ABSTRACT

COX-FRANKLIN, ELIZABETH MASON. Rediscovering the Self: An Exploratory Descriptive Case Study of Retired National Hockey League Athletes. (Under the direction of Edwin R. Gerler, Jr., Ed. D.)

Sports play an important role in cultures around the world. While the sport of choice may vary from country to country and culture to culture, sports bring people together. Americans like their football, Canadians adore their hockey, Europe lives for soccer, and Asia cheers for baseball. Across the world people gather in homes and restaurants, stadiums and bars, to cheer on their favorite teams and secretly hope that something unfortunate happens to the opponent. Every fourth winter and summer the countries of the world come together to compete in the Olympic games and a sports-enthused frenzy takes over the globe. Sporting fans certainly enjoy their events and live vicariously through the players, cheering or moaning from one moment to the next as if their lives depend upon the outcome of the game. But though fans may feel as though they are part of the game, they are distinct from the players. When the game ends fans resume their normal lives, perhaps peppering their daily conversations with references to sports, but for athletes sports are their normal lives. The athletic identity is powerful and when that identity becomes threatened, athletes can face enormous difficulties. Results from a descriptive exploratory case study focused on six retired professional athletes from the National Hockey League, composed of semi-structured interviews and analyzed using open coding, indicated that retired professional athletes experienced the retirement process both uniquely and similarly. A career counseling model entitled *Rediscovering the Self* offers recommendations for counselors working with retired professional athletes.
Rediscovering the Self: An Exploratory Case Study of Retired National Hockey League Athletes

by
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to Dr. Harold Andersen Cox, Jr., Ph. D. I may never have met you, Uncle Andy, but you have inspired me each and every step along the journey to this Ph. D. Thank you.
BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Mason Cox-Franklin was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina on the precise day she was due thanks to her father’s spur-of-the-moment decision to drive over a set of train tracks really fast. She practically always had her nose stuck in book, except for the time she convinced her sister it was okay for them to ride their bikes to the drugstore without their parents’ permission. But even then all she really wanted was the latest *Sweet Valley High* book and some gummy worms.

For most of her adolescence, Elizabeth was convinced she wanted to be a journalist and wrote for the *Winston-Salem Journal’s* Teen Page. In the tenth grade Elizabeth’s parents encouraged her to volunteer with a local teen crisis line called *TeenLine* despite the fact that talking to strangers on the phone scared her to death. Through the *TeenLine*, Elizabeth discovered that she enjoyed helping people with their problems, be they homework, relationships, or boredom. After receiving a full academic scholarship to Salem College, Elizabeth began volunteering with Family Services’ Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Crisis Lines. Helping survivors through forensic exams and connecting them with the vital resources they needed ignited a passion in Elizabeth; she was on her way to becoming a counselor. Following graduation from Salem College with College Honors in English and Psychology and a minor in Business, Elizabeth received a master’s degree in counseling from Wake Forest University.

Elizabeth is a Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC) and continues to volunteer with various women’s organizations. She also volunteers with the Leukemia and Lymphoma
Society’s Team in Training Program, mentoring participants as they train for half-marathons and full marathons.

In her spare time, Elizabeth enjoys running and training for marathons, attending Carolina Hurricanes games with her family, spoiling her three cats, and traveling with her husband, Eric. She still reads anything she can get her hands on and practically always has her nose stuck in a book.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing a doctoral degree is a lot like running a marathon. Since I have done both, I feel like I can say that. Some would say that in deciding to take on either task, a person has to be just a tad bit off. And if said person decides to do both simultaneously, she has to be way off…or at least irrepressibly eccentric.

Doctoral degrees and marathons both involve blood, sweat, tears, expensive equipment, and usually some sort of intense mental negativity along the lines of, “I am such an idiot! What on earth ever made me think this was a good idea?” But there is a crucial, key difference between running marathons and finishing the doctoral degree. During a marathon, you have to dig deep within yourself, fighting an exhausting physical and mental battle while relying on the miles of training, to remind yourself that this is a goal you can accomplish. The doctoral degree offers countless mental battles and some physical ones, too. But throughout these four years, I haven’t had to do it alone. There is absolutely no way I could have done it alone. I offer my heartfelt and deepest thanks to the people who have made it possible for me to become Dr. Lizzie. I promise not to use your embarrassing nicknames.

To my husband, Eric, without a doubt, you are the best part of my doctoral experience. I met you 18 days before beginning this crazy process and you stuck by me-and even married me! -through all the late nights and early mornings, the crying fits, and sighs of “I can’t do this anymore!” You have been my biggest supporter and patient confidante. You are my prince and I love you.

Sabrina, Shakespeare, and Sylvester. My furry little feline friends, you accompanied me from Winston-Salem to Raleigh to Durham. You have slept on textbooks, hacked up
hairballs on rough drafts, and sat in my lap while I read endless journal articles and wrote in circles. You greet me with smiles, purrs, and nudges on my worst days and have been awesome therapists.

Dear Mom and Dad…I don’t know how you have managed to put up with my perfectionist tendencies, particularly when they involve academics, for the past 29+ years. I mean, Mom, how many papers have you proofread for me over the past two decades? Dad, how many evenings did you spend helping me study for math tests, including the GRE? You are my constant cheerleaders when I feel my sanity slipping away and I can never thank you enough for all your support. You are the best buddies ever.

Brother Alan, you took care of me on the school bus my first day of kindergarten in 1989 and guided me around Sherwood Forest Elementary School. Nineteen years later you showed me around HUGE N.C. State and the even bigger City of Oaks. You really are the best brother ever. Oh, and you were so right about N.C. State.

Caroline, my dear birthday stealer and sister, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you! Thank you for always cheering me up with naughty reminders about baloney, a sarcastic comment, or a vote of confidence. You know me better than anyone else and I love you. Best sister ever! And, yes, I know you’re taller than me.

Kate and Annie, thank you for adding so much sunshine to the doctoral degree process. Now that I am finally done, you can see how much fun I can really be. Ready for a cruise?

John and Rhoda, I have been in school the whole time you have known me. Hopefully I can now get a real job! Thank you for your endless encouragement, support, and
belief in my abilities. Knowing you were rooting for me during this process helped me persevere and actually finish it.

Dr. Jo Dulan: If it hadn’t been for you and your phenomenal Honors Program presentation at Salem’s Scholarship Weekend in 2002, I would never have found myself at Salem College. Throughout those four years, you taught me to always think more critically, push the boundaries of society and myself even when it is uncomfortable, and perhaps most importantly, to believe in myself. Thanks for leading me to the light.

Dr. Sam Gladding: I am so lucky to have been taught and mentored by a true star of the counseling world. Through my time at Wake Forest University and N.C. State University, you have helped me learn the ins and outs of counseling, “the light, the bright, and the serious” (Gladding, 2008). I will always remember the valuable lessons, as well as the jokes, you taught me.

No one can complete a dissertation without the guidance and expertise of her committee. Dr. Stanley Baker, Dr. Edwin Gerler. Dr. Marc Grimmett, and Dr. Julia Storberg-Walker, thank you ever so much for guiding and directing me through this process. Thank you for asking the tough questions and making me think in new ways even when I felt like my head was going to explode.

To my interview participants: Confidentiality prevents me from naming each of you, but you know who you are. Thank you for your honesty and insightfulness about just how much it took to accomplish your lifelong goal of playing in the National Hockey League. Without your help, I could not possibly have accomplished my lifelong goal of completing my doctoral degree.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Alan cannot recall exactly when he put on his first pair of ice skates. He remembers that he was fairly young, perhaps four years old in the winter of 1953. He was in his hometown of Rochester, New York and the local firemen had sprayed water over portions of a local park to create an ice skating rink for children like Alan. Together with his three older brothers and their father, Hal, Alan took to the ice for an afternoon of fun. He was a natural-no sore ankles for him-and skating was just as easy as walking. Maybe it was even easier since he could glide across the ice for some distance with just a little extra momentum.

Shortly thereafter Alan started playing hockey. Rather than skating around the park, he and his brother Ralph made their own ice rink in the backyard of their parents’ house on Babcock Drive. Older brothers Andy and Doug did not skate as often as Alan and Ralph, as junior hockey was only getting started in Rochester. But the rink on Babcock Drive became the place to be after school and hockey practice. At times, players from the local American Hockey League team, the Rochester Americans, would join them. The group would skate for a few hours, then sit down to a meal cooked by Alan’s mom, Marguerite.

But Alan did not only enjoy hockey, he excelled at it. At Ithaca College he was a star goalie and an All-Star. Alan was an athlete, both by his standards and those of others, and he identified as one. His athletic identity was so strong that by his own admission he really did not give that much thought to what he would do after college. He was a math major, so he supposed he could be a teacher, but it was not something he thought about too much. Then came December 1969.
The Vietnam War continued to rage on and Alan was a college senior. He remembers watching the draft lottery on television and feeling a knot form in his stomach. 1968 was the height of the Vietnam War and anyone with a draft number under 305 pretty much knew he was headed to war. Alan was number 157. Suddenly his future became clearer—and hockey was not going to be a part of it.

Alan became a naval officer in the United States Navy. After his service, he played hockey in graduate school and even coached a junior hockey team when he moved south to North Carolina. His interest in hockey waned slightly, as the sport did not receive much coverage in North Carolina. That interest reignited nearly 20 years later when the Harford Whalers relocated to North Carolina and became the Carolina Hurricanes. While his life revolved around hockey from the time he was a small child through college, his interests changed. But for professional hockey players who devote not only their youth to hockey, but also their 20’s and 30’s, this is not the case.

Statement of the Problem

Years after Alan stopped playing hockey on a regular basis, the sporting world has changed a bit. Children start competing in sports earlier, their parents devote sometimes exorbitant amounts of money to athletic endeavors, and sports consume people’s lives. But what happens when those sporting careers end? What happens when an athlete is cut from the team, can no longer play due to injury, or does not make the professional team after college? Sports may have been all-consuming until to that point, leaving the athlete wondering where to go next. Career counseling interventions can help athletes figure out how to proceed after sports.
Rationale for Study

A study by Canadian counseling psychologist Dr. Patrick Baillie (1992) showed that well over 80% of professional baseball and hockey players were actively competing before the age of 10. Thus by the time a professional athlete reaches retirement age, the majority of his or her life has been devoted to athletics and the athletic identity is a crucial component to the sense of self.

Life following retirement from professional sports is not always easy. In fact, it can be extremely difficult. For example, within five years of their retirement an estimated 60% of former players for the National Basketball Association are broke (Torre, 2009). For former National Football League players, the numbers are even worse: 78% are bankrupt or under serious financial stress due to divorce or an inability to find employment two years into retirement (Torre, 2009).

Furthermore there are two parts, private and public, to the athletic identity (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The private athletic identity is the “extent to which one’s self-concept is significantly imbued with an athletic persona” (Nasco & Webb, 2006, p. 135). This may include how the individual perceives himself or herself to be an athlete or the importance of athleticism to self-expression. The public athletic identity is more concerned with how much an individual “is aware of and values the fact that an athletic persona has been endowed on him by others” (Nasco & Webb, 2006, p. 135). The self-esteem of retired athletes is negatively correlated with their public athletic identity, but not with private athletic identity, which suggests that counselors need to work to help professional athletes balance the public and private aspects of their identities (Nasco & Webb, 2006). Longtime Ottawa Senators’
captain Daniel Alfredsson summarized the issue when he stated, “It’s an adjustment from the high-profile life you live to go back to everyday (life), I guess” (Cohen, 2011).

**Purpose and Importance of the Study**

Following the surprising deaths of National Hockey League players Derek Boogaard, Rick Rypien, and Wade Belak within a four month period in 2011, *The Hockey News* writer Adam Proteau wrote, “Players are more than just names we root for, slag off, pick in a fantasy pool, or snarl at behind the safety of arena glass. They are sons and husbands, fathers and brothers and friends. And their pain is as real as anyone’s” (2011). These words are a valuable and important reminder of why this research was conducted. Regardless of the sport a professional athlete selects, s/he is as capable of feeling the same psychological pain and turmoil as someone who is not a professional athlete in the public eye. But it is perhaps in part because of this exposure to the public that professional athletes may find themselves reluctant to seek counseling.

Unsurprisingly the need for counseling does not end when retirement begins. After all, the typical career does not end when people enter their 30’s or 40’s. Thus from a counseling perspective there are three separate purposes to this research including (a) understanding the retirement experience of retired NHL players, (b) discovering how retired NHL players maintain the athletic identity following retirement, and (c) the development of a career counseling model for retired NHL athletes. In conducting this research, the primary investigator executed an exploratory descriptive case study. She interviewed six retired NHL players and performed both case-by-case analyses and a cross-case analysis on the data. She
examined the data for overall themes with open coding, as well as themes according to Donald Super’s Life-Span, Life Space Theory.
CHAPTER II

Review of History, Theory, and Literature

Sports play an important role in cultures around the world. While the sport of choice may vary from country to country and culture to culture, sports bring people together. Americans like their football, Canadians adore their hockey, Europe lives for soccer, and Asia cheers for baseball. Across the world people gather in homes and restaurants, stadiums and bars, to cheer on their favorite teams and secretly hope that something unfortunate happens to the opponent. Every fourth winter and summer the countries of the world come together to compete in the Olympic games and a sports-enthused frenzy takes over the globe.

Sporting fans certainly enjoy their events and live vicariously through the players, cheering or moaning from one moment to the next as if their lives depend upon the outcome of the game. But though fans may feel as though they are part of the game, they are distinct from the players. When the game ends fans resume their normal lives, perhaps peppering their daily conversations with references to sports, but for athletes sports are their normal lives. The athletic identity is powerful and when that identity becomes threatened, athletes can face enormous difficulties.

Athletic Identity

In the most simplistic of terms, identity helps individuals answer the question, “Who am I?” According to Vander Zanden (1984) personal identity is more complex because it helps people determine where they are both within the world and in human life. Furthermore people achieve a sense of identity through the roles they have in daily life (Wiechman & Williams, 1997). It is easy for individuals to become too dependent on their roles, which can
lead to difficulties when one can no longer fulfill the role, as the person does not know how to function outside it. This can be particularly true with athletes, who have spent a large portion of the lives preparing and practicing for competitive events. Some of the most significant events of an athlete’s life may surround making a team, playing well, and competing. Their worst fears may include not making the team, suffering an injury, or facing retirement and losing the chance to compete (Baillie, 1993).

Athletic identity is “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role” (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). The development of the athletic identity can begin early in life when children play in the backyard or neighborhood with friends or siblings. Once children reach school age sports involvement becomes even more social as children participate in physical education classes and playground activities. This early play has six central motives including the chance to improve skills, have fun, play with friends, experience thrills and pleasures, achieve and maintain a level of fitness, and being successful in a socially desirable activity (Gould & Horn, 1984). The more extrinsic factors of sports, such as winning and improved social status, do not become important until adolescence, a time when some previously active children will stop participating in competitive sports (Nicholls, 1980).

The fact that the athletic identity begins forming at a young age is important because children and their parents often become preoccupied with the athlete role when a child exhibits athletic prowess. They devote a large amount of time physically, emotionally, and mentally to sports. By high school a child may have focused so much on sports that other social roles have gone unfulfilled. Furthermore the child has had such a long time to
internalize the athlete identity that it more than likely dominates the child’s self-concept (Webb et. al., 1998). Thus if the child is cut from a team in high school or college or faces an injury “the individual with such a strong, centralized athletic identity is presumed to lack the flexibility necessary for redefining the self-concept” (Webb et. al, 1998, p. 340).

Research supports these ideas. A study by Canadian counseling psychologist Dr. Patrick Baillie (1992) showed that well over 80% of professional baseball and hockey players were actively competing before the age of 10. McPherson (1980) suggested that significant figures in the child’s life reinforce this involvement and that combining this with success in sports “leads to a definition and ego-involvement of the self as an athlete” (p. 127). Thus some children have solid athletic identities at an age when few other aspects of their identities are well understood or even formed. As the children grow into adolescence they focus more and more energy on their sports, often at the expense of education, which can lead to difficulties when the individual has to stop competing be it due to personal choice, not making the team, or injury. As Baillie (1993) stated, “years of external evaluation and internal reinforcers associated with sport participation help to form an identity in which physical competition is central for the athlete’s sense of self, but such an identity may also be harmful in its consequences after retirement from the sports environment” (p. 401).

Unfortunately not all athletes prepare for their retirement from sports. A study of Canadian and U.S. Olympians, University of Southern California football players, players from Major League Baseball, and players from the National Hockey League found that the adjustment to retirement took an average of two years, but some athletes were struggling after 10 years (Baillie, 1993). Professional athletes had more difficulty transitioning than did
collegiate and Olympic athletes, most likely because the professionals made educational sacrifices that collegiate and Olympic athletes did not. Interestingly only half of the athletes made plans for careers after sports or for the financial readjustment required after retirement (Baillie, 1993). Thus even though the athletes did eventually transition, the transition may not have been easy and even akin to diagnosis of a terminal illness, significant life losses, or death (Baillie & Danish, 1992).

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ work on grief has been applied to athletes forced to retire from their sports because of injury or managerial decisions. Like those experiencing grief and loss, athletes progressed through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, but not always in a linear fashion (Baillie, 1993). Examples of thoughts in these stages might include “I can still play just fine” (denial), “What an idiot that general manager is” (anger), “Please just give me one more chance to play” (bargaining), and “There is not anything I can do anymore” (depression).

Part of the difficulty for an athlete leaving sports can be understood through Donald Super’s lifespan life-space model of career development. The majority of people do not earn their living through sports activities; instead sports are part of the leisurite role (Super, 1980). Athletes, particularly professional athletes, place sports in the worker role. Professional athletes can face a double conundrum when retiring because they have not had the time to explore other career options. Thus they are losing their worker role and do not have a ready replacement option as a college-educated athlete might have. This can create feelings of worthlessness in an athlete who sees his or her peers well established in traditional careers.
Another key component to adjusting to life after sports concerns the nature of retirement (Webb et. al, 1998). When athletes choose to retire, they are exerting control over their lives and their environments. This can create a feeling of self-efficacy and the athlete feels better able to deal with a changed life. But when an athlete is either cut from the team or forced out due to injury that sense of control is lost. These athletes have not had time to plan for a different life and are left feeling distressed, confused, and even helpless.

In their article *Enduring Injustice: A Case Study of Retirement from Professional Rugby Union*, authors Jim McKenna and Howard Thomas detailed an 18-month case study during which the primary author helped a former professional rugby player, Garth Armstrong, transition to a new career as Garth encountered feelings of distress, confusion, and helplessness. The case study focused on Garth’s feelings and frustrations regarding retirement, which he felt came too early considering the commitments he made to his team. Garth also felt that retirement was unfair and not on his terms, which added to his difficulties transitioning to a new career. Ultimately the authors offered support, garnered through the account-making approach, for the idea that Garth’s difficulties related to leaving professional rugby and beginning a new career.

The authors began their article by noting that few studies examined how athletes cope after retirement. Furthermore, persons engaged in team sports require more support mechanisms than those in non-team sports. The authors also stated that players, coaches, administrators, and counselors required more understanding of the unique situation athletes faced when retiring in their twenties or thirties. The overall purpose of the case study was to “explore the experience of ending a professional career within rugby union” to provide some
of that understanding (McKenna & Thomas, 2007, p. 19). Additional contributions of the study included its addressing retirement and transition as they happened, using a well-known counseling method to help ease the career transition, and exploration of a newly professionalized sport, rugby.

In conducting their case study, the authors utilized an inductive, phenomenological approach. They examined a phenomenon, retirement and career transition, by looking at Garth and his subjective experience of reality. This emic approach was appropriate because Garth was a true insider; after all he was the person experiencing retirement from rugby. The in-depth exploration of Garth’s reality took 18 months and continued after the article’s publication. The authors justified this length by noting that retiring elite athletes face numerous difficulties that require intense examination. Indeed they cited another study stating that up to 85% of retired elite athletes experience problematic transitions (p.21).

The counselor directed Garth to journal his experiences as he transitioned from the role of elite athlete to that of former athlete. This account-making approach was chosen because it was beneficial to retiring Olympic athletes. Furthermore the process can encourage athletes to “think about their experiences, put them aside, then return to cognitively restructuring the components of the transition and then renew the analysis” (p. 23) The process of confiding the journal entries also helped the writer process the experiences; a role well-suited to a counselor.

Data were collected over a period of eighteen months, eight of which saw Garth playing rugby and ten of which saw him transitioning to his new career. During the first phase of analysis, individual accounts were discussed with Garth. The fact that Garth was an
active participant in the analysis process further adds to the credibility and confirmability of the study. The researcher and academic adviser worked together during the second stage of analysis, inductive content analysis on Garth’s final accounts. When the researcher and adviser disagreed, the researcher’s viewpoint took priority because of his close relationship with Garth. The final step involved synthesizing the key issues that emerged. The authors note that their interpretations were made in “the context of our understandings of rugby union” because all had been involved in rugby (p. 24).

A 2003 article, *Repercussions of Transition Out of Elite Sport on Subjective Well-Being: A One-Year Study*, by authors Yannick Stephan, Jean Bilard, Grégory Ninot, and Didier Deligniéres investigated the “subjective well-being” of 16 French athletes following retirement from elite sport (p. 354). The authors utilized both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to determine that the athletes’ well-being decreased initially, then increased, stabilized, and finally increased. Furthermore the athletes encountered a variety of difficulties during their yearlong transition including changes in work, physical health, daily functioning, and personal control and autonomy.

The authors defined subjective well-being as the “assessment of the quality of one’s life based on personal experience” (p. 354). Participants in the study demonstrated this well-being based on the degree to which they found satisfaction in different life areas. The authors also pointed out that during athletic careers, the athletes often experienced high level of life satisfaction because of the special relationship they had with their sport. That life satisfaction can decrease following retirement, though, because athletes have put sports first for so long, rely heavily on their socio-professional status, and live a performance-oriented lifestyle.
Retirement alone introduces a type of discontinuity to which no athlete was immune.
Furthermore retirement was more of a process than a single event and thus lent itself to a longitudinal study such as this. These are all reasons the Stephan et. al. used to justify their study. They also emphasized that they were unaware of any research that studies retirement from elite sports as the retirement occurs or in any longitudinal method.

In conducting this study, the authors examined the subjective well-being of French athletes who retired following the 2000 Sydney Olympic Summer Games. Their hypothesis was that the athletes would face two phases of transition, an initial crisis at retirement and then a period of personal growth, which their subjective well-being scores would reflect. The transitional elite athletes were compared with elite athletes still in competition, though only with the quantitative measure.

The authors selected their participants by contacting 21 athletes who decided to retire after the Olympics. Sixteen chose to participate and were matched with current athletes from the National Institute of Sports and Physical Education in terms of sport, gender, and age, which was one of the main strengths of the study. Unfortunately the article provides no detailed demographic information besides age (ranging from 27 to 35) and gender, which was split equally between males and females. A t-test showed no statistical differences between the two groups in terms or age or years of elite sport participation.

The authors used the same instrument to measure participants’ subjective well-being over the one-year period. The General Health Questionnaire-12 (French version) had twelve items that looked at short-term changes in subjective well-being. It had a test-retest reliability of 0.82, which was strong, though there are no reference norms for the questionnaire. Semi-
structured interviews took place with all transitional athletes roughly every three months. The first author conducted all the interviews and used a standardized interview guide developed by all four authors. (Copies of the interview guides were available upon request from the authors.)

In analyzing the data from the GHQ-12, the authors used repeated measure ANOVAs. The dependent measure was subjective well-being, time was a repeated-measure independent variable (four times) and the between-group independent variable had two groups, the transitional and active athletes. The results of these careful analyses revealed a statistically significant time effect at the 0.0001 level and a significant Group x Time interaction effect. The Newman Keuls test, used for post hoc comparisons, showed the GHQ-12 score of transitional athletes decreased significantly between the first and second administrations, as well as between the third and fourth administrations, but not between administrations two and three. No significant differences were found in the active athletes’ scores. Furthermore the only significant difference in scores between the transitional and active athletes occurred during the first administration, which was understandable because this was most likely when the change was freshest for the transitional athletes. The authors provided a table with this information, which was quite helpful for the reader.

In analyzing the semi-structured interviews, the authors followed a careful process of inductive and deductive reasoning. They used deduction to create the broad categories of their interview questions entitled 1) changes in lifestyle and 2) socio-professional situation. They then placed athletes’ responses in the pre-existing categories while also grouping
responses into common subcategories, an inductive process. In order to “verify and refine” the themes the authors performed overlaps of data collection and analysis (p. 359).

The qualitative results demonstrated four distinct phases in the lives of these transitional elite athletes. The first interview session, conducted one and a half months after career termination, showed athletes confronting the realities of a new lifestyle. These realities included a more sedentary daily life, lack of physical sensations and simulations, and the loss of frequent travel. In terms of confronting their new socio-professional situation, the athletes encountered discrepancies between their former and current competencies. The second interview session, conducted five months after career termination, demonstrated further difficulties in accepting a new lifestyle. These include the investment in alternative non-sport activities and the avoidance of a passive lifestyle. In the socio-professional arena, transitional athletes sought social support, avoided identifying with other athletes, and experienced some liberation through losing the social status of athlete.

The third interview took place eight months after career termination. The transitional athletes were reconstructing a healthy lifestyle by reinvesting leisure time in physical activities and viewing physical transformations as warning signals, primarily to stay in good health. They faced a sort of “paradox” in the socio-professional realm as they developed feelings of competence while also lacking personal goals (p. 364). In the fourth and final interview, conducted 11 to 12 months after career termination, the balance in lifestyle showed in complementary and healthy physical activities, as well as a sense of personal autonomy and control. In the adjustment to the socio-professional situation, the transitional
athletes felt a sense of accomplishment and felt that their new lives could be as rewarding as their lives as elite athletes.

Through their discussion, Stephan et. al. offer support for several other studies relating to the retirement transition of elite athletes. They also offered important points on the liminal position athletes felt upon retirement and recommended helping athletes practice effective coping mechanisms rather than avoidance. Athletes should also be encouraged to develop personal feelings of generativity.

Authors Jiri Kadlcik and Libor Flemr examined the career termination process of former elite athletes in the Czech Republic in their 2008 article Athletic Career Termination Model in the Czech Republic: A Qualitative Exploration. The title of the article was a bit misleading, as the authors were not attempting to develop a new model for elite athletes and career termination. Rather they were looking to determine whether Stambulova’s Sport Career Transition Model and Taylor and Ogilvie’s Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition model were applicable to elite athletes in the Czech Republic, a country in which there are virtually no support mechanisms for retired elite athletes. Essentially the purpose of the emic study was to investigate “the process of athletic career termination and adaptation to sport retirement in the Czech Republic based on the theoretical background of sport career transition models” (p. 265). Interestingly, though, the authors did not explicitly state that purpose until the discussion portion of the article.

Kadlcik and Flemr provided extensive theoretical justification for their research including links to gerontological aging models and thanatological models of death and dying (2008). The authors took the position that retirement from elite sports was not an isolated
event, but a transitional process. This was the justification for using Stambulova’s Sport Career Transition Model and Ogilvie’s Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition. The authors provided extensive diagrams of both these models which served as a helpful visual aid to the reader. Both models involved “perceived transition pre-conditions and demands, coping strategies associated with internal/external resources/barriers mediating [the] adjustment process, and outcomes/consequences of the athletic career termination” (p. 254).

In conducting this research, the authors used snowball sampling to select participants. This was not the ideal method; certainly random sampling would have been preferable. It appeared that the researchers had difficulty securing participants, which was the reason they resorted to the snowball method. They found 11 athletes, which was a bit small for an initial study. Coaches and other athletes were used to locate participants and any sport was permitted. Thus the five female and six male participants represented football, ice hockey, handball, track-and-field, rowing, and judo. Their average age was 27 and the average number of years in sport was 14.6. No identifying racial information was provided. All participants had to meet three criteria including participation in elite sport at the highest level in the country, termination must have occurred within the past ten years, and they needed to have Czech citizenship. The authors chose a ten-year window for termination to minimize recall bias, but this was rather high. The mean for years out of sport was 3.3 with a range of two to seven years, which was certainly better than ten years and does increase the credibility of the findings.
The authors developed a semi-structured interview divided into four related sections including a) introductory remarks and demographics, b) career retirement pre-conditions, c) transition period, and d) current life status. This meant that each participant answered a minimum of 23 questions; follow-up questions were permitted when the interviewer needed to clarify. Informed consent was obtained and all interviews were transcribed.

In analyzing the data, the authors used hierarchical content analysis. Working together the researchers examined the raw data units (transcribed interviews) and then performed inductive analysis to generate high and low order themes. However, the trustworthiness of these findings would have been improved if the authors had each done this process and then compared their results. Perhaps instead of taking this step, the authors chose to have a second individual well-versed in qualitative methodology read through the data and repeat the process. This was a crucial step and strengthened the findings of the authors.

Kadlcik and Flemr provided an extensive results section with a number of graphics and direct quotes from the research participants. A synopsis of these findings indicated that elite athletes’ reasons for termination fell into the category of sport related (injury, decrease in motivation, age, etc.) or non-sport related (mobility, family, free time). As far as athletic career termination planning was concerned, the four major categories were awareness of a need to retire, involvement of a significant other, planning time to retire, and planning to finish at the top of the sport. Barriers related to transition fell into the categories of non-acceptance of termination or others.

Social support was important to athletes in the transition process and came either from their social support network (parents, family, friends) or the sporting area (manager,
fellow teammates). The athletes also utilized a variety of coping mechanisms including keeping in touch with sport, stress and energy management, perceived ability to cope, seeking social support, and looking for success in other areas.

The elite athletes were also asked about their reaction to termination. The results fell into two categories: self-apprehensions and emotions and perceived reactions of significant others. The changes and demands required after retirement resulted in five separate categories including body transition, changes in self-perception and lifestyle, social changes, economic/education/vocational demands, and family demands. The final graphic presented by the authors concerned the athletes’ perceived factors of life satisfaction, which fell into the categories of free time, social support network, economic/educational/vocational, and health.

In the discussion session the authors pointed out that their study supported the idea that most athletes have more than one reason for retiring. The findings supported Stambulova’s Sport Career Transition Model, but not Taylor and Ogilvie’s Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition. Overall the authors’ research demonstrated that retirement from elite sports was a complicated process regardless of the country in which the athlete lives.

The article *Identity Foreclosure, Athletic Identity, and Career Maturity in Intercollegiate Athletes* (1996), had authors Geraldine M. Murphy, Albert J. Petitpas, and Britton W. Brewer examining the relationships between a) identity foreclosure and career maturity and b) athletic identity and career maturity in 124 intercollegiate student athletes at an NCAA Division I school. The authors justified the study by explaining that relatively few
student-athletes actually advance to the level of professional sport. Despite this, these students usually engage in less career planning than non-athletes.

Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer utilized a cross-sectional design for this quantitative study. Their primary purpose, which they expatiate upon early in the article, was to “assess the extent to which student-athletes’ levels of identity foreclosure and athletic identity were related to their career maturity” (p. 240). Regarding this purpose, they hypothesized that there would be negative correlations between identity foreclosure and career maturity, as well as between athletic identity and career maturity. The second purpose of the study sought to investigate the differences in identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity with regard to gender, playing status (varsity vs. non-varsity), and sport type (revenue-producing vs. nonrevenue). The hypothesis was that all three variables (identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity) would be higher for athletes on varsity teams and in revenue-producing sports.

The authors provided some information on the 124 research participants, of whom 99 were male and 25 female. The participants represented a variety of sports including men’s and women’s basketball, men’s ice hockey, field hockey, wrestling, men’s and women’s crew, and men’s swimming. The vast majority (86.3%) came from football and crew, making the results most applicable to these sports and limiting overall generalizability. The authors did not state how they recruited the students nor did they provide racial information, all of which was quite pertinent.

Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer used three separate measures in the study including the Foreclosure subscale of the Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status (OM-EIS), the Athletic
Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), and the Attitude scale of the Career Maturity Inventory (CMI). Each measure had established consistency and validity. The OM-EIS examined identity foreclosure and has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.76 and adequate convergent validity, though the authors did not provide extensive information on the latter. The AIMS was a more recent measure for athletic identity, but Cronbach’s alphas range from 0.80 to 0.93, test-retest reliability is 0.89, and there was construct validity. The CMI measured career maturity, specifically the aspects of decisiveness, involvement, independence, and compromise, and had adequate stability (r=0.71) and internal consistency (K-R coefficient of 0.74). The authors reported it also has content, criterion-related, and construct validity, but provided no numbers.

The overall procedure of the study was fairly straightforward with the participants taking all the measures during an academic support meeting. They completed demographic information, an informed consent document, and the three measures. An academic athletic counselor administered the measures and it would have been helpful for knowing his or her qualifications to do so.

The results of the study supported the researchers’ initial hypotheses. Identity foreclosure and athletic identity had an inverse relationship to career maturity. There was not a statistically significant relationship between identity foreclosure and athletic identity. Identity foreclosure and athletic identity were independently associated with career maturity. Multiple analyses of variance looked at the effects of gender, playing status (varsity vs. nonvarsity), and sport (revenue producing vs. nonrevenue producing). Because of the small number of women in the overall study, the researchers only included men in the revenue vs.
nonrevenue producing calculation. There were significant effects for gender (Wilks’ lambda of 0.92), playing status (Wilks’ lambda of 0.85), and sport (Wilks’ lambda 0.88).

Other results show that women had significantly higher career maturity scores than men, but there were no significant differences concerning identity foreclosure and athletic identity. Compared with nonvarsity athletes, varsity athletes had significantly higher identity foreclosure scores and athletic identity scores, but significantly lower career maturity scores. Athletes in the revenue-producing sports, which included basketball, football, and ice hockey, were lower in career maturity and higher in their foreclosure scores. The authors did not find any significant differences in athletic identity based on type of sport.

In the discussion the authors pointed out that because of their cross-sectional research design, they were unable to draw “causal inferences” between identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity (p.244). Overall this study had important implications for the counseling field, as it demonstrated that athletes do not receive adequate career planning. It is startling that 65% of the participants had the same career maturity level as high school seniors. Part of this may be because 49.2% of the students were freshmen and not far removed from the twelfth grade. It would have been helpful for the researchers to break down career maturity by grade level. The author would also be interested to see the measure of athletic identity broken down by grade level. Seeing how athletic identity changed over the college career would be quite helpful to career counselors at the college level.
Theoretical Framework:

Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory

Though it may not have been readily apparent upon his in birth in 1910, the surname of Donald Edwin Super would prove to be an apt description of his career and contributions to the field of career development. Continually refined and improved over the course of 40 years, the “differential-developmental-social-phenomenological career theory” (Super, 1969) Super eventually termed Life-Span, Life-Space Theory remains one of the most well-known approaches to helping understand how careers develop.

Super, a self-defined trait-and-factor counselor until his death in 1994, developed his theory by examining a variety of disciplines including psychology and sociology (Savickas, 1997). He felt that the theories of his contemporaries, including Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, and Herma (1951) were lacking because they ignored the role of interests in decision-making, did not offer a definitive definition of choice, distinguished between choice and adjustment too much, and failed to appreciate the importance of compromise in career choice (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). Thus he developed an “assemblage of theories that I have sought to synthesize…the synthesis is a theory” (Super, 1990, p. 199).

There are 14 key assumptions in the Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, though Super’s original theory had only ten. These assumptions include the following (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005):

1. People have different abilities, personalities, needs, values, interests, traits, and self-concepts.
2. Because people have different characteristics, they are fit for multiple kinds of occupations.

3. Every occupation requires certain abilities and personality characteristics, but people can be suited for multiple occupations and different kinds of people can work in the same occupation.

4. Change occurs over time. Career choices and competencies, life situations, and individual self-concepts will change over time, particularly as people gain more experience. Self-concepts become more stable from late adolescence onward, though changes are possible.

5. The change process can be “summed up in a series of life stages” (p. 41). Each life stage has the same sequence of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline.

6. Multiple factors including parents’ socioeconomic status, mental ability, education, skills, personality, and career maturity affect a person’s career pattern.

7. Success in coping with an occupational environment in any life-stage depends on an individual’s career maturity. Career maturity is physical, psychological, and social and “includes the degree of success in coping with the demands of earlier stages and substages of career development” (p. 41).

8. Career maturity is a hypothetical construct. It does not have a true operational definition.

9. By helping mature one’s interests and abilities, people can be guided through the life stages.
10. Essentially career development focuses on developing and implementing a person’s occupational self-concepts. The self-concept results from the “interaction of inherited aptitudes, physical makeup, opportunity to observe and play various roles, and evaluations of the extent to which the results of role playing meet with the approval of superiors and fellows” (p. 42).

11. The synthesis or compromise between individual and social factors is a complex interplay of role playing and learning from the environment.

12. An individual’s work satisfaction and life satisfaction depends on how well that person finds outlets for his or her abilities, needs, values, interests, personality traits, and self-concepts. People seek out occupations and lives that allow for the level of growth and exploration most appropriate for them.

13. “The degree of satisfaction people attain from work is proportional to the degree to which they have been able to implement self-concepts” (p. 42).

14. The work or occupational atmosphere helps most people organize their personalities. If work is not the primary organizational tactic, though, other activities in the roles of worker, student, leisurite, homemaker, or citizen take precedence.

Super likened career development to physical development in that it takes place over the lifespan. He determined that there are five essential stages of career development that typically proceed in a linear fashion. Super later noted, though, that people can recycle through the stages, particularly when changing careers or facing job difficulties. These stages include growth (childhood), exploration (adolescence), establishment (early adulthood), maintenance (middle adulthood), and disengagement (late adulthood). A variety of factors
influence these stages including the society in which one lives, the opportunities one has, and individual differences. But age is a factor, too, and Super reflected this in key terminology. Career maturity refers to how ready an individual is to make career decisions, but the term finds more use with children and adolescents. For example, a 13 year-old who decides to take on a summer paper route in addition to his allowance would have more career maturity than a 13 year-old who sticks with the allowance alone. Where adults are concerned, the term career adaptability comes into focus. This term also refers to career decision-making readiness, but it takes into account that “as adults cope with their changing work and working conditions, adults make an impact on their environments and their environments make an impact on them” (Niles, Andersen, & Goodnough, 1998, p. 273).

The growth stage focuses on children aged 4 to 13 who, believe it or not, do face career development tasks. They are beginning to form a sense of self and understand that there is a work world. Oftentimes it is during the early parts of this stage that children engage in gender-stereotyped working roles with girls playing as nurses and boys playing as construction workers. In these early years, children are exploring occupational fantasies, a substage of the growth stage. During the interest substage children look for more information about work and their own interests or capacities. This would be an excellent time for children to participate in “Take Your Child to Work Day.” The final substage, capacity, sees older children realizing the importance of career planning and the fact that their present behavior can affect the future. This is when a 12 year-old who wants to be a doctor realizes that she should start paying even more attention during science class, as doing so will help her in the coming years.
Adolescents aged 14-24 are in the exploration stage of the Life-Span, Life Space model. They know more about themselves and the job world, so they begin to crystallize and implement their occupational choices. Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Joe Corvo provides an appropriate representation of these processes. The crystallization process sees people clarifying the work they would enjoy as a career. As a high school student, Corvo already knew that he wanted to be a professional athlete. Growing up in Chicago, he pursued the sports of baseball and hockey. (This was possible because the sports are in different seasons at the high school level.) He even attended the pro camps of the Chicago Cubs and the Chicago White Sox. But when the time for college, and hence the implementation substage came, Corvo has to take action towards getting started in one sporting arena. He chose hockey and spent three years at Western Michigan University, though one has to wonder if he still plays baseball to further develop his killer slapshot.

The establishment stage of career development takes place from age 25 to 45 and has three central tasks including stabilizing, consolidating, and advancing. As soon as one enters the workforce, the stabilizing begins. The person looks at the environment, the organization, and the culture to see if he or she has the skills to succeed there. (If the answer is no, the person leaves and begins the exploration process anew.) If the person chooses to stay, s/he works to become known as a dependable and productive worker in the consolidation stage. As the person develops that reputation, s/he seeks higher pay and more responsibility; i.e. advances.

The maintenance stage, typically at ages 45 to 65, has the tasks of holding, updating, and innovating. When a person is holding, the focus is on keeping one’s skills updated and
innovative, but within the same occupation. Remaining up to date and innovative can keep workers from becoming stuck in the holding task, which can lead to decreased productivity and stagnation.

The end of the maintenance stage, which seems to be coming later in life than age 65, sees the beginning of the disengagement stage. People shift their concerns to retirement planning and other physical, spiritual, and financial considerations. Their tasks are deceleration (in terms of careers), planning for retirement, and then living that retirement. It is important to note, though, that planning for retirement now begins far before age 65. When Super developed his theory, it was not uncommon for individuals to remain with a company for their entire career and retire with a pension. As the economic and corporate environments have changed, retirement planning has, too.

Clearly Super’s theory looked at career over the life span. But Super also noted that while people are working on their careers, they are also living lives. The life space aspect of his theory emphasizes that work is not of equal importance to everyone. Some people work because it puts food on the table, some people work because their job fulfills their life’s mission, and some work for a combination of reasons. The different roles we have in life, such as wife, student, daughter, and sister, make up lifestyles. The “sequential combination” of the lifestyles makes up the life cycle (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). That total structure is the career pattern.

Super noted that most people have nine major roles throughout the life span. In chronological order these include: son/daughter, student, leisurite, citizen, worker, spouse/partner, homemaker, parent, and pensioner (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). These
life roles take place in a variety of places including home, school, the workplace, and the community. Balancing these roles is stressful and an effective balance is quite difficult to achieve. Hence many people come to counseling seeking a more ideal life structure. A strength of Super’s theory is that it takes into account a variety of life roles and looks at how individuals make those roles into a life.

One of the most important ideas in Life-Span, Life-Space Theory is that of the self-concept, which Super defined as “a picture of the self in some role, situation, or position, performing some set of function, or in some web of relationships” (1969, p. 18). He developed two key figures, the Archway Model and the Life-Career Rainbow, to demonstrate how personal and situational factors influence life roles, the life span, and the self-concept. The career decisions a person makes are an attempt to put the self-concept into career terms. People use subjective and objective understandings of themselves to determine career goals, which also help them figure out how to participate in various life roles.

Donald Super’s theory covers quite a bit of information, which is understandable considering it has been continually refined since 1953. The latter part of Super’s career was spent on the actual application of the theory and this culminated in the Career Development Assessment and Counseling Model (C-DAC). The goal of this model, which is not an actual instrument but a process, is to help individuals deal with concerns in the exploration stage, but it can be useful for any age group, not just adolescents (Super et. al, 1996). The exploration stage really focuses on helping people determine their true interests and values and connecting these to the working world. While adolescents typically engage in these tasks, adults unhappy in their current careers can also benefit from such exploration. Super was
careful to note that people do not always go through the career stages in a linear fashion; it is normal to re-cycle through them.

A truly adult-oriented measure of Super’s theory is the Adult Career Concerns Inventory (ACCI) (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). This instrument looks at how well an individual has planned for the four stages of the life-span, life-space theory. As discussed earlier, each stage has three career development tasks. Respondents rate their concern with each task on a Likert scale of 1 (no concern) to 5 (great concern) (Super, Thompson, & Lindeman, 1988). This is a useful tool to use when a counselor is beginning career counseling with an individual. Counselors must be careful, though, as not all clients will be able to make career choices. If this is the case, the counselor should work on helping the client develop helpful ideas about career planning, help the client research various occupations, and finally, help the client make a career decision (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005).

Super also developed the Career Development Inventory as part of the C-DAC model to help determine how prepared high school and college age students are to actually make career decisions (Thompson, Lindeman, Super, Jordaan, & Myers, 1984). It looks at career planning, career exploration, what students know about the work world, and career decision-making concepts. Higher scoring students are more prepared to make career oriented decisions, such as deciding on a college major.

In order to make sound career decisions, a person needs to know how much s/he values a certain life role. A person who places a great deal of value on the worker role may be comfortable with the 60+ hour work weeks of a high-powered corporate attorney.
Someone who places a higher value on the homemaker role may choose to work part time. To help people determine which life roles are most important, Super and Nevill developed the Salience Inventory (1986). This instrument looks at five of the life roles including student, worker, citizen, homemaker, and leisurite on one behavioral and two affective components (1986). Participation is the behavioral section and examines what the person has done in each of those life roles. Commitment, an affective component, has the person look at how s/he feels about the roles while the Values Expectation component, also affective, helps the person determine how often there will be opportunities to express their values in the life roles.

Crystallizing the self-concept is a difficult process and some clients will need help in that area. The Values Scale, also developed by Super and Nevill, measures 21 extrinsic and intrinsic values that people hope to showcase in their life roles (1986). Together the Salience Inventory and the Values Scale can help clients see where they are currently spending their time and where they would like to be spending it. From there counselors can help clients develop strategies to achieve their goals.

For being such a well-known and extensive set of concepts, Life-Span, Life Space Theory has only a moderate amount of cultural sensitivity. Most counselors recognize that patterns of life-salience can be passed on through a person’s dominant culture or the society in which they live. Counselors also know that popular culture continues to perpetuate gender stereotypes across all of Super’s life roles. As an example, American society continues to view the wife or female partner as the homemaker and the husband or male partner as the worker with each expected to find satisfaction with that role. A woman who loathes the
homemaker role will likely raise a few eyebrows, as will the man who delightfully fulfills the homemaker role by letting his children paint his fingernails. Unfortunately Super’s theory itself does not mention the difficulties that can arise when clients face discrepancies between what they want to do and what society tells them they should want to do. In applying Super’s ideas, counselors must take care to investigate how clients have internalized role expectations and how those expectations are affecting career decisions.

In a literature review regarding Super’s work, Niles and Goodnough (1996) came to several important conclusions. For example, counselors must consider developmental and cultural contexts when helping clients determine life-role salience and values. There are also sex differences related to life roles and values. Finally career counselors cannot be fully successful without addressing issues of life-role salience and values.

Salomone (1996) examined 40 years worth of research on Life-Span, Life-Space Theory to provide a historical perspective. He notes that within that time, Super’s theory changed very little. He also pointed out the need for more research, particularly empirical research, related to Super’s 14 propositions. Overall, though, Salomone concluded that Super’s theory is an invaluable contribution to career development. It also provides an important framework for the career counseling process.

It is also worth noting that Life-Span, Life Space Theory was developed using American males. Super stated in a 1993 interview with Suzanne Freeman that studies “show that the hypothetical pattern of women’s careers which I developed based on men’s, published in 1957, has had considerable validity” (p. 257). While it is somewhat comforting to know that the theory is applicable to women, it is disconcerting that the theory has not
been tested with diverse populations. Even after half a century Life-Span, Life-Space Theory still appears to tilt heavily towards Western nations. That must change.

Overall Life-Span, Life Space Theory is quite beneficial to this research with retired professional athletes, most of whom retire in the late thirties or early forties. While most workers find themselves in the establishment stage at this age, these athletes are starting new careers. While they are not the only people starting new careers at this age, they have been working on their sports careers for most of their lives. More than likely they will need to engage in some exploration tasks if they have not already. Furthermore explaining the very idea of the stages of career development-and the fact that people can recycle through the stages-could be quite beneficial to someone who feels as though everyone else his age has everything figured out career-wise.
CHAPTER III

Method

Overview

Gaps remain in the literature regarding how best to conduct career counseling interventions with retired professional athletes. As research has shown athletes do encounter a unique situation upon retirement. They may be as young as high-school age or they may be older and retiring after twenty years at the professional level, but counseling can be beneficial as the athletes rediscover parts of their identity. The author chose to focus on elite athletes in part because today’s college athletes receive at least some exposure to career services and career exploration at the college level and thus are better prepared for life after professional sports. Furthermore professional athletes forced to retire due to injury may have not had the time to adequately plan for a changed lifestyle, which can create extra emotional distress and feelings of helplessness. Unfortunately there was little information available on counseling retired elite athletes. The research that did exist remained heavily focused on Western countries, lacked cultural sensitivity, and was rarely generalizable outside the sport researched.

It is not unusual for athletes who endure career-ending injuries to struggle with mental health issues. Part of helping the athlete discover new parts of himself or herself involves confronting those issues. Former National Hockey League goalie Clint Malarchuk nearly died in 1989 after a player accidentally skated over his neck and severed his interior carotid artery. Though he returned to the game after his injury, Malarchuk has been frank in discussing his mental health struggles with include depression, nightmares, obsessive-
compulsive disorder, alcoholism, and attempted suicide. Says Malarchuk, “At night I’d sit straight up, gasping, seeing this huge skate coming at my face and my throat and I couldn’t catch my breath. The physical recuperation, that’s the easy part. It’s the mental side you fight with. I look back now and ask myself, ‘Is that why this happened to me? Is that why I’m so screwed up?’ I go to one of those slasher movies, those slice-n-dice things, blood spurting everywhere, and I break out in a cold sweat. I start to squirm.” (Entertainment Sports Network News Services, 2008). Athletes such as Malarchuk, who continues to work in the NHL as a goaltending consultant for the Winnipeg Jets, can be a source of strength for athletes. They can learn that their struggles are normal, that they are not weak, and that recovery is possible.

Research Design

In pursuing a qualitative exploration of life after sports, the researcher had three distinct purposes including a) understanding the retirement experience of retired NHL players, b) discovering how retired NHL players maintain the athletic identity following retirement, and c) the development of a career counseling model for retired NHL athletes. The questions asked of athletes were tailored to specific life stages of Super’s model. The researcher hopes that the study will provide valuable information to help counselors better understand the experiences of retired athletes and also aid in the development of more successful career counseling interventions for these athletes.

The multiple case study approach was selected because it allows the researcher to explore specific issues in detail from a variety of viewpoints. This particular research used descriptive case studies because the researcher utilized a specific theory, Super’s Life-Span,
Life-Space Theory, to help formulate the interview questions and guide data collection. (Tellis, 1997). The approach was also problem-oriented rather than analytical, as the researcher sought to uncover the central issues related to the retirement and maintenance of the athletic identity while suggesting appropriate career counseling interventions.

The primary method of data collection was individual personal interviews with each athlete. Each interview took approximately two hours. The PI hoped to conduct all interviews in person, but recognized that this was not always possible. NHL players come from around the world and some had returned to their home countries following their retirement. When in-person interviews were not feasible, the interviews were conducted by phone. Regardless of the actual interview situation, each interview was transcribed by the PI and returned to the NHL player for comments and corrections.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured with each athlete receiving the same questions. Follow-up questions were asked as appropriate based on the responses of the athlete. Each interview began with the same broad background questions as suggested by Moustakas (Creswell, 2007). These questions, designed to provide key background information about the athlete’s career, included: When did you first consider yourself an athlete? Did you consider yourself to be an elite athlete? If so, when? When did you decide to attempt becoming a professional athlete? How long were you a professional athlete? What were some of the highlights of your professional career? What were some of the low points of your professional career? How did those highs and lows affect your sense of self?

The other questions in the interview were designed to probe the individual’s experience as a professional athlete, the retirement process, and his current experience. It is
through analysis of these experiences that counseling intervention recommendations emerge.

The interview questions were divided into three sections in line with Super’s framework. The first section, *As An Athlete*, examined the establishment phase of the athlete’s career. The second section, *Retirement*, sought to help determine how the athlete went through the exploration stage of career development and into the establishment stage. The third section, *Today*, was designed to help the researcher understand how the athlete is experiencing the maintenance stage.

**As an Athlete:**
1. Was being a professional athlete an all-encompassing experience? What about in the off-season?
2. Did you feel you had a life outside of professional athletics?
3. What parts of being a professional athlete do you miss the most?
4. What is the most difficult thing about no longer being a professional athlete?
5. Do you believe that teammates/other pro athletes still want to be thought of as professional athletes even after retirement?
6. Do you still consider yourself an athlete?

**Retirement:**
1. How would you define your career today?
2. Did you plan for retirement?
3. If so, when did you begin planning?
4. Did you have assistance in planning for retirement?
5. How did you begin planning for retirement?
6. What factors led to your retirement?
7. Was retirement a shock? If so, for how long?
8. Is being retired still a shock?
9. What are some ways retired athletes maintain an athletic identity? How long can they do that?
10. Do you think athletes could benefit from counseling or career planning during their athletic careers and during the transition process?
11. What might that counseling look like?
12. People retire in different ways. Can you recall athletes who went through retirement differently than you and how they are doing? (You need not give names.)
Today:
1. How do you define yourself today?
2. How has your definition of self changed since being retired?
3. How do you feel about your current career?
4. What advice would you give to fellow athletes about the retirement process?

Participants

In order to select participants for the research process, the principal investigator (PI) contacted former players of a National Hockey League (NHL) team to explain the project. The PI selected the NHL as opposed to other professional sports leagues due to proximity, personal interest, and contacts she and colleagues had within the sport.

Using the contacts of herself and a former NHL player, the PI contacted other NHL players who had retired within the past ten years. A ten-year time frame was selected to ensure a sufficient number of participants. Furthermore the athletes needed to have had sufficient time to pursue other opportunities after their sporting careers. A total of six athletes participated in the initial study. All six athletes were Caucasian, of North American descent, and their average age was 38.33 years old. Charles, age 35, is a husband and father who remains involved with hockey as a youth coach. John, age 44, is a husband and father who coaches an American Hockey League team. Sam, age 34, is the youngest of the participants, and works as a financial adviser. He has a wife and children. Thirty-nine year-old Brent currently works as a broadcaster and is a husband and father. The oldest participant, 42-year-old Peter, is a husband and father who works in broadcasting and business. The last participant, 36 year-old Frank, is single and involved in a number of business endeavors.

Further information on the participants is in Appendix A.
Participants needed to be players who signed NHL contracts with one of the 30 NHL teams. The length of time spent at the professional level did not affect their selection for the project; they could have been players who retired at the end of long NHL careers or young prospects who may only have had the chance to play a handful of NHL games. Essentially the only criteria for this project were that the participant retired after playing hockey at the NHL professional level and that he was willing to participate in the research project under the direction of the PI. To ensure that the study was practiced ethically, the university’s Institutional Review Board approved the study. Information on the IRB process is in Appendix B. The participants signed informed consent forms, were free to leave the study at any time, and received written copies of the questions used in the study.

**Researcher as Interviewer**

The PI was a master’s level counselor working on a doctorate in counselor education at a research I university in the southeastern United States. She had experience working with student athletes, as she taught several classes of student athletes while pursuing her master’s degree at a mid-sized university in the southeastern United States. Her theoretical orientation was Rogerian, though she did also use cognitive-behavioral and reality therapy techniques as appropriate.

It is important to note that the PI selected professional ice hockey as a research topic in part because of an avid interest in the sport. She has followed hockey for the majority of her life and has season tickets for one of the NHL teams. Furthermore she possessed some degree of familiarity with the careers of two of the interview participants, though she had not
met any of the participants prior to the interviews. In order to minimize the potential for bias, the PI also interviewed participants of whom she had little prior knowledge.

Data Analysis

The data analysis of the interviews began with the PI transcribing each interview, after which it was returned to the athlete. The athlete had the opportunity to comment on and clarify any statements. Once the interviews were returned, the PI went through the step of horizontalization (Creswell, 2007, p. 61) in which she looked through each interview for significant statements and sought to understand how the athletes understood the retirement process. This allowed the PI to develop clusters of meaning and themes from the interviews.

In coding the data, the PI engaged in two separate processes. She first went through the data using open coding, meaning that she allowed the themes to emerge from the data without confining them to any preconceived themes. Following this step, the PI then coded the data according to Super’s life stages, specifically the stages of exploration, establishment, and maintenance.

The PI then produced what Creswell terms textural descriptions, which were essentially descriptions of what the athletes experienced (2007). The PI also wrote descriptions of the settings that affected how the athletes experienced retirement in a process called imaginative variation. Using the textural descriptions and the imaginative variation, the PI wrote a description of the common themes the athletes experienced. In writing the descriptions, the PI sought to capture the essence of the experience so that readers came away with the feeling, “I understand better what it is like for someone to feel like that”
(Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46 as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 62). The athletes reviewed these descriptions in an attempt to further establish trustworthiness of the findings.

The PI worked diligently to establish the trustworthiness of the findings realizing that she was the interviewer, the coder, and the developer of themes. The athletes were active participants in the reviewing process, as the PI returned the interview transcriptions to the athletes prior to coding. It was not until the athletes had the opportunity to clarify the interviews that the coding process began.

Once the data were coded, the PI returned the themes to each individual player for their review. They also had the opportunity to view their supporting comments for the cross-case analysis to ensure that the PI had correctly interpreted their quotes. If there were disagreements, the athlete’s viewpoint took precedence over that of the PI.

The trustworthiness of the data was further validated by the fact that as professional athletes with public lives, supporting data existed for the majority of their accomplishments. For example, it was possible to review the number of years the athletes played professional hockey, as well as drafts, championships, and on-ice incidents they mentioned.
CHAPTER IV

Results

This author divided this chapter into several sections, beginning with the results of the case-by-case analysis. Following this discussion of individual themes with each participant, a cross-case analysis of the results summarizes themes that were common across the six participants. The chapter closes with several sections detailing additional important themes of these particular elite professional NHL players as they relate to being athletes, retirement, today, and the work of Donald Super.

Results of the Case-by-Case Analysis

Charles

I met with Charles at his current place of employment, where it is clear from his comments, behavior, and interaction with colleagues that he is enjoying his professional life after his career as a hockey player. Over the course of the interview, a variety of themes related to athletic identity, sports, and retirement emerged.

“The Grind of Being a Professional Hockey Player”

One of the first lessons Charles learned as a professional hockey player was that “it’s a numbers game. If you don’t perform well, you’re out of the game.” This was also one of the toughest aspects of his career, as going back and forth between the major National Hockey League (NHL) and the minor American Hockey League (AHL) was mentally draining. All the players on the AHL team were playing for the chance to be on an NHL team, yet most of the time only one player received a call up at any given point.
Playing a professional sport also meant getting used to a “roller coaster ride of highs and lows.” The team’s emotions could vacillate wildly depending on if the team played well or poorly. For example, if the team found itself “in a terrible slide, it’s just a miserable time to try and get out of [it],” said Charles. Furthermore the traveling that accompanied the professional sporting life became more draining as Charles’ life married and had children. It was not always glamorous.

Charles also noted that staying in shape for the game became more of a year round mission as his career developed. In his words, “the players are getting better and better each year because of what they’re doing in the off-season.” This meant that there really was no time to take a training break, as everyone wanted to be in the best shape possible for training camp.

“Having to be Selfish”

Part of being a successful hockey player meant possessing a certain degree of selfishness, which appeared difficult for Charles in the sense that he is not a naturally selfish person. But working to be the AHL player to make the jump to the NHL did require selfishness in the sense that Charles kept working to be that much better than his teammates. He said, “That’s one thing I believe, in professional sports, people don’t realize. You have to be extremely selfish in a lot of ways; in the way you train yourself, commit to your own self. If you’re not going to do it, no one’s going to do it for you.” There was a sense that though there is a team atmosphere, each player does have to look out for himself “because when the phone rings, 20 of you aren’t going.”
“Strength”

Strength is key to the professional hockey player physically, emotionally, and mentally. Physical strength was perhaps the most obvious, as Charles trained year round, made sure that he could skate quickly, and give hits as well as he absorbed them. The mental toll of hockey was evidenced by having to remain strong even when the team did not perform well on the ice. The emotional aspect may have been less pronounced, but it was every bit as important. Said Charles, “If you look at the professional athlete who is supposed to be the big, brawny, bold guy, invincible…supposed to be able to take anything, nothing can hurt [him]. When you take away all that [he does], I mean, it does hurt guys.” Charles linked this to the “male attribute of not opening up enough” when asked about advice he would give fellow athletes going through the retirement process. In his opinion, a lot of men are reluctant to ask for help and professional athletes may take that to an extreme. He cautioned against this tactic, though, noting that resources are out there for players as they go through retirement. Getting the players to take advantage of those resources is the tricky part.

“Family”

Charles noted the importance of his family early in his career, particularly with regards to financial planning. As his career progressed his family continued to support him, as well as motivate him in the off-season. Family also factored into his decision to eventually retire from professional hockey, as he had young children and was “getting back in a scenario where I was bouncing around from city to city. I didn’t want to be everywhere.”

Family had a different meaning in the hockey world, as well. Charles mentioned that a hockey team definitely is a family of sorts with “guys’ time in the locker room and being
on the road together.” In referencing the deaths of three professional hockey players with several months’ time, Charles stated he thinks the deaths would be particularly hard on the teammates of those players because of the “family atmosphere” of the teams.

“Focus on the Future”

Today Charles has a firm focus on the future. He said, “People still come up to me and talk about it and I’m like, ‘Ah, it was great.’ But this is what I do now.” He enjoys seeing how he can have an effect on the future in his current career, which still involves hockey. He mentioned that it is the player who looks to the past too much, who misses the fact that no one is wearing his jersey anymore, that may struggle with retirement. In his opinion, the focus needs to be on the future and finding fulfillment after the sport. “[Charles] now is different than I was two years ago and way different than I was ten years ago.”

“Financial Planning”

Financial planning, beginning with his first contract, was important through Charles’ career. He noted that financial planning was a major part of his retirement planning in general and he gave more thought to that aspect of retirement than the career aspect. He also mentioned that “NHL guys maybe do a better job of managing what they have” than some other professional athletes. He speculated that this may be due in part to the family atmosphere of the NHL, as older players have a tendency to look out for younger players and keep them a bit grounded financially.

“Staying Involved with the Game of Hockey”

When he first stepped away from professional hockey, Charles went into the small business sector. While the business was successful, Charles did not find it fulfilling. He said,
“I knew all along that wasn’t who I was. That’s just not me. That’s just not what I do.” When Charles’ current position became available, he knew it was something he wanted to investigate because he missed his involvement with hockey. Now that he has gotten back to hockey, he is thoroughly enjoying his career and feels fortunate to remain involved with the game. “It’s always going to be in my blood. This is what I do, so being able to help this way in the community and in this team fits perfectly for me.”

John

The interview with John took place by phone. He had a positive attitude that appeared to influence his responses and was forthright and well-spoken.

“Positive Attitude”

Throughout the interview, John had a positive attitude that permeated his comments. He mentioned that he was “very fortunate” to play hockey for a living and that he sees “a lot of good things” when reflecting on his career despite the accompanying disappointments. He noted that once he reached a certain age, every extra year spent on the ice was “a bonus” and that he had “no regrets” upon retiring. Part of that no regrets attitude may stem from the fact that as a player, John remained cognizant of the fact that as a professional hockey player, “you’re very fortunate, one, to play a sport you love and get paid very well to do it.” He made the most of his career in the NHL and continues to do that in his coaching career.

“Routine”

Routine was an important aspect of John’s career and his realization of that helped his transition after hockey. For fifteen years, each day of his work life was predictable. He knew what time he needed to be at the rink, what he would do when he got there, and how he
would prepare for games. Game days also had a set routine. Thus when retirement arrived and John no longer had a set routine, it was quite a change. In his words, “there was definitely an adjustment period.”

“Adjustment”

As indicated in the theme of routine, adjustment was often mentioned in John’s interview. It often emerged in speaking about life after hockey, which makes sense because former players often find themselves missing “the playing, being with the guys every day, and having fun.” John wondered what his next step would be, a pretty big change from knowing how each day will play out. A common thought was, “What’s next? What do I do now?” There was also an adjustment when John began his new career as a coach, as his hours were different and he helped out on the ice in a completely different way. Yet another adjustment was financial, as coaches do not make the same amount of money as players.

“Staying Involved with the Game of Hockey”

Unlike some of the interview participants, John gave serious thought to his after hockey career while still playing the game. Staying involved with the game of hockey was key and even as a player, he thought about how he could make that happen. He took down notes from his various coaches as one form of preparation, looked at former teammates, and also visualized the transition. Throughout the interview John mentioned how much he enjoys staying involved with hockey, even joking, “You’re always involved in the game. The only difference is you feel a lot better waking up in the morning. You’re not as sore.” He sees coaching as the next best thing to playing because it does keep him involved with the sport. He noted that other former professional hockey players may not have careers involving
hockey, but they still manage to stay involved with the sport through recreation leagues and the like.

“Focus on the Future/Planning”

Perhaps the most obvious example of John’s planning for the future is the fact that he took down notes from practice in preparation for a possible coaching career. He also mentioned the importance of planning for the future financially and recommended that players “be smart with your money.” Furthermore he noted the importance of taking advantage of opportunities after hockey be they in sports, business, or education. His biggest advice to retiring players is to prepare, ease into the transition, and make sure to enjoy whatever it is one chooses to do.

“Personal Differences”

Personal differences were another theme in John’s interview in the sense that no two players go through the retirement process the same. John has seen “the good and the bad.” Some players “never step on the ice again” following retirement, whereas others like John make an active decision to stay in the game. Players oftentimes want to remain competitive in some way, as competiveness is a key part of their personalities, and manage to do so in recreation leagues, triathlons, and various team sports.

Sam

The interview with Sam took place at his current place of employment in a conference room. Throughout the interview he was relaxed and very open with his answers. He interacted with his colleagues at one point and it was obvious that he is well-liked and respected by them.
“Family”

Sam began his interview with a statement about the importance of his family. When he received his first signing bonus, his parents urged him to be cautious with the money and he found a financial advisor. He also emphasized that he “had a great upbringing. My parents raised me that way. I had a great upbringing; the best parents ever. They brought [me] up to the best [person] I could.” His family life today is also clearly important to him, factoring into his decision to retire and live in his current location. He also told several stories about his children and mentioned wanting to work extremely hard in his new profession, financial advising, to provide for his family and give them a quality life. But Sam is also working hard in financial advising to help other families or in his words, “take care [of] families,” too.

“Competition”

Competitive drive is part of what made Sam a successful NHL player, but it is also a powerful motivator in his role as a financial advisor. He says he wants clients to see “I’m working harder than anyone else here because that’s who I am. I had to work harder than anyone else there on the ice to get to where I got in hockey, so I know how to be successful.” He is putting the same effort, and perhaps even more, into his new career. There is also a sense that Sam is working hard to prove himself not just to his clients, but to himself as well. His competitive drive is helping him push past his comfort zone. For example, Sam noted that he never really viewed himself as an elite athlete and thinks that may have held him back a bit. He is now working to be more confident in himself, his abilities, and his skills with investments.
“Planning for Retirement”

In some ways, Sam has been planning for his ultimate retirement—not only hockey—since he received his first signing bonus. He hired a financial advisor and began maxing out his 401(k) as a minor league player. He did not spend his money frivolously and “started putting money right away and saving.” But Sam also made sure that he thought about life after hockey. He knew he had an interest in financial advising from his initial encounters with his own advisors and after seeing a friend find success in the area, he decided to follow suit.

Sam also mentioned that he began thinking about retiring from hockey several seasons before actually doing so. It was not a decision he made lightly, though, and he planned carefully by talking to general managers of several of the teams for whom he had played. He thought about what he would do after hockey. Knowing that there is no coming back after retirement, he wanted to ensure he had a plan in place for retirement and that he was ready to walk away from the game.

“Peace with Decision”

Another theme that emerged through the interviews is that Sam is very much at peace with his decision to walk away from professional hockey. He looks back on the memories, which come back to him more and more as time passes, with fondness. In his words, “I am very proud of it. And I had so much fun, so many memories.” Today he says, “I’m really happy with what I’m doing.” He is not having a hard time not being a professional athlete and though he considers himself athletic, he does not view himself as an athlete.
Part of Sam’s ease with his decision relates to the fact that even as a professional athlete, he seemed to be more aware of the fact that it was not a job he could do forever. This contributed to his decision to begin a new career and work diligently to achieve a new kind of success. Furthermore, his role in hockey had become to wear on him and simply “was not a fun job anymore.” Today when people ask about his hockey days, Sam is happy to talk about them, but he also wants people to understand that the days of Sam the Hockey Player are over. He is now Sam the Financial Advisor.

Brent

Due to scheduling difficulties, the interview with Brent took place electronically. His answers were both honest and well-thought out, as he requested the questions prior to the interview.

“Constant Evaluation”

As a professional athlete, Brent knew that he was judged and measured constantly by coaches, the media, and fans. Being under such a microscope was not easy and has an effect on him even today, as he feels that he still tries to get everyone to like him even if those people really do not matter. There is a feeling that he can never truly be comfortable with himself because of outside judgments.

The constant evaluation was at times negative, but Brent noted “most [hockey players] embrace the idea of people being invested in your team and your performance.” Thus for Brent retirement has brought a sense of not mattering as much as he did in the past.
“Perfectionist”

Brent’s “first serious indication” that he had a chance to become a professional athlete came when he was drafted and helped drive him even more to make his dream a reality. But he also mentioned that he was a perfectionist as a hockey player and maintains that characteristic today. Looking back at his career, there are a few things he would change if possible. He related this to his status as an athlete and the need to be a winner, as well. Even today in his broadcasting career he strives for perfection, doing his best to make sure that his insecurities do not come through in his work.

“Financial Planning for Retirement”

The majority of Brent’s retirement planning was financial. When he received his first contract, he “put away good money in the market” and let his father and agent take charge of the process. Reflecting on that, he joked about how trusting he was. Brent admits that did not think too much about a career after hockey, though looking back he “angled towards TV.” He also mentioned that he knew he would have to remain active in retirement, as simply sitting around was not an option.

“Views Self as (Retired) Athlete”

In defining himself today, Brent noted that he still thinks of himself as an athlete, albeit a retired athlete. His career reflects that in the sense that he is working to be the best broadcaster he can be (competitive drive). Furthermore remaining involved with hockey helps maintain his athletic identity, an important fact when the Stanley Cup Playoffs arrive and Brent misses hockey.
Peter

Peter requested the interview questions prior to our discussion, which took place by phone. He had obviously given a great deal of thought to his answers, which were detailed and honest.

“Always an Athlete”

Peter said, “I think I’ll always be an athlete. That’ll never leave.” The theme was apparent throughout the conversation as he discussed pursuing various athletic endeavors, such as snowboarding and kite surfing, in his spare time. He also noted “you’re just an athlete inside and forever.” Another point he made was as athletes go into retirement they carry a strong ego, fueled in some part by years in professional sports, that makes them reluctant to seek help, particularly mental health help.

The sense of always being an athlete has carried over into Peter’s professional life after hockey as he uses the characteristics that made him successful in that job in his new work. In his words, “You…learn to adapt to the new environment with the characteristics built, that you learned, and then move forward.” In the meantime things may not go as well as one may like, but the key is to “don’t be afraid to get up and keep looking for that right environment.”

“Competitive/Perfectionist”

Speaking with Peter, there is a definite sense that he has maintained his competitive edge into retirement. He also described himself as a perfectionist and that factored into his decision to retire when he did. He was used to competing at the highest level in every game and when he felt he could no longer do that, he knew it was time to step away from the game.
He did so after playing more NHL games than any of the other interview participants, which is also a reflection of his dedication and competitiveness. During the interview one of the words Peter used to describe himself was “champion,” but not in a prideful sense. Champion reflects how he has been competitive, persevered, and used the skills he learned over life to succeed on the ice.

Winning is “pretty cool [and] fun” and Peter is using his competitive drive to try to replicate the winning feeling in business endeavors. The “things learned through [competing] and through those experiences are the exact characteristics you should be able to take with you into the real world.”

“Financial Planning for Retirement”

Financial planning for retirement was the most major form of Peter’s planning for retirement. He noted that the quality of life enjoyed as a professional athlete is something most athletes miss and there is an adjustment period. As a player he made sure to save his money, as he was well aware of the fact that one day the hockey checks would stop coming. He actively preserved his wealth and also sought the advice of financial professionals.

“Continually Looking to Challenge Self”

Peter is making sure that he stays active during retirement and part of that includes finding new ways to challenge himself. He mentioned trying new athletic pursuits, such as kite surfing and snowboarding, but also business interests. He has gotten involved with several different businesses and does broadcasting work for an NHL team. Peter said he is not afraid to fail, as he knows he can get back up. He learns by doing, whether in hockey or
business, and uses the skills he learned from being on winning teams to help create success in business.

**Frank**

I interviewed Frank by phone and the first observation I made was his laidback, jovial nature. The answers he provided were well thought out and at times reflected his laidback personality.

**“Family”**

Family was one of the most prominent themes during Frank’s interview, beginning with his mentioning playing a variety of sports with his brothers growing up. His father has also been invaluable in multiple areas, such as helping Frank arrange housing and transportation when he got his first contract. He has also helped Frank preserve his wealth both as a young player and as a more experienced athlete. Furthermore, Frank has made a number of investments in real estate and business with the assistance of his father, who appears to have a large amount of business experience.

**“Playing as Long as Possible”**

In speaking with Frank, it is obvious that he has great passion for the game of hockey. He has played professional hockey for 16 years and spent the majority of that time in the NHL, though he now plays in Europe. He notes that there have been good years and bad years, but for the most part he just feels “lucky that I’ve gotten to play this long in a game I love.” He does not mind that he no longer plays for the NHL because he is still playing hockey. Frank is also well aware of the fact that a number of the people he began playing
with have retired completely from the game, some for physical reasons, so he knows he is fortunate that his body can still handle the game.

“Staying Involved with the Game of Hockey”

Frank has managed to stay involved with hockey as a career longer than most players and his interview reflected that. As he looks toward retirement, though, he hopes to remain involved with the sport. He said he will always consider himself an athlete and “will always be involved with” hockey. Coaching is one way in which Frank could see himself remaining involved with the sport. Over his career he has seen a number of coaches, some better than others, and he said “I think I know how to be a good one and I could honestly be successful at it.”

“Planning for the Future”

The theme of planning and preparing for the future was evident in Frank’s interview. He has given real thought to a career after hockey, as well as preparing for the eventual financial adjustment. Frank has been careful not to spend his money frivolously and worked to make sound financial investments. Furthermore he has a side business that keeps him active in hockey’s off-season, as well as real estate investments.

“Positive Attitude”

Frank has quite the positive attitude. He was laid back and made several jokes during the interview. For example, he mentioned wanting to stay active in retirement and stated, “I would never be the guy sitting around with a beer in my belly button smoking a cigar.” He describes himself as an “athlete, business owner, and easy-going guy.” He also values the fact that he has the chance to keep playing the game he enjoys so much. Though the travel
and physical aspects of hockey can be draining and not always glamorous, he made sure that
the interview knew he was not complaining. He also has a life outside of professional hockey
and seems to have a lot of fun in it.

**Results of the Cross-Case Analysis**

In conducting multiple case studies, the Principal Investigator (PI) can examine
commonalities and differences in how participants experience a particular phenomenon. In
this study, the phenomenon was how retired professional National Hockey League (NHL)
players maintain the athletic identity in retirement. The cross-case analysis looked at the
cases as a whole as opposed to individually, yet maintained “the most important experiential
knowledge” (Stake, 1995, p. 44).

The PI began the cross-case analysis by first looking at the themes from each case
study. She then examined the similarities among those themes and the accompanying textural
descriptions. By looking closely at the textural descriptions, which were designed to help the
reader achieve a deeper understanding of how it really is to live as a retired professional NHL
player, the PI was able to make broader conclusions about retired NHL athletes. In some
cases, an individual athlete may not have spoken enough about a particular topic on his own
to warrant its label as a theme for himself; but as long as he covered the theme at some point
in his interview, it was included as a theme.

There were five themes common to all six of the study participants. These included
financial planning, focus on the future, peace with decision, competition, and athletic. In the
following table, the PI provides examples of how each participant experienced the theme.
Table 1. Themes Across Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Planning</td>
<td>Charles: “Financially, yes, I think I did everything the right way to not be one of those guys going, ‘Oh, my goodness I need to go get a job. What am I gonna do?’”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>John: “You’re very fortunate, one, to play a sport you love and get paid very well to do it. But when that day comes and the paycheck’s not there anymore and the next paycheck is nowhere near where it used to be it’s like, ‘Wow.’ You have to adjust your lifestyle.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sam: “Getting the success that I had all of a sudden I was like, ‘What do I do, right’ So I hired a financial advisor. I started putting money away right away and saving. I was maybe 20 when I started doing that stuff.”</td>
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<td>Brent: “Financially I put it [retirement] in the hands of an investor.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Peter: “Yeah, you can save your pennies and I think that’s planning for retirement in my eyes. Saving your money, making sure, you know, that when checks stop rolling in that you have the ability to plan for what you want to do,”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Frank: “I like to think I’m one of the smarter ones, you know? I got involved in a business before I even came close to retiring and, you know, I didn’t go out and buy, you know, six boats and five cars and stuff like that.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on the Future</td>
<td>Charles: “I try to look at the bigger picture of what was going on in my life than just that single thing.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>John: “I was always taking down notes from practice stuff in case coaching was a possibility.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sam: “I’d rather do it this way. You know, work harder than anyone else is willing to, so then I can live better than anyone else in the years to come. If I can get this going the right way, it will be good.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Brent: “I always knew I couldn’t just sit around. Early on in my career I had a knack for being interviewed and I guess in retrospect, I angled towards TV and it worked out.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Peter: “I think it’s just a chapter in your life that, you just know that it’s over, you turn the page, and, you know, you have a whole new blank sheet of paper there. You have to, you know, start writing a new chapter.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Frank: “I wouldn’t mind getting into coaching at some point. I would like to, you know, stay involved with the game. I have seen quite a few coaches and quite a few of them were not good. I’ve seen the good ones; I’ve seen the bad ones. I think I know how to be a good one and I could honestly be successful at it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peace with Decision</td>
<td>Charles: “I needed to be back into it. It’s always gonna be in my blood. This is what I do. So being able to help this way in the community and in this fits perfectly for me.” John: “Personally I had no regrets. I was playing, it was a great time, and I knew the day would come when I would have to step away from it.” Sam: “I wanted to get my second career started. I felt like if I played a couple more years I would be losing those years of growth in that new career.” Brent: “I love it [referring to current career.] It lets me surprise people who thought I was [one-dimensional.]” Peter: “I actually walked away from the game feeling pretty good.” Frank: “I’m trying to play as long as I can. I’m, you know, obviously not getting paid nearly as much as I used to, but, you know, I’m doing it because I love it and, you know, they’re paying me.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
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</table>
| Competition  | Charles: “If you look at the professional athlete who is supposed to be the big, brawny, bold guy, invincible, that [is] supposed to be able to take anything, nothing can hurt [him. ] But when you take away all that [he does], I mean, it does hurt.  

John: “You’re used to competing all the time and whether that’s playing tennis or running a marathon. You know, whatever, playing in a pickup basketball league, whatever. You’re so used to competing and that’s one thing that, as a competitive athlete, I don’t think you lose.”  

Sam: “I’m working harder than anyone else here because that’s who I am. I had to work harder than anyone else out there on the ice to get to where I got in hockey. So I know how to be successful.’  

Brent: “It was a pressure, but most embrace the idea of people being invested in your team and your performance. Almost euphoric.”  

Peter: “You have to start realizing that, ‘Okay, I’m not a pro athlete anymore. Now what?’ And you have to start to think, ‘Okay, what other challenges can I challenge myself with? You know, can I go back to school? Can I do things that are going to challenge my mind?’ You know, you have to start looking at your life as the way you looked at your pro career.”  

Frank: “I actually have a bet with a few of my buddies that they think ten years after I’m retired I’m going to be about 250. I’ve got a $1,000 bet on that one! So I have some motivation as far as that, besides what I said I would always want to be that way anyways.” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Charles: “Getting out on the ice a couple of times a week …at practices and helping the coaches is, like I said, my job’s great.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>John: “You know, you’re always going to be an ex-professional athlete. It’s gonna kind of stay with you.”</td>
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<td>Sam: “I try to stay in good shape. I’m a Monday night, pick-up league kind of athlete now.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Brent: “I consider myself a retired athlete. Emphasis on retired. So I guess yes is your answer.”</td>
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<td>Peter: “You know, I think I’ll always be an athlete. That’ll never leave.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Frank: “I think I’ll always consider myself an athlete. I like to be active at all times so I would never be the guy sitting around with a beer in my belly button smoking a cigar or anything like that.”</td>
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In addition to the data provided in the case-by-case analyses and the cross case analysis, some data did not lend themselves to particular themes. Nevertheless important information emerged from each of the three separate interview areas, which included questions related to life as an athlete, life in retirement, and life today. These data, detailed in the following sections, provide further insight into life as an NHL athlete, as well as the transition into retirement.
Themes as an Athlete

In coding the interview data for overall themes, there were a number of similarities among the participants beginning with the fact that all skated from a very young age, the relatively long lengths of their careers, remembrances of highlights and tough challenges, hockey as an all-encompassing experience, and missing some of the wonderful and unique aspects of being an NHL player.

Despite childhoods and adolescences filled with sports activities and high-level youth hockey, two-thirds of the participants did not consider themselves elite athletes until they were playing in the National Hockey League. Though Sam mentioned wanting to become a professional hockey player from a young age, most of the participants made the active decision to become professional athletes after specific hockey-related milestones such as making a junior team or getting drafted.

The length of the participants’ careers varied from 12 years to 17 years, an impressive spread considering Sam’s observation that the average NHL career lasts between three and a half and four years. Charles noted that he retired a little earlier than some of his peers, while Brent and Peter had some of the longest careers. During their professional careers, the participants experienced a variety of highs and lows, many of those related to the fact that professional athletes are continually subject to intense external evaluation.

Highlights of the participants’ careers included winning championships, with three participants winning the most prized award in professional hockey (and arguably the most prized award in all professional sports), the Stanley Cup. Other examples include leadership roles such as co-captaining teams, representing their countries on the international level,
meeting United States’ Presidents, and playing with other elite players. Nearly all the participants mentioned getting drafted, playing their first NHL game, and scoring their first NHL goal as career highlights.

Of course, playing professional hockey was not without its challenges. From being sent from the NHL to the minor leagues to disagreements with coaches, to on ice-incidents that became YouTube hits and losing in the Playoffs, each of the participants faced their share of adversity including an eventual physical decline. A common theme throughout these challenges was that hockey is, in the words of Charles, “a numbers game” (personal communication, April 11, 2012). The player’s performance was constantly being judged by a number of people including coaches, fans, the media, and even other players. As Brent pointed out, those judgments can affect a person’s sense of self and not always for the better.

All six participants noted that being a professional athlete was, for the most part, an all-encompassing experience especially in traditional hockey markets. Regardless of location, though, it was important to continue training throughout the off-season. This was particularly true the longer athletes played, but not necessarily due to age. For example, developments in nutrition and training meant that athletes arrived at training camp in “ready to play” shape as opposed to using training camp to get back into shape. As Charles pointed out, “It’s a full year thing” (personal communication, April 11, 2012).

Though playing and training for hockey was a year-round process, participants did report feeling like they had lives outside of professional sports. Early in their careers this meant spending time with other young players, being invited to dinner at the home of team leaders, and hanging out. As players made the transition to married life, wives and children
became the life outside of hockey. Wives and children, and the desire to be around them more, were also factors in ultimately stepping away from life as an NHL player.

The six participants miss similar aspects of no longer playing NHL hockey including the close-knit, family feel of the team, travel and adventure in some of the world’s best cities, the paycheck, and the simple joy of playing hockey nearly every day. Each participant also noted that they miss the thrill of playing in front of an NHL crowd and the associated adrenaline rush. As more than one person emphasized, “There’s nothing like it.”

There are also difficulties associated with no longer being a professional athlete. As Brent said, it is hard “not mattering like you used to” (personal communication, September 22, 2012). Others mentioned the difficulty in taking the next step professionally, as most people do not retire at age 35. Finding a balance in life after hockey was not always easy, though Sam in particular feels that hockey is a chapter of his life’s book that been written and now he is working on a new chapter. Despite this, most of the participants thought that former professional athletes still want to be thought of as professional athletes or at the very least, remembered for what they did. Many of the athletes will talk about their NHL careers when asked about them, but emphasize that it is important to move on from those careers. Charles stated he believes it is the players who get wrapped up in ideas such “No one’s wearing my jersey number anymore” that will have the most trouble transitioning. A key to a healthy transition appears to be looking back on the NHL career fondly and being proud of it without miring in the fact that one is no longer playing professionally. Though they are no longer playing professional NHL hockey, all six participants still skate and five still consider themselves athletes. Brent noted that he considers himself “a retired athlete, emphasis on
retired,” but one can understand how it would be difficult to lose the athlete status entirely. After all, these six men have been athletic in a multitude of areas for decades.

**Themes in Retirement**

Themes related to retirement included some planning with the help of others, though not necessarily detailed plan, watching one’s money carefully, and not being shocked as the NHL careers came to an end.

The six participants noted that they did plan for retirement, particularly in terms of finances. They began that planning early in their careers, as well, usually after signing their first contract. They worked to avoid spending their money frivolously and remained conscious of the fact that their large paychecks would not continue indefinitely. Furthermore, they did not plan for retirement alone. Sam, Brent, and Frank had help from their families when their careers first began in beginning to save and invest their earnings. Frank continues to consult his father regarding business ventures, as his father has a great deal of business acumen.

In terms of planning for careers after retirement, not all the participants had detailed plans. Most emphasized that hockey players and professional athletes in general do not like to think about the day when they will no longer be professional athletes. Peter stated that players cannot think too much about careers after hockey because doing so can distract them from the game. When circumstances began requiring that participants look at retirement, most turned to former teammates, general managers, and coaches for guidance.

Numerous factors led the participants to finally make the decision to retire including feeling that the game was not as fun as it had been, physical problems such as injury, the
desire to spend more time with their families, and feeling that they were not playing as well as they had in the past. Due to the fact that the participants had signs that their professional careers were ending, none of the participants felt that retirement was a shock. Thus today they do not feel any shock regarding their status as retired professional athletes, though several mentioned really missing hockey during the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Maintaining an athletic identity after retirement is not paramount for all retired athletes. For example, John knows other hockey players who never step on the ice again after retirement. Some may have an easier time holding onto their athletic status simply because they were so well known throughout the NHL, perhaps because they are future members of the Hall of Fame. For many athletes, it is a deeply personal decision with some moving onto other careers like Sam and others remaining involved through coaching or broadcasting in the styles of Charles, John, Brent, and Peter.

All six participants believed that professional athletes could benefit from counseling or career planning. They also mentioned the difficulty in getting athletes to participate in such activities, as many athletes are reluctant to ask for help due to pride issues and the idea that they are perceived as strong and invincible. Furthermore it is hard to get a young athlete who has just signed his first contract to think about the day, which may be 15 years away, when he will no longer be playing professional sports. Several participants noted that the NHL and the NHL Players’ Association are making progress in helping athletes as they retire in terms of having a support system. Despite this, the retired players recommended starting the career planning process early.
The majority of the athletes who participated in this research have not personally seen former players hit “rock bottom” as they enter retirement. Of course, they have all heard stories and read news articles about players who faced difficulties when their playing careers ended. Brent, however, has seen the “brutal” side of retirement as former players struggle with alcohol, divorce, and financial issues (personal communication, September 22, 2012).

**Themes Today**

Common themes related to the participants’ lives today included the belief that their core selves and values have not changed after hockey, the application of the skills that brought them success in hockey in another context, and enjoyment of their new careers.

In defining themselves today, the six participants used an assortment of terms including renewed, athlete, retired athlete, business owner, father, husband, broadcaster, hardworking, competitive, family-oriented, and dedicated. Most noted those are also terms they could have used to describe themselves prior to retirement, which demonstrates that their core selves and core values have not changed after retiring. The data also reflect this because the participants stated that for the most part, their definitions of self have not changed since they stopped playing hockey. They are taking the skills, such as hard work and perseverance, that helped them become successful professional athletes and applying them in different areas. Brent noted that since retirement he has become better at “maneuvering life” and also become less reserved, the latter of which may relate to his broadcasting work (personal communication, September 22, 2012).

Each of the six participants is enjoying his current career. For some such as Charles, a little more exploration was involved. Today though, much like John, Charles is glad to
remain involved with hockey in his coaching role. Frank is still playing hockey, though not in the NHL, and has a number of successful business ventures. Peter has also met with success in the business world and manages to stay involved with hockey, as well. Brent is also still involved with hockey through his broadcasting work. Sam maintains hockey connections in his leisure time, with his work as a financial advisor proving quite fulfilling.

In offering retirement advice to other professional athletes, each of the six participants recommended beginning the process early. This is particularly true where finances are concerned, as going from a professional hockey player’s salary to a more standard salary is an adjustment. All six cited the important of saving money, consulting financial advisors, and not living lavish lifestyles to avoid becoming one of the retired players who suddenly needs to get a job-and job-simply to put a roof over his head.

John and Frank, the former now a coach and the latter considering coaching, knew while playing hockey that coaching was an interest. Thus they took steps during their careers, such as taking notes and asking questions of other coaches, to help make that more of a possibility. While still playing hockey Sam knew that he had an interest in financial advising and began investigating the possibility of that career. Likewise Brent had an interest in broadcasting in college and took steps to pursue his career options. Knowing that retirement from professional sports was inevitable, the players took active steps to better facilitate the transition into retirement.
Themes Analyzed in Light of Super’s Theory

The Hockey Career

In analyzing the data based on Donald Super’s career development theory, several key themes emerged. Most obvious is the fact that all six participants passed through each of Super’s stages including growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement, throughout the course of their professional hockey careers. Due to the length of a professional playing career, though, those stages were quite compressed. While Sam was the only participant to specifically mention wanting to be a professional hockey player from a young age, by being focused on and skilled at the game of hockey, all the participants were focused on hockey during the growth stage (ages 4 to 13).

These six athletes began the exploration stage, specifically the crystallization process, relatively early. This stage takes place from ages 14-24 and typically sees people truly beginning to implement their career choices. For an American student in college, true implementation may begin taking place later in that stage at age 21 or 22. But by that age, these six participants were already dedicated to their NHL careers. By electing to pursue hockey at the junior level or college level, the exploration stage truly was almost complete by age 17 or 18.

According to Super’s theory, the establishment phase commonly takes place from ages 25 to 45. Clearly this is not the case with professional hockey players who begin the stabilization process in their early 20’s. The entire hockey career can be viewed as the consolidation period, as the athletes were working to become and then stay known as dependable, productive workers. Players such as Charles and Sam, who played in the NHL
and also in the minor leagues, spent even more time working through the consolidation task. The advancement task, which sees workers seeking higher pay and more responsibility, became more apparent as the participants moved along in their careers.

For these six retired professional hockey players, the maintenance stage began in the mid-20’s, not ages 45 to 65 as is typical of most careers. Each of the participants noted the importance of keeping one’s skills current and one’s body in top physical condition, particularly as they aged and began seeing signs of the inevitable physical decline that comes with years of flying around the ice at “25 miles per hour” (Peter, personal communication, July 9, 2012). By staying up to date and constantly working to improve their on-ice games, the participants avoided stagnation and decreased productivity.

The disengagement stage differed from Super’s typical model, as well. Most obvious is the fact that it did not take place from ages 45-65, but began anywhere from a player’s early 30’s to late 30’s. The players on the earlier end of the spectrum began disengagement for reasons related to injury, decreased enjoyment of the game, and the desire to spend more time with their families. The players who began disengaging later went through the process a bit more rapidly, as they noticed a decline in their on-ice abilities and retired relatively soon after that. All six participants began planning for the financial side of retirement early in their careers, much like workers in more standard professions are also doing.
Life after Hockey

The six participants are in various stages of Super’s Life-Span. Life-Space Theory today giving further evidence that people can cycle through the stages multiple times. Charles is in the establishment phase, though this is his second time experiencing this since his retirement. He tried another career after leaving hockey and though he was successful in that career, he did not find it fulfilling. Thus he began the exploration process again, found himself in a coaching role, and now is working to establish himself there. In his words, “I was doing a small business with a friend of mine and the frustrating part wasn’t the business. The business was fine, but I knew all along that that wasn’t who I was. You know it was fine, but when I was just like, ‘That’s just not me. That’s just not what I do.’ So when this came available, I knew this was something I wanted to look into and get involved in. It’s worked out and like I said, it couldn’t be any better of a position for me.”

John is also establishing himself as a coach and like Charles, is in the consolidation task of the establishment stage. He said, “I was fortunate enough to stay involved in the game. I’m on the ice every day, but I’m not skating every day. So the next best thing is you’re kind of still involved in the game.” The PI expects both of these participants to continue advancing in these specific careers. As a financial advisor, Sam is in the establishment stage, too. He has seen that he has the skills to succeed in the arena and is working to further develop his reputation as a dependable, productive worker. Currently he plans to remain in the career for some time. He stated, “I’d rather do it this way. You know, work harder than anyone else is willing to, so then I can live better than anyone else in the years to come. If I can get this going the right way, it will be good.”
Brent and Peter both have firm holds in the broadcasting arena, though Peter is continuing his education and exploring business ventures. Brent, in the consolidation stage of establishment, is showing his coworkers that he has the talent and expertise to keep advancing. “As confident as I may seem now, I constantly battle with insecurities. Weirdly I find myself at times trying to get people to understand me and like me, even if they don’t matter,” said Brent. With his varied skill sets Peter is also in the consolidation stage, though he is also doing a bit of stabilizing in the sense that he technically has more than one career. He stated, “It doesn’t matter if you have a hockey team or a football team or a business team, if you will, because all those environments to winning are all the same. So I feel what I’m trying to do now is put the tools I’ve learned in hockey and just transfer them into the business world and try to build that same kind of culture in the things that I’m doing. I do a little bit of broadcasting. It’s just a really fun job. It just gives me a way to stay involved in the game of hockey, but yet I’m still doing some other things on the side.”

Frank, retired from the NHL and still playing hockey, is in the establishment stage. Because he has been developing business interests outside of hockey for some time, though, he is completing the advancing task. In describing one of his businesses he said, “It’s not too shabby. It’s a little place to go and it’s been a fun little project we’ve had for-well, this is our seventh year this year.”
CHAPTER V

Discussion

As part of the dissertation process, the author suggests a model for use by counselors working with professional athletes. She calls this the Rediscovering the Self model. Before explaining this model, several points must be made. In counseling athletes, it is important to remember that there are two parts, private and public, to the athletic identity (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The private athletic identity is the “extent to which one’s self-concept is significantly imbued with an athletic persona” (Nasco & Webb, 2006, p. 135). This may include how the individual perceives himself or herself to be an athlete or the importance of athleticism to self-expression. The public athletic identity is more concerned with how much an individual “is aware of and values the fact that an athletic persona has been endowed on him by others” (Nasco & Webb, 2006, p. 135). For a counseling intervention to be successful, a counselor must help the client balance these two personas. A counselor might help the client develop an action plan for continued athletic activity after retirement to satisfy the private identity. To satisfy the public identity needs, the counselor could suggest community involvement with athletic events. The self-esteem of retired athletes is negatively correlated with their public athletic identity, but not with private athletic identity, which suggests that counselors need to work to help professional athletes maintain their public presence (Nasco & Webb, 2006). A better tactic, however, would be to help clients build up their self-esteem to the point that they are less dependent on their public identities.
Rediscovering the Self

The *Rediscovering the Self* model has been designed for use with athletes early in their careers. While the model can certainly be used during and into the retirement process, the players interviewed for this dissertation all indicated that it is important for career counseling and planning to begin early in a player’s career. No NHL athlete wants to face the fact that his playing days are finite. By beginning the career planning process earlier rather than later, though, one can hope to prevent future difficulties. It is not uncommon for NHL teams to have a motivational consultant on staff. Ideally teams would also employ counselors or at the very least maintain connections with counselors in the local community trained in the model. These counselors would meet with individual players at the beginning of each season and facilitate the career planning process in steps, as a first line player has different career concerns than a fourth line player going back and forth between the NHL and AHL.

There are five central components to the *Rediscovering the Self* model. Step one involves giving the athletes a supportive environment in which to share their concerns. A good time for this to occur would be at the beginning of the off-season, when players go through exit interviews, have a bit more free time, and are less likely to be thinking about hockey all the time. The second step helps the athletes identify their values, needs, interests, and skills. In step three counselors help the athletes create and implement a life work plan. In step four counselors help the athletes develop their self-esteem to the point that they can make successful career transitions. In the fifth and final step, the counselor helps the athletes establish a peer support group.
The first component of the model is perhaps the easiest for counselors, as they are accustomed to providing a safe and supportive environment for clients. They are comfortable dealing with the myriad of emotions that an athlete may display such as anger, sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness.

Helping athletes identify their values, needs, interests, and skills can be difficult. Athletes may get used to thinking in terms of sports only and a counselor has to get them to think outside of the box. Danish, Petitpas, and Hale (1993) discuss that many of an athlete’s skills are applicable across settings. For example, in a team-oriented sport such as hockey, athletes must be patient, perform under pressure, exercise self-control, work within a system, meet challenges, communicate with others, and work with people they may not necessarily like (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993). The job of a counselor is to help the athlete think about the things they did every day and see that those skills are helpful in other ways.

There are also tools available to help athletes narrow down their values, needs, and interests. Super and Nevill’s Salience Inventory, as well as their Values Scale, would be excellent tools to use in this process. The *Strong Interest Inventory* is also an invaluable assessment that could help athletes gauge their interests outside the of sports participation. For example, a hockey player could learn that he has an interest in sports broadcasting or coaching. His career in sports, particularly with the help of a program like the NHL’s *Breakaway Program*, could help him get into broadcasting at a variety of levels, much like Brent experienced.

Another useful tool is the *CPI 260*, which helps people understand how they approach life, how they see themselves, and how they compare to others based on things that are
important to them in work and everyday life (Gough & Bradley, 2003). By helping the athlete learn if he or she is an implementer, supporter, innovator, or visualizer, the counselor can open the athlete’s eyes to a variety of opportunities. For example, an athlete may view forced retirement due to injury as a negative, but the counselor can help the athlete reframe that viewpoint to that of a new opportunity.

Step three of the *Rediscovering the Self* model involves helping the athlete create a life work plan. It is important that the athlete be an active participant in the development of the plan as opposed to having the counselor simply write out a plan. Involvement on the part of the athlete helps create a feeling of ownership and self-efficacy. A useful tool for this is the work ladder developed by Danish, Petitpas, and Hale (1993). The counselor provides the athlete with a drawing of a ladder. At the bottom of the ladder the athlete lists the goal. Each step up the ladder represents a specific, but also more difficult step towards achieving that goal. For example, suppose that a former NHL player wishes to become a color commentator for a major television network. He would list that goal at the bottom of the ladder. Step one would be to learn more about color commentary and step two would be to develop a goal ladder. Step three might be to contact the color commentator for his former team, step four might be to practice doing color commentary during an NHL game, and so on up to the final step of becoming a color commentator.

In the fourth step of the *Rediscovering the Self* model, counselors can use their therapies of choice to help the athlete rebuild his self-esteem to the point that he feels comfortable making a career transition. Often this will link back to step two in the sense that the goal is to help the athlete feel good about the skills he already has. The athlete is learning
how to apply the skills acquired during the process of making a lifelong goal a reality in a different setting. Role-play is a useful tool here because athletes, particularly those who have been in the public spotlight, may worry about messing up (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993). The counselor can play the role of boss or co-worker in the new setting where the athlete has to use the new skill. The athlete can practice in the safety of the counseling environment with the counselor acting as the coach to ease anxiety.

The fifth and final step of the model, establishing a peer support group, will probably be the easiest for the athlete. Most athletes, particularly those who played for several seasons, will have developed a network of associates. Like any other person they will be naturally close to and friendly with some of those associates. The job of the counselor is to help the athlete develop a network of close associates or even friends that he or she can call on when not playing a professional sport gets difficult. In developing this network, it will be helpful to include athletes who have successfully transitioned into retirement, as well as those who successfully transitioned only after a struggle. By having people who have retired from the sport in the support group, which could even take place electronically, the athlete in counseling can feel the common connection that is so vital to recovery. Including other athletes who have struggled with retirement and made a successful transition will help an athlete understand that his difficulties are not only normal, but also conquerable. Avoiding feelings of isolation and ‘I’m the only person who has ever had a rough time going into retirement’ is key to a successful transition.

The *Rediscovering the Self* model differs from the current transition model offered by the NHL, the *BreakAway Program*, which begins years after retirement. The program, which
has been offered for five years and had approximately 100 participants, is run by the NHL Alumni Association “to support and develop customized, relevant programs and services that address the unique post-game and off-season challenges that elite athletes face” (NHL Alumni Association, 2012). The program offers counseling, entrepreneurial training and assistance, education services, career exploration and transition assistance, one-to-one business and life coaching, business skills development, mentorship, and workshops and seminars. The typical BreakAway participant has “been out of the NHL for nine years and out of the professional game for six years” (2012). The goal of the Rediscovering the Self model, though, is to work with players prior to retirement. This is a crucial difference because as interview participants noted, athletes are reluctant to ask for help. Counselors need to work with athletes to help them form a plan of action for retirement and ease into it to help avoid problems, particularly problems with drugs and alcohol as noted by Brent.

Future Implications

This study has implications not only for retired NHL players and retired athletes in general, but also for people who find themselves changing careers at any point in life. For example, the number of unemployed persons in the United States increased during the Great Recession of 2008. While some of these people were able to find work within their original career field, others were unable to do so. The Rediscovering the Self model could be used to help these individuals explore new career interests and transition to new careers.

The Rediscovering the Self model could also be used with persons who change professions due to injury, such as construction workers unable to perform construction work due to on the job injuries. People learn a variety of skills through their career endeavors and
counselors can help clients see how the skills they already possess can be used in a different situation. A long-distance runner who has honed her skills through competition, perseverance, and patience may have to stop running long distances due to back injuries. But those skills that she used in running could be used in other areas, such as coaching or volunteering with an endurance running training program such as the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s Team in Training or Girls on the Run.

Furthermore the successful transitions to more traditional careers by these six athletes can serve as inspiration for college athletes wondering what they may do after college. Very few athletes ever receive the opportunity to pursue sports professionally and this is an important lesson for college athletes in any sport. Knowing that they have the skills, as well as the college degree, to succeed in life is vital. Counselors at the college level could partner with athletic departments to implement the *Rediscovering the Self* model. Finally as chapter two discussed, athletes in other sports such as the NFL and NBA, appear to encounter significantly more difficulties upon retirement. Further research could explore the different reasons for these difficulties.

**Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. For example, these six athletes successfully transitioned to retirement and are not representative of NHL players overall. Several participants noted that they have seen their peers struggle with the transition and the recommendations for those players could be substantially different from those who took part in the study.
The sample demographics, composed entirely of Caucasian athletes of American and Canadian descent, are not representative of the NHL. A number of NHL players come not from North American nations, but also western and eastern Europe. Cultural differences may affect a player’s transition to retirement. Also, all six participants noted the importance of their family members throughout their careers, particularly in terms of overall support and financial advice. The import of these close familial relationships cannot be underestimated, as they more than likely contributed to a lifetime of overall stability that then carried over into retirement.

Finally these six athletes had NHL careers significantly longer than the average NHL player; all their careers were over a decade long. Having steady careers that for the most part included retirement on their own terms, despite occasional wistfulness to play as in the past, surely eased the transition into retirement. A player who retires suddenly, perhaps due to injury or managerial decisions, would more than likely face more of a struggle going into a new career.

**Conclusions**

Athletic identity is a powerful force within a person. It develops early and often lasts for a lifetime. When an athlete encounters retirement either through being cut from the team, injury, or personal choice, the road to recovery can be difficult. Thankfully counselors exist to help retired athletes continue to live successful and productive lives when their athletic careers end.

Through this research, a primary goal of the researcher was to further understand the retirement experience of professional athletes for the National Hockey League. The
experiences of the six participants were simultaneously similar yet varied, offering valuable insight into not only what helps make a person a successful NHL player, but also a successful retired NHL player.

Furthermore the researcher found that the decision to maintain an athletic identity is, as one would expect, a deeply personal decision. The ability to retire on one’s own terms in a sense prevents the athlete from having a sense of unfinished business and thus contributes to the athlete’s ability to transition into a new career, regardless of whether or not that career relates to hockey. The majority of the participants still consider themselves to be athletes, though they are also comfortable with the fact that their days of playing NHL hockey are over.

The researcher recognizes that not all athletes will transition into retirement as well as this study’s participants. Thus she proposes a counseling model, Rediscovering the Self, for use with athletes prior to and into retirement. The five-part model, created with the input from multiple case studies, aims to further the career development of professional athletes.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A
Participants’ Interviews

Participant One: Charles

In Canada instead of going to a U.S. college, I played major junior. I was still in high school. It took me another half a year to finish that, but I managed to get everything finished and graduated. So you can play in that league from when you’re 16 to 20. So it’s kind of your first step towards taking it a lot more serious than youth club hockey. They have their draft, they have 72 games, a lot of travel. You can be traded, so I think that’s when you consider it a lot more serious and more of an athlete…in that sense of the word. When I did make that move to junior you kinda realize [the NHL] is the next step. You kind of change your mindset. You have to make that choice, ‘Are you going to take this extremely serious now and train yourself physically and mentally to do that? If you don’t, you’re obviously not going to make that step.’ So I think that was when I kind of made that choice to push for it.

I think for me, probably not even until I made the NHL [did I consider myself an elite athlete.] To put someone in the elite category I think you have to be an NHL player. Guys are elite depending on where you’re playing. You know, when I was playing junior everyone was very close-knit, I felt. And maybe that’s just me being more modest than some people, but I thought until you really make that step…I wouldn’t consider myself elite until you’ve reached that…the top, I guess.

[As for highlights of my career,] I think for anyone it’s your first game, your first goal, traveling around, being in a locker room with the guys. I was lucky enough to play with Hall of Famers. So looking back those are some of the highlights, besides stepping into the big
arenas. You know, playing in Toronto and Montreal and Madison Square Garden. Things like that you can always look back on and say, ‘Wow, that’s just something the boys, my buddies growing up back home, would have given anything to do.’

I think the toughest was…I guess once you made it and then you kind of find out, you know, it’s a numbers game. If you don’t perform well, you’re out of the game. You have a couple injuries, which slows down your progress. And then when you do…I was playing in the NHL and then was demoted back to the minor leagues. I think that [is] more mental. It’s like, ‘How do I get back?’

The toughest part of being in the minor leagues is [that] you are on a team of 20 guys, of 20 people. But when the phone rings, usually only one of you gets to go if someone gets hurt. And so you’re sitting there thinking, ‘Ah, I’ve been there,” and you see someone else go. And then this guy goes and then you start questioning, ‘What am I doing wrong? Why am I not playing good enough?’ So those things are all the more mental side more than anything. It’s definitely a roller coaster ride of highs and lows and how your team’s playing. If everyone’s winning and everyone’s happy or if you’re in a terrible slide it’s just a miserable time to try and get out of.

You have a lot of ups and downs like that and a lot of guys who just go through the whole contract side. Your agent who, what you learn when you play is, like your best friend and thinks you’re the best thing since sliced bread. And the team is saying ‘You’re only worth this’ and your agent is saying ‘You should get this,’ and it’s just a whole mind game of where you should be. It’s tough on guys. You know some guys are married with kids and if the kids start getting into school, then they’re traveling alone away from their families.
Sometimes it’s difficult dragging your family from city to city and things like that. More stuff weighs on guys behind the scenes I think than just…the glitz and glam.

[Speaking about professional athletics as an all-encompassing experience] I think they’re even more [so] as the game has progressed and as professional sports [have] progressed. When I first started playing you’d have that time off. When the season ended you’d take three weeks, a month off maybe and then get back to training. You know now it’s almost guys take a few days off, maybe a few more if they’re injured, but they’re right back in the gym training. Training has come a long way as to how guys work out now and train their bodies. The way guys are eating, the nutrition and all that and how they’re fueling their bodies…it’s always progressed each year. And you see that. I think when people see the speed of the game and the true athleticism of players, that’s where it’s coming from. I mean, the players are getting better and better each year because of what they’re doing in the off-season. It’s a full year thing. You do take a break, but you’re still in the gym, you’re still on the bike, you’re still on the ice keeping your body going.

The atmosphere, the family with the guys, the guys’ time in the locker room, and being on the road together, [you miss that in retirement]. And just playing that game. The adrenaline and the aspect of the goals you’re shooting for is different from someone who goes to an office every day. Yeah, you know, it’s that extreme high of being on the ice in front of fans and going crazy and things like that. Probably the biggest part that guys miss is that…where do you get that adrenaline rush afterwards? Every guy is an adrenaline junkie and what better place is there to find that then professional sports?
It’s different when you retire…just finding a balance of where you are in life. I retired, I would say, a lot earlier than some of the guys. You know I think my situation would be different from [someone] who accumulated everything you could in a career, including the Hall of Fame. When he retires, it’s different when he steps away from the game. But then guys who, you know, in my track with injuries and things like that, you get to the point where you’re almost, not forced to retire, you have to make that hard decision where, it’s not going to work anymore.

It’s a different feeling to find a balance. Like here, when I work here, it’s great. When I first retired I took off…I think I probably didn’t do anything for like a year. You know, my kids were starting school and finding that balance, being home all the time. I was traveling a lot. But then you start to sit there and you’re like, ‘Where am I at?’ and trying to find that balance in your life from the daily structure of ‘You know I’m going to the gym. You know I’m going to practice.’ Well, now you’re not doing that. What are you going to do?

If you look at books, what’s the most important thing to a guy? It’s respect and the guy’s pride factor. So when you do step away from the game and people just walk by you and you’re like, ‘Hey, do they remember what I did?’ So that will affect a guy mentally and emotionally. I think that’s where guys get into trouble because they don’t have that awe effect. And everyone’s wearing [names new player’s jersey number] and they’re not wearing my jersey. I think it’s like anything, you go through a tragedy or whatever and you have to find where you are in your life. Is your glass half empty or is it half full? Are you excited because of everything you did and these people look at you and say, ‘I remember when he
used to play’ or are you just upset about everything because you’re not playing anymore? And guys who stay there will be in a lot more trouble than guys you stay on the other side.

I think some guys really do wish they still were [playing] and that’s just not how it is. I mean, for me, I’m not going to play again. I’m not going to be a professional athlete. I’m grateful for what I was able to do. People still come up to me and talk about it and I’m like, ‘Ah, it was great.’ But this is what I do now. Now, how can I change? And I think it’s finding that aspect of your life; of how do you make a difference? You know, now in doing this job. It is [very rewarding.]

[Asking about retirement], I don’t think anyone plans for it because I think, in all our minds, we’re just going to play forever and eventually you realize you’re not. That’s tough to get through for a lot of guys. Did I plan for it? No. Financially, yes, I think I did everything the right way to not be one of those guys going, ‘Oh my goodness, I need to go get a job. What am I gonna do?’ You make strides that way. I don’t think…I think it happened quicker for me mentally than I prepared for. So I think after that’s why it took awhile to get back and go on and say, ‘Okay, this what you’re going to do now.’ I think everyone does it differently. Again, from injuries or guys who are forced to retire earlier compared to someone who goes that distance, it’s definitely a whole different process. I think it’s more fulfilling to say, ‘This is my time. I want to step away from the game.’ It’s easier for the guy ‘cuz obviously he’s gone through all the emotions compared to someone who’s just sitting there and your phone doesn’t ring the whole summer and you’re going ‘What am I going to do now?’

It’s something you can’t explain to someone how you’re feeling about it, what the game makes you feel like. You can’t describe that to someone of…how that makes you feel.
So it’s definitely a solo mission and a process to work through with some guys. You know, if you go to outside therapy or something like that…It would be beneficial to a lot of guys because again, for me, and I know I don’t speak for all men…a lot of men, they don’t talk, they don’t open up. If you look at the professional athlete who is supposed to be the big, brawny, bold guy, invincible, that [is] supposed to be able to take anything, nothing can hurt [him]. When you take away all that we do, I mean, it does hurt guys. It’s something that you, again, selfishly and unselfishly you have to go through by yourself and figure out how to get through it with help or without help.

[The retirement] factors for me would have been injuries; obviously those affected the way I was playing. And then my family, as well. Having two young kids and getting back in a scenario where I was bouncing around from city to city… factors in big. I know they’re going to be here full time. I didn’t want to be everywhere. And you know, financially, too. You’re not making NHL salary when you’re jumping around like that. You’re making enough to pay for the apartment you’re living in, plus your mortgage here. So I looked at it financially, as well. So the three things between injury and playing, to my family, and financially.

[Retirement] was not really a shock. The injuries I had were definitely serious enough to say, ‘This is going to hamper you along the road.’ Those things I knew were major enough to hold me back some. But again you try, I try to look at the bigger picture of what was going on in my life than just that single thing. I think it’s a personal choice if they [try to maintain an athletic identity] or not. How they live their life, what they’re doing, how they can stay involved in the game if they want to stay involved in the game and different avenues
the guys take. I think you see a lot of the players who, whether they get into broadcasting of some kind or doing something with a team, scouting, maybe coaching a junior team back in Canada, something like that which some guys do, as well. Again I think it’s all a choice of that person of what they’re going to do, which in the end is a big factor of what they’re going to be feeling on the inside, too.

[Speaking about his job today] It’s been a couple years. Leading up to when I got the position in September, I was doing just a small business with a friend of mine and the frustrating part wasn’t the business. The business was fine, but I knew all along that that wasn’t who I was. You know it was fine when, but I was just like, ‘That’s just not me. That’s just not what I do.’ So when this came available, I knew this was something I wanted to look into and get involved in. It’s worked out and like I said, it couldn’t be any better of a position for me.

Some of the young guys [could benefit from career counseling or planning] because again…When you play even at the AAA level in the American Hockey League, I mean you’re making anywhere from say $40,000 to $60,000. That’s pretty good. But if you’re not paying attention to what you’re doing with it and you don’t ever make that step to the NHL to make the big paycheck, you could be in trouble because, again…Most of these guys step out, I skipped college. I went to play junior and I finished when I was 20, I went to pro. So I didn’t take the time to do classes or go to university or anything like that, which, I would say 80% of the guys that are in there playing are in that situation. I mean it’s grown back the other way because the college game is starting to grow a lot, so it’s starting to come back a little bit. But I would say it’s very high…it’s over 60% to the guys who just have a high
school diploma. So I would think it’d be very beneficial early on and then maybe a step process of just touching base with them. But again to guys…I think the counseling to a guy at the end of his career is too late.

And then again it’s their choice whether they do it. I always said if you want to be successful then you need to surround yourself with successful people. So if they have a good agent and they get you in touch with a good financial advisor and you have a good backdrop of training and a nutritionist and you’re lining things up and you’re living properly. You know, it’s easy to get in that spotlight of, ‘Oh, I’m going to live this way. This is awesome.’ And then all of a sudden it takes one hit and your head is scrambled and you’re not going to play again. So I think it would be very beneficial early on to touch base with players at every level from the minor leagues, even the NHL guys coming here. And literally my first year I was just…I didn’t blink every time I was in here because it’s just such an experience.

I think [counseling or career planning] would be beneficial. Obviously you can’t…I don’t think you’d be able to tell a guy. It would be hard early on because he wouldn’t have felt any of that emotion yet. He would still be on the high of, ‘What are you talking about?’ So that’s why I see the step process being more helpful. I think [in hockey] guys look out for each other. If someone is doing the wrong things obviously one of the older guys would…he’d be like, ‘Hey, look at what’s gonna happen.’

There are other guys who’ve retired who, like I said, I’ve been lucky to know…those guys who stay involved…in the game. Some of the guys have moved onto successful careers in, you know, the financial field and doing that kind of stuff. I’ve seen a lot of guys in a large
spectrum of what they’ve been able to do. I haven’t…I’m happy I haven’t seen anyone crash and burn.

I didn’t know those guys this summer. I played against them, but not personally. So I’m glad nothing like that has happened. I think it goes back to that family atmosphere. If something like that happened to one of your teammates you would take it hard because you would feel like, ‘Why didn’t he talk to me?’ or ‘Is there something I could have done to help?’ I’m lucky I haven’t seen that side of it. Everything I’ve seen has been guys who made good moves. Obviously we have our bumps in the road, all of us. The ones you don’t hear about are the guys who just kind of disappear and do what they should be doing.

I think how I’ve been today, I’ve been more renewed than anything. You know, ‘cuz I think you go through growing up and then playing professional hockey you get to that certain point and then you have that retirement phase and you go back to, ‘What are you gonna do?’ Well, you have to start over again. I don’t go around telling people, ‘Hey, I’m [inserts name] I used to play in the NHL.’ I’m just [inserts name.] If someone brings it up I pretty much downplay it. That was years ago because it is different. Me now is different than I was two years ago and way different than I was ten years ago. I think I am in a different place from when I was a professional athlete.

This position and me getting this position has helped a lot. My job’s great. It’s what I want to do. Because again two years ago when I was working there was something missing and I knew it and I didn’t know what it was. It was good for me to be away from the game and to be away because I needed to go through all that other stuff.
Be open about [retirement] and do not shut yourself off from your resources. I think your resources are there and again, I think that falls back on a male attribute of not opening up enough. So guys going through that should talk about it whether it be with a qualified therapist or just good buddies, your parents, whoever. I tell that to a lot of young people I’m working with now. I’m like, ‘Make sure you’re talking to your Mom. Tell your Dad what you’re feeling. Don’t just tell me.’
Participant Two: John

When I was young, I was athletic. I played sports and I felt that I was an athlete. And whether that was playing rec league soccer, softball, or hockey…whatever it is, I felt that I was athletic. I tried to keep active. Different seasons, different sports. When you’re younger you’re playing ‘cuz you enjoy it. It was fun…it was playing with your friends. You know, obviously, maybe you’re a little better than your buddies. But you never really thought the NHL was a possibility. It was all about playing and it seemed so far away. So I wouldn’t say, for me, you’re elite until you actually made it [to the NHL].

I guess probably not until I was 16 or 17 [did I decide to become a professional athlete.] Then the NHL became…You know, you start to know more about it and it was a possibility. Then obviously you get drafted and that’s the first step. I was a professional for 15 [years] in the minors and in the NHL.

The highlights? I think it starts when you sign your first professional contract. Obviously that’s where it starts. You know, before that you get drafted. So signing my first contract, for me it was [names team]. You know, playing your first NHL game. After that, every year is just kind of a bonus. You just keep playing. You want to just keep playing as long as you can. Unfortunately you can’t. But I think the first two big ones for me were, obviously, signing your first contract and scoring your first goal. I’ve been fortunate enough to win some championships.

I wouldn’t say [there were] low points. I mean, obviously when you look back…I think you’re very fortunate to be able to do that for a living for a period of time. There’re obviously some disappointments. From not making the team, to being sent down to the
minors, to losing out in the playoffs. So there are disappointments. But in the big picture you know, you look at it and see a lot of good things. A lot of things happen over those 15 years.

Internally you kind of put pressure on yourself to succeed [and] there’s disappointment. You want to push yourself more and more. And for me it was mental. I kind of kept everything in; didn’t show too much to the outside. I think especially later in my career [being a professional athlete was an all-encompassing experience.] When I first turned pro it wasn’t like it is today, where [you’re] constantly training. Guys take a couple weeks off and then they’re right back training. When I first started you kind of trained all summer, then used training camp to try to get in shape. Now they expect you to be in top shape. So the game has changed that way a bit. Later in my career and as you got older, too, you didn’t want to lose a step and you’re afraid to take time off. You know the window is starting to close and you want to make the most of it.

But I would say I definitely [felt like I had a life outside of professional athletics.]. You [have] your off season. Eventually over time, I got married and had a daughter. That was kind of an escape from the pressure of the game. I would be able to kind of separate, you know. Obviously sometimes you take the game home with you, [but] I guess over time you kind of learn to step away a little bit. And you know, some days are tougher than others. But with experience…kind of…you’re able to find your escapes and kind of get away from it for a bit.

The part for me you miss the most is hanging out with the guys every day. For 15 years when you’re in season you’re in such a routine and that’s all you know. There is an
adjustment period. You miss the playing, you miss being with the guys every day, and having fun. Umm, for me I say that’s the thing you miss the most.

For me personally [the most difficult thing about no longer being a professional athlete] was just, “What’s your next step?” You step away from the game and you know it always sounds funny when you retire at, you know, 35. But you’ve got a lot of life to live and things to do and all that stuff. That’s the first adjustment. I was fortunate enough to kind of stay involved in the game. But there’s definitely that transition period. As I said, for 15 years you’re kind of set in a routine and you knew this was happening on practice day and this going to happen on game day and travel and all that. And all of a sudden it’s like, “What’s next? What do I do now?” When you do find something else it’s the adjustment of the hours you’re used to and you know, you’re out in the real world now.

I’m sure some people do miss the limelight and the stuff that comes with it. Some people just kind of move on to the next phase of life. For me personally I had no regrets. I was playing, it was a great time, and I knew the day would come when I would have to step away from it. So, you know, you’re always going to be an ex-professional athlete. It’s going to kind of stay with you. You know, you try to stay active and do some sports stuff. So I think everyone’s an athlete at some point in some sense.

I was fortunate enough to stay involved in the game. So I still had that competition part of it. You know, wins and losses and still be involved with a team. Again, your hours are different. You prepare your team and then you have to hope that they go on the ice and perform. That’s an adjustment, too, when you’re not able to get on the ice and help out. You just kind of…hoping you’re preparing them. As I always joke, you know, you’re always
involved in the game and all that. The only difference is you feel a lot better waking up in the morning. You’re not as sore. So you know, maybe a little bit more stress as a coach and that kind of stuff. But you feel a lot better the next morning physically as opposed to a player.

As I said you kind of knew at some point you were going to have to retire from the game. I knew that I wanted to stay involved. I didn’t know what avenue that was going to be. You know I always was taking down notes from practice stuff in case coaching was a possibility. Probably once you get in your early 30’s [you start to think about retirement.] Again you know that window’s closing. At that point you are thinking ahead. Some people start doing more educational stuff and that kind of stuff. For me it was always about staying involved in the game.

[When it came to planning for retirement], I kind of [looked] at ex-teammates and you know, from the good stuff they did to the tough transitions some players had. For me it’s more of a visual thing and just kind of watching that next step to see how it was going to be. Yeah, as you got on in your career for the most part you take it a year at a time. You weren’t always sure you were going to be able to play again. And as I said, as you get older and you get married and have a family and you got other things to take care of…You make sure everything’s, as I said, taken care of.

I guess at some point you’re not as fast as you used to be, you’re not as strong as you used to be, and other players are coming up. You’re there for your job and to be a better player and a time comes when,…I think every player realizes and sometimes it’s tough to admit that the time has come. There are factors in a sporting game where you have to be able to skate and do things on the ice. We talk about how the day is coming and when it’s finally
coming it’s like, ‘Wow.’ It’s here and like I said, ‘What’s next?’ You’re so set in your routine as a hockey player. Every day is so predictable. What you were going to do, what time you had to be at the rink, what you’re going to do on the ice, and how you’re going to prepare. The game day you had your routine and then all of a sudden it’s the next day and you’re not going to the rink. You’re kind of out of that routine and so there was definitely an adjustment period. It varies from being able to get into something right away. I think it’s wise to kind of step away from it for a bit. Take a step back and see what’s out there next. I was able to get involved in hockey right away. It was a change. All of a sudden the hours are different. You’re going to the rink at a different time, leaving at a different time…New responsibilities and then all of a sudden you’re learning more. You thought you knew everything about the game and now you’re on the other side of the game and you’re learning things every day. That kept things exciting.

I know some players who, once they retire they never step on the ice again. I’m on the ice every day, but I’m not skating every day. So the next best thing is you’re kind of still involved in the game. And you know, some guys find some other sport to do competitively. Because you’re used to competing all the time and whether that’s playing tennis or running a marathon…You know, whatever, playing in a pickup basketball league. You’re so used to competing and that’s one thing that, as a competitive athlete, I don’t think you lose. You want to go out and compete.

We are all athletes and just because you retire doesn’t mean you have to stop being an athlete. So I said rec league, rec whatever, and still be involved. You can compete and be on a team. Have that team spirit, rivalry, all that kind of stuff. Like I said, everyone’s different
that way. Whatever direction you want to go to and at what level. Obviously there’s some stuff you can kind of ease into it and other stuff…There’s competitive stuff, there’s triathlons…I know some guys get involved doing [those] and that kind of stuff.

[When it comes to career planning and counseling,] I think for sure [players can benefit from it] and I think they’ve done a better job of that. Through the Players’ Association they have the courses whether it’s continuing schooling or broadcasting, they have stuff available to players if they’re looking for stuff. There are avenues there to offer you. They’ve done a great job over the years of just kind of preparing athletes for the future.

The educational part [works well.] I think just the process of learning, whether it’s going back to your schooling, or insurance, or whatever it may be. As a professional athlete that’s all you know, so as I said earlier, 15, 16, that’s what you’ve been doing every day of your life. So just to have an outlet and learn about something different and hopefully maybe something you love and grow into. Just to have the stuff available to you as, you know, you kind of educate players on different avenues you can go into. Twenty, thirty years ago you were kind of on your own.

I mean, I’ve seen the good and the bad. Where people have retired and gone out and started their own businesses and become very successful and become elite in that business. And I’ve seen other players who’ve had tougher adjustments and didn’t know which way to go. All of a sudden the money you were making isn’t there anymore and that’s an adjustment period, too. I’ve seen some guys have some tough times and have trouble finding solid ground. It’s an adjustment. I mean you’re very fortunate to play a sport you love and get paid very well to do it. But when that day comes and the paycheck’s not there anymore
and the next paycheck is nowhere near where it used to be it’s like, ‘Wow.’ You have to adjust your lifestyle. That’s a big thing, adjusting that lifestyle where you’re making all that money and all of a sudden you’re not making as much as you used to and you have to make adjustments.

[Asked to define himself today], I’m a hardworking, competitive person. I’ve been fortunate. I’ve been given an opportunity some guys don’t get and it’s a matter of making the most of it. The talk would be no different whether it was a sport or a business. It’s just making the most of an opportunity. I think as a player I wasn’t a superstar. So I got by or made it through hard work. I think it’s something that’s been with me for a long time. You know, nothing was ever given to me and I had to work for it. And for me I still feel that way, that I have to keep going out and prove myself every year that, ‘I can do this.’

[Speaking about advice he would give other players going into retirement,] prepare because it is an adjustment period. And prepare in the sense that maybe one…start your education process before your retirement. Ease into the transition, be smart with your money because, as we talked, there’s an adjustment period with that from what you’re making to the next phase in your life. And enjoy what you’re doing. Because when that day comes, you can’t really go back to it. I guess really just make the most of it.
Participant Three: Sam

Well, I came from [the northeastern United States] with no…experience with money or anyone in my family. Getting the success that I had all of a sudden, I was like, ‘What do I do, right? So I hired a financial advisor.’ So I got interested in it. Then I was 19 and I got a big signing bonus. I started putting money away right away [with that initial financial advisor] and saving. I was maybe 20 when I started doing that stuff. And then, of course, especially like my parents [made] me super cautious and [asked], ‘Who do we trust?’ You know, who can you really trust? So I always thought, you know, someday I want to do it on my own. I did for a little while. Then I hired another financial advisor; I didn’t like the first one. Somewhere along the way around ’07 or ’08 a friend of mine had to retire because of a knee injury and that’s what he started doing. So he was telling me all about it. Along the way I kept thinking more and more…I just decided that I was going for it.

Probably, the first time I put skates on and skated on our pond back home [I knew that I wanted to be a professional athlete.] I mean, I loved it so much and going back to as far as I can remember in elementary school…Any time anyone asked me what I wanted to do it was, ‘Be a professional hockey player.’ And pilot was number two. I had a 13 year career. I had a three-year junior career that is considered semi-professional. You get paid, but you don’t get paid very much. You get put up with a host family. And I did that for three years, from 17 to 19. So 16 years, but 13 full years of professional hockey. I am very proud of it. And I had so much fun. So many memories. Another thing I wish I would have done is recorded a lot of the stuff I did. The stories, they’re actually coming back to me more and more. The more I talk to people in this job, people and stories…hockey comes up all the time.
It’s natural and I keep remembering stories of this road trip or this celebrity I met in Vancouver or Las Vegas. Stuff like that and I keep remembering all these stories. All the fun, yeah I did have a lot of fun. I had a good career.

I can specifically remember being about 22…when I first really realized…I mean I don’t think I even considered myself a professional (even though I was) in the minors. I just thought, at that age, ‘You’re nobody unless you’re in the NHL.’ I kind of had this epiphany and realized like, ‘Okay, I am this close. And I can do it. And I just decided I’m gonna give everything I have and do it. I got that much more confidence. And then I made it. I had a lot of fun. Not long enough, but a pretty average NHL career is 3.5, 4 years something like that. I think I maybe had a little longer than average, but not really. You know…because there were some up and down years with part of the year in the NHL and some in the minors. But the three or four straight years [names specific team] were the majority of it and the most fun.

[As for highlights], getting drafted was obviously huge. World Junior Championships I had for two years, one in [names country] and one in [names country]. I was an assistant captain one year. It was a lot of fun. And then my first goal, it was against Philadelphia. So I have that puck and everything framed. And, I don’t know…hockey-wise that’s about it. Aside from the luxury of the travel and the food, visiting all the nice cities in the League. Yeah, the travel was the best. The difference in the travel from the NHL to the minors is…You travel the day before every day instead of busing twelve hours, ten hours. Especially [hard were] the road trips where you go to three different cities in three days and three nights and you’re busing half the night. That’s a tough gig.
I had a lot of adversity. [There were] some on-ice incidents. And another really tough one was the year when [names a former team] won the Cup. I was [with that team] for three years or four years or whatever. I got traded from first to worst. My season was over. I came back and had to watch all my buddies win the Cup without me. It’s what you dream about when you’re a kid. [I was with] them for a few years and most of that season. Blood, sweat, and tears for them. It is tough. It would have been really nice to win that.

I think that probably did hurt me for a little bit before I could get my mind set back on track [and] to get a chance to get back into the regular NHL scene. Being an up and down guy and in the minors, being a call-up I lost out on a regular position, a regular job in the NHL like I had after that. It’s tough to go through that.

[Asked if there was a point where he considered himself an elite athlete], not really. I just never really looked at myself that way. I wish that I had because I think that I held myself back from being a better player. I’ve actually really thought a lot about that in this stage of my life and not letting those kinds of thoughts prevent me from being more successful in this profession. [I am] trying to be more confident, [have] more belief in my abilities, my people skills, because that’s all part of it. [I’m showing people] that I care and that I’m trustworthy and that I’m going to work hard for them. I wear many hats with this profession.

[Talking about professional athletics as an all-encompassing experience,] I mean, there is an off-season, but there really isn’t much time off. You can maybe take a couple weeks after the season to let your body heal if you have some nagging injuries. Usually by the end of the season you have a bunch of injuries and just soreness all over. I remember
counting places on my body that were bruised or sore or something was wrong, but it was nothing preventing me from playing, and getting up to a dozen or so. There were places all over. So, you take a little time off. But then you really have to be back training five days a week minimum throughout June and July, then six or seven days a week in August, September. You have to build your base back up so you can maintain throughout the season. But, yeah, it’s tough. It’s very tough physically. You have to do cardiovascular fitness and strength-training. If you’re not, you risk injury. It’s strenuous, it’s tough. I was happy to not have to work out for awhile, then I started seeing signs of it. I had to get back into the gym. I’ve been back in almost every day for the past couple of months. I took too many months off last year, last fall.

[Asked about his life outside of athletics], I golfed a lot. I had a lot of good friends and I played poker with some buddies. Yeah, the guy stuff. Poker and golf and hanging out. And [then] I met my wife, had the family side, started all that. That part of my life turned into what it is and it’s great. So yeah, I had hockey life and I had family life. [It’s] tough to say [what] I miss the most. I’m really happy with what I’m doing. I do miss a little. I miss the good stuff, the travel, the places, the food. Playing in front of big crowds. Playing in front of the fans and the support from the fans. You appreciate it more after, you know? I appreciated it during, not to say I didn’t. But when it’s gone, you realize how great [the experience] was.; to be in that kind of a spotlight and have a whole crowd cheer for you when you’re scoring goals or getting hits or whatever else. [But} I’m not having a hard time not being an athlete. I kind of closed that chapter and I’m starting a new book. I’m writing a whole new book lately. I feel like the hockey book is closed and I’m writing a new one with this career.
[Asked how athletes being remembered as professional athletes into retirement], I think you always have…you always want someone to remember you by that. The good times. You want them to remember the good parts of your career, especially not all the injuries or the adversity. Today I try to stay in good shape. I’m a Monday night, pick-up league kind of athlete now. I did play in an Easter tournament with some friends that I skate with on Monday night. They asked me to play in their tournament. So I did that and that was fun. So, no I don’t consider myself an athlete anymore. I’m happy to be done. When it’s not a fun job anymore…it lost the fun that it had when I was younger. It got wearing. My role got to be wearing. Yeah, I [took that as a sign] that I didn’t want to do it anymore. I was like, let’s start up a new career, and work as hard at that, and be successful at that. Because I’m not going to be an athlete my whole life. You just can’t do that.

I figured it was better to switch over sooner rather than later. I wanted to get my second career started. I felt like if I played a couple more years I would be losing those years of growth in that new career. Well, I think probably just over the last few years I was starting to think hard about, ‘What am I going to do?’ And even the last two seasons that I played in the summers I called [names two NHL general managers.] I just talked to them about not being sure that I wanted to play anymore. Both summers both of them gave me the advice to make sure and ‘Don’t quit playing sooner rather than later because when you do, you’re done.’ You don’t want to risk retiring too soon and regretting it. But I think I did it the right way. I played those two more years until I was sure. And then I was sure and made the plans to move on. I’d rather do it this way. You know, work harder than anyone else is willing to, so then I can live better than anyone else in the years to come. If I can get this going the right
way, it will be good. Then I can have some more flexibility, more time, more freedom to take kids to sporting events.

I think [the ability to maintain an athletic identity after retirement] might depend on your stature and how big of a player you were. If you say the names [lists several players] then everyone knows [whom] you’re talking about. If they say mine or [lists several players] then people will be like, “Who?” If you were in Philadelphia, everyone knows every player on the Flyers. In Detroit, everyone knows every player on the Red Wings. And every Canadian city is like that too, obviously. But I think if you have a decent name, you can keep your athletic status.

I’m in that position where I’m not an athlete anymore. This is what I’m doing and I have to try to use that to get to people. And I think I might have said earlier, the challenge is to explain to them that I’m [Sam] the [names current profession.] I used to do that and we can talk about it, but this is what I do now. Let me show you how good I am this. I used to be an average hockey player, but I’m a superstar over here. No, I’m just kidding. But that is how I think of myself. That’s how I’m trying to present myself to people so they get what I’m doing. I want them to know that I’m working harder than anyone else here because that’s who I am. I had to work harder than anyone else out there on the ice to get to where I got in hockey. So I know how to be successful. I know how to do it no matter what I’m doing. And I think anybody can be successful in whatever they choose to be. If I had chosen to do something else, I really believe I could have been that successful. I believe I’m going to be successful in this. It’s just going to take time and a lot of hard work. And I know that. I went through that in another profession and I know how to get to that level.
Absolutely [athletes could benefit from counseling or career planning]. The challenge is, you have the same challenge as me, presenting the value that you can bring to them. I took [a career planning test] in maybe ’07. This was one of the things that showed up repeatedly. And it was always sort of…the more common things that came up were working with people, helping people, or something like that. Something that was social. I really enjoy interaction with people and the psychology of it, reading people’s body language and stuff like that. That is a big part of this. I’m great when I can get to that. The challenge is getting into the pipeline and getting enough people in here. That’s the hard part. I’ve been very humbled by doing this for sure. It will be worth it.

I’ve just seen some guys go into scouting, coaching. My best friend went into coaching this year. He just retired. Well, he retired the year before, I guess. He didn’t do anything, he took the year off. He started coaching this year. It was pretty much for free, just to get his foot in the door. But I’ve seen other guys go into broadcasting like you said, scouting. I haven’t really talked with them about, you know, what their thoughts were and what their plans were when they decided they were going to do what they did. Except for my best friend, we talk back and forth about what he’s doing and what I’m doing.

[Asked to define himself today.] I think people would say that I was a great team guy, a people person, honest, hard-working, trustworthy, loyal. Family guy, a great husband and loving father, and very dedicated to what I’m doing whatever it may be. Caring, honest, and all the good qualities. I’m really talking myself up here. Yeah, and that can’t happen every day. You know some days I feel like, ‘Oh no. I’m not being a good person today.’ You do have some off days. But for the most part, I try to be all those things as much as possible. I
would have said all those things pretty much my whole life. I think a lot of my high school
yearbook quotes would say the same thing. You know, don’t ever change and always try to
be that way. My parents raised me that way. I had a great upbringing, the best parents ever. I
mean, they cared so much. They brought me up to be the best person I could.

[In giving advice to fellow athletes going through the retirement process], I would
give the same advice that the GM’s gave me in the summers. You know, make sure that
you’re ready, that you don’t quit too early and regret it. And once you make that decision,
just be fully invested in the decision. Move on and put the same effort or better that you put
into your hockey career into the next thing you decide to do or whatever it is you’re doing.
That’s the best advice I can give. That’s what I’ve done. I hope I’m not trying too hard. I’m
trying really hard to be the best I can be at this job. It’s very competitive-just like hockey or
any other sport. It’s very competitive in here.
Participant Four: Brent

I [first considered myself an athlete] when I made Tier 2 Juniors in Canada in because fans had to officially pay to watch us play. Prior to [that] I was a player in my estimation that made a competitive team. The [point where I saw myself as an elite athlete] is easy; a college scholarship to [names a Division I school.] Technically I was getting paid via the scholarship itself, I had state of the art facilities and care, and was down amongst few players to ever attain that position.

I was a professional athlete for 17 years. I [decided to attempt becoming a professional athlete] the moment I was drafted. The odds are against most to become one of the 770-ish players to make the NHL each year, but that was my first serious indication [that] I had a chance. It was the catalyst to my dedication and seriousness that I took towards making this opportunity a reality.

There were some real highlights to my professional career. [I won] three Stanley Cups, was drafted [in the] first round, met two presidents, and [scored] the first-ever goal in the history of [names an expansion team] franchise, and had [that goal] commemorated on a Postal Service envelope. Playing [and] representing my country, Canada, [was also a highlight.] Low points included the deterioration of skills towards the end of my career, [being] punched in [the] face during the Playoffs and becoming a YouTube hit (lost the series, too), [and] an inability to see eye to eye with [names a particular coach].

[Asked about highs and lows affecting his sense of self], every day [there is the] feeling that still, your performance is being measured [and] who you are is being judged. As great as the job seems, there were so many negatives to it. As confident as I may seem now, I
constantly battle with insecurities. Weirdly I find myself at times trying to get people to understand me and like me, even if in life they don’t matter. [It is] hard to transition away from the game at times and the level of both good and bad focus placed upon you and your life. [It] seems as though you can never truly be comfortable with yourself.

Overall, yes, [being a professional athlete was an all-encompassing experience.] I met stars, athletes, and got to experience more than I could ever imagine only because my job afforded me that opportunity. It also depended on the city. In [names an Original Six team, city] no matter your place on the team you lived the rock star life. [You got] free everything and everything [was] first class. Other cities that lacked the attachment to the team, players, or game itself- you were often just another face in the crowd. Big teams in [the] NHL combined no anonymity, but coolest life. [There was] more of a real life in smaller markets and realistic experiences. I also went to school, so I had another bond somewhere else in my life, and a wife that eventually led to a family.

[You miss parts of being a professional athlete,] the money obviously. But [I also] miss the friendships with like minded/like skilled people that understood and sacrificed the same as I did; team friends. In some regards, not mattering like you used to [is the hardest part of no longer being a professional athlete.] It was a pressure, but most [players] embrace the idea of people being invested in your team and your performance. It was almost euphoric and that feeling goes quickly. That is what I think most [players] struggle with and why they gravitate back to the game in some manner.

Athletes will hang on to every thread of belief that they still are [pro athletes,] no matter the stage of life. Mentally most can’t let go of it. You dedicate early stages of your life
to it like a love and you struggle to ‘break up’ with it when it’s over. [Today] I consider myself a retired athlete. Emphasis on retired.

[I would define my career today] as a roller coaster. I am happy overall, sorry, thrilled, but wish for a couple of do-overs. That’s the athlete, perfectionist, need to be the winner in me. I would define my career as being a guy with good skills, [who] made ‘good’ with what he had, and won three Stanley Cups.

I did plan for retirement. Financially I put it in the hands of a friend/investor. Directionally I always knew I couldn’t just sit around. Early on in my career I had a knack for being interviewed and I guess in retrospect I angled towards TV. And it worked out. In college I took radio/TV production, but only did so to avoid tougher majors. Oh well, God had a plan!

[When I got my] first contract, I put away good money in the market. I was young and my agent and father took charge of it. I honestly didn’t actively take part. God, I was trusting!! Career wise I only started to plan after [the] TV industry reached out to me first. I [started] thinking about [retirement] two months into my last year. And it wasn’t a shock because I reached out to other recently retired players and asked every guy, ‘How do you know when?’ and gagged if my feelings applied. Simply, my body started to break down rapidly.

Rarely [is being retired still a shock.] [It is] only during playoffs when hockey is at its best and I get caught up in the emotion and miss it a little. [Athletes can maintain an athletic identity] in media, coaching, managing, forever as long as long as you are good at it. Counseling and career planning could be beneficial, a lot, yes. But the problem is it falls on
deaf ears because players still involved still believe they are invincible. Players often hit rock bottom before asking for help because of pride issues. Brutal! [I have seen players who are] alcoholics, divorced, penniless. You hear it all the time. Most still think ‘wont happen to me’... and it does. Run [any counseling or career planning] through all Players Associations because players will trust where it is coming from. No idea [what it would look like], but not too complicated because not a lot of guys are splitting atoms!

[Asked to define himself today], I would say husband, dad, [names current profession,] retired athlete. I am better at maneuvering life than I first thought. Not only my transition, but the world around me itself. I am still burdened with the idea that people constantly judge [me], both positively and negatively, but I am less reserved than I was. As for my current career, two words, love it. It lets me surprise people who may have thought I was one faceted.

[Asked to give fellow athletes advice about the retirement process], trust your instincts and plan early. Friends and family will always be there and most others in your life in this business are simply passing through.
Participant Five: Peter

I think early on at a young age, I was winning races and I was an athlete in three different sports. I was quarterback in football team, pitch and played third base in baseball and I was a really good skier. I don’t really remember, but my parents would say, you know, at a young age he’s really a good skier. And I would never notice that, but my parents would always say when I was ten, twelve years old that I was doing things that other kids couldn’t do. So I think at an early age I was already an athlete.

I don’t [think I] considered myself an elite athlete until my junior year in college. I began to fill into my growth spurt and my body started to do things that, maybe my mind wanted it to do, but [before then] my body wasn’t ready yet. You know, so I think it wasn’t until my junior year of college when that began to happen. I was always a [names position] and I think I had some steam set forward, but I knew I was always a good [position] just the way my brain worked. So I was always that position. I don’t think that would ever change as far as hockey is concerned.

[Asked when he decided to become a professional athlete], I would say it was after my junior season in college. I got asked to play in a national team over in Russia for my country. [I] went there and played really, really well in the national game and then I was asked to try out for the Olympic team. I made the national team at trials. I really knew, at that point. You know, I made the Olympics [and] played in the Olympics. I think it was after the Olympic Games when I saw all my other teammates that I played with all year long on this national team. It was me and maybe a couple of other guys that still hadn’t signed contracts and then I kind of realized that, ‘Hey, maybe I can be a professional athlete. Maybe I can do
this. If those guys can do it, I think I [can] do it.’ It wasn’t one of those things that I was thinking about as a kid growing up, ‘I want to be an athlete.’ You know, I was really actually thinking, ‘Boy if I could get a scholarship to college hockey, that’d be kind of cool.’ I was more academically focused and trying to, you know, play college hockey.

I left [college] my junior year and left to make the Olympic team. I left school that year because we traveled around the world the whole year and then during the Olympics. After the Olympics I went back to school [and] took some courses. I’m slowly chipping away at taking courses at [names a school] now. So far still continuing to try to finish my education. [But I was a professional athlete] sixteen, seventeen seasons. Something like that.

Some of the highlights were some of the teams that I played on in [names team] and we won the Stanley Cup in [names year]. That was really the highlight. Playing in Stanley Cups altogether, all those cup runs were special. Those were all highlights. I think you remember the moments with your teams, you know? Some of the highlights from [year] was winning the Stanley Cup, but that season was a special year, just the team in general was really cool. You could sense something was happening. You just sense that we had the right chemistry, we had the right team, we had the right mix. We had the right leaders more importantly than anything. When you have the right leaders for the team, you have the right ingredients to win.

The low points, I would say, I think the grind. The grind of hockey, professional sports in general. You know, eighty-two regular season games, playoffs… it’s long, it’s arduous, it’s definitely taxing on the body and the mind. I think the surgeries I’ve had are some of the low points. Overall looking back, you know, you don’t remember a lot of the low
points. You remember a lot of the great moments and a lot of the great times you had. Looking back when you play [names specific number of games], that’s a high point obviously. But when you’re playing a 1[specific number] game, you realize you’ve gone through a lot. That says you’ve been there, you’ve done it, and you’ve gone through a lot of low points to survive; [you have] persevered mentally.

[Asked if the highs and lows affected his sense of self], absolutely. I think part of professional sports tests the range of emotions that you have, like confidence at times. You probably fight over-confidence at times. You go through every battle and every emotion and at the end of the day you realize that you have one thing that you can really control and that’s the way you prepare, the way you perform on a daily basis. Whether it be a game or practice… basically you can ask yourself, “Are you a professional?” every day, on and off the ice. When you finally figure that out, you are a professional. It takes some guys a whole career to become a professional and still not figure it out. I mean their professional career. They could play ten years [of] professional hockey and still not figure it out. I think there’s a moment in time when as a young player you know what you’re doing, [but] you’re not a pro. Then at some point you realize that, “Hey, I really [have] got to start taking this seriously.” [It’s] not that you weren’t already, but you really look after every aspect of the game on and off the ice.

[Being a professional athlete] is absolutely an all-encompassing experience. Off-season you’ve got to continue to train. There are moments right after the season you need a break. You need a break from everything – from training, from skating, from just even thinking about hockey. You need that break, but then after that break, four to six weeks
[have] gone by, then it’s back to work. You [have to] get back into the grind of getting the body prepared for what lies ahead and so it is a twelve-month process. Even that resting period is part of the training process because if you have [physical] rest and your mind is not restful, you will not perform the way you need to perform that following season. You’ve got to give your mind a break. It’s really about forgetting about the game, forgetting about pucks, forgetting about sticks, about all the things that go along with the grind of hockey. You need to get away from it for a few weeks and to forget to play the game.

I think in professional sports it’s that hard and people think [we] just show up in the rink, or on the field, or the basketball court, or whatever. [They think] and it’s just the paycheck and it’s all honky and fun and dory and whatever. But at the end of the day, if you treat it like it’s a professional sport and you are a pro, then you know it’s twelve months out of the year you’re preparing to play.

I think [I did feel like I had a life outside the game.] I think that’s part of being professional. You learn that you are away from the training, away from the rink, and you do cut it off because when it comes time to perform everything has to be on. There are moments you think about the game at home, maybe resting, getting ready to prepare, your mental preparation are some of the things that I would do. That’s when you have the visualizations, some of the mental things that you know about the game. But when the game is over, when you’re away from it, you need to somehow get away from it. It keeps you fresh and that keeps your longevity.

I think being in the moment, that’s the biggest thing I miss. Being trained, being in control of the way you want to work and perform on the ice. Then obviously when you’re
trained and you’re feeling like you can do whatever you want to do physically on the ice, then you can just be in the moment. That is what I really truly miss. [I miss] that not thinking about the past, the future. [I miss] just being right there in that moment in the game and feeling that puck on your stick and making plays. That’s what I miss most.

I think when you step away from the game you realize the perks that come along with it. You’re traveling [and] you’re traveling in private jets. You’re sleeping in nice hotels and your quality of life is pretty significant. You don’t really realize [that] when you’re in the mix of it because you’re so focused on the game. When you step away from it, you go back and say, “Wow.” That’s a pretty special thing, to be a professional athlete and treat it with the utmost respect. It’s a pretty, pretty special thing. Obviously the money is great too, I mean let’s call it what it is. [Athletes] get paid a lot of money today, but the ultimate prize [is] physical and mental and a lot of other things. And sometimes even your family pays a price. Yeah, there are sacrifices you’re making. But I think at the end of the day it’s really the quality of life that you have as a pro athlete [that] is probably one of the things you miss most.

I think it’s hard because you play so many players throughout your career and everybody has their own lives, busy lives, and it’s hard to keep in touch with everybody. There are a few guys that you stay in touch with and you want to see them here and there when you have the opportunity, so that’s always a difficult thing. But life continues to clip along and if you want to make an effort to see a teammate, you can make an effort.

I think I’ll always be an athlete. That’ll never leave. I think once you’ve played at that highest level and you’ve [gotten to the point that] you think you’re a professional, you’re just an athlete inside forever. It’ll never leave you. I mean I can still do things today. I just took
kite-surfing lessons [and] I’m getting up on a kite-surf Sunday. You’re still challenging
yourself. Great challenge, but you know, good athletes try different things and see what they
can do. Snowboarding, I try to do that. I picked that up a little bit. It’s just fun. Fun things
like that continue to remind you that you are an athlete and you can do things, even at my age.

[Asked about planning for retirement,] I’d say you don’t really plan. I don’t think you
can really plan for your retirement. When you’re a pro athlete, you need to be a pro, and that
goes from all the other things I just described. So now you’re starting to think about
retirement, your brain is not right where it should be. Focus on being extra fast when you
step on the ice. The game of hockey is so fast [and] the players are so strong. If you’re not
ready to play, if your brain is thinking about retirement when you’re on the ice and you’re
playing these other guys that are 210 pounds [and] can skate twenty-five miles an hour or
greater [and] if your brain is thinking about retirement that’s when you should get out of the
game. That’s basically what happened to me. When I got to the point where my body just
couldn’t withstand 82 games anymore, even though I might have 50 good games in my body.
[My last season] out of those 82, I played 70, I’d say. For 20 games you’re hanging on for
dear life. Those other fifty, you’re performing just fine. [That] to me is hard to do as such a
perfectionist. You want to be able to go out there and play at a high level every night.

When you start thinking about, ‘Wow, maybe my body just can’t do this anymore,’
that’s when you need to start thinking about retirement. So that’s when you do. That’s when
you retire and you walk away. Every player you talk to, probably any ex-pro athlete, they’re
going to tell you, ‘You know, I just knew that moment came’ or I knew it was time to walk
away.’ [That] is usually what happens when your body and your mind are just not there
anymore and that’s when you start thinking about retirement. I think you have to wait to think about retirement for a period of time. Yeah, you can save your pennies and I think that’s planning for retirement in my eyes. Saving your money, making sure that when checks stop rolling in that you have the ability to plan for what you want to do. [You want to make sure] you’re not rushed to do what you want to do next. That’s one of the things that pro athletes should remember is that that check, that last day, whenever that might be, is going to go. You’re never going to come back again.

You have to realize that money is something that’s going to have to stretch out for you and your kids. I think that’s how I planned for retirement. [I] made sure that financially I was saving my money and making sure that I was preserving my wealth. I know guys that have gone bankrupt. It’s amazing. So I think begin planning my first couple of years, trying to find the right people to look after my money. I didn’t have a lot of money my first couple of years, but as you get older and you start to know you’re going to be in this business for a long time you begin to start looking at avenues of preserving your wealth. I have to say I had some good people that looked after me and did the right things and planned the right way and so that’s helping me today.

[As for factors that led to retirement,) I think my body, [it was] physical. I had surgery and I think I got to the point where my body was just, kind of getting patched. I had re-fractured [specific bone] my last season and I took a couple injections to calm it down. That’s when I realized it’s just, kind of diminishing returns, you know what I mean? What was I trying to prove at [certain age]? It just doesn’t make sense. I think you just know it’s
your time like I said before. Not being able to perform at the highest level every night. I just had a hard time going out there half of what I normally would be.

So I don’t think retirement was a shock for me. I have no regrets. I had no regrets when I walked away from the game; I walked the game proud. The year I went out in [names a specific team] I thought that was my last year and I walked out there really feeling good about myself. I really came back [and] had a really great year. My teammates ordered me a really nice award, which is pulled down by the players. [That] is a really special gift for me from my team and I walked away from the game feeling good. Then I got a call and next thing you know, I’m playing one last final season in [names a specific team.] So the retirement wasn’t bad for me; the retirement wasn’t a shock. I didn’t feel like I left something out on the ice.

[Asked about how athletes maintain an athletic identity,] it’s hard. I mean, it takes a blow. That first year of retirement, you realize that, ‘Boy, I’m just another Joe.’ I think that it takes a year, I’d say. It really does. It takes me and some people even longer than a year. It took me a year, give or take and I think you have to start realizing that, ‘Okay. I’m not a pro athlete anymore, now what?’ You have to start to think, ‘Okay, what other challenges can I challenge myself with? You know, can I go back to school? Can I do things that are going to challenge my mind?’ You know, you have to start looking at your life the way you looked at your pro career.

I tried to – for me I just looked at how to turn it into business. I looked at all the tools. I learned about winning teams and those winning environments. It doesn’t matter if you have a hockey team or a football team or a business team, if you will, because all those
environments to winning are all the same. So I feel what I’m trying to do now is put the tools I’ve learned in hockey and just transfer them into the business world and try to build that same kind of culture in the things that I’m doing. I do a little bit of broadcasting. It’s just a really fun job. It just gives me a way to stay involved in the game of hockey, but yet I’m still doing some other things on the side.

[Asked about athletes and counseling or career planning,] I don’t know if it’s a smart idea to do it [while you’re playing.] It might one of those agent things. I was within an agency that represents us during the playing years and [they’re] kind of making sure the financial things are going the right direction. But I guess when a player retires, when they announce their retirement, there should be some kind of system to step in and say, “Okay.” Maybe they fly somewhere that gives them this packet, if you will of that says, ‘Okay these are the things that you’re going to go through. What do you have interest in?’ You get involved in that or [they] lead you down a path that gets you going in the right direction with the right people. I think [it] would be kind of nice for athletes to have something like that because there is a transition. Counseling, whatever it might be, is always something that could benefit the athlete.

[They could do some] kind of assessment of where their interests are and then [see] what career choices fit their interests. And [say here are] the resources that we can put in front of you and say, ‘Hey, you should be going down that path.” That would be kind of a neat thing for athletes.

Honestly I think athletes, when they retire, they don’t really share how they’re doing in a good way or a bad way. It’s always personal. You’ve always been an athlete and there’s
that ego saying, ‘Yeah I can handle this. I can do it on my own. I’ve been on my own all this
time.’ You know, like, you step out on the ice or you step on the field, you have to perform
as yourself. You go out there, it’s normal. Stepping away from the ice, you’re not necessarily
going to go out and tell people, “Hey, I’m not doing too good mentally.” I mean that’s not an
athlete. So I think part of the counseling goes back into almost something that’s mandatory.

[Have the NHLPA say], ‘Okay, you retired and you go to certain place.’ [[Maybe] a weekend
sort of retreat or a couple day retreat. It’s all paid for through the PA and it’s kind of a couple
day course of moving through the transition. I think that’s the only way you could get players
do that. I don’t know about mandatory, but it’d be highly, sort of, recommended I’d say
for players to do such a thing because none of the players are going to want to do it. They’re
going to be macho. I think if the players talked to each other about it [and said,] ‘This is
really how I got my start in what I was doing and it was really worthwhile.’ Players are not
really going to reach out and say, ‘Hey, I’m not doing too good now mentally’ until they hit
the absolute skids.

How do I define myself today? I don’t know. That’s a tough question because I think
I define myself as somebody that has persevered. I define myself as somebody who has won.
I’m a champion, but that being said, I think being a champion, all being a champion did for
me was an affirmation. An affirmation of what I’d always believed in of what winning is and
what the winning ingredients are I guess. Because I had a mental image of what that, what
those ingredients were and when I saw it in real life and we ended up winning, it confirmed it
for me.
The team aspects, the team characteristics that it took to win a championship are [what are] confirmed, affirmed if you will. You need an affirmation of, ‘Okay, wait, these are things that really I believe are the ingredients to winning.’ And when we won it confirmed that for me. So how do I define myself today? Well, I define myself as somebody that has gone through the process of what a losing team looks and what a winning team looks like. So now I try to define myself as somebody that’s trying to replicate what winning is.

I think that’s really the mission in what we try to achieve. It’s just always things that you want to do again in life. You want to replicate things that gave you a good feeling that you had or winning. It doesn’t really matter what you’re winning at, as long as you win it’s pretty cool. It’s fun.

How has your definition of self changed since being retired? I don’t think it’s changed much. I still feel the same way about all the things that I’ve gone through. You know, I think being a pro athlete doesn’t make me better than the next guy, it doesn’t make me worse than the next guy. It’s just I’ve had a heck of a lot more experiences than the next guy. I think I’ve challenged myself more than a lot of people have out there, well, pro-athletes do I think in general. They have to survive. We’re a unique group of athletes.

You have to continually try to strive to be great and I think with doing that you become habitual about a lot of things that you do in day to day life change. So whether you’re a pro athlete or a retired athlete, it doesn’t really matter. Those habits that you’ve created that have given you the success that you’ve wanted and that you’ve achieved through sport, you should be able to achieve the other things in life. If you’ve, again, treated your
professional career like a pro going back to where our conversation started. You learn to be a pro and should be able to be a pro the rest of your life in some sense of the word.

I think it’s just a chapter in your life. Now that it’s over, you turn the page and, you have a whole new blank sheet of paper there. You have to start writing a new chapter. The quicker you realize that the better you’ll be because I think you’ll realize that, ‘Okay, that chapter in my life is done. It’s over; that’s it. It’s not coming back. I had one shot at it; that’s it. ‘ Now you learn to adapt to the new environment with the characteristics built, that you learned, and then move forward. The best advice is realize that you can do anything you want, you just have to put your mind to it like you did your career. You have to let go of that sensation of playing at the highest level of your sport, but don’t let go of the characteristics that you built to get yourself there. If you had the great experience of winning in a sport, typically those winning environments are the things that will carry over into business, I think. All the things learned through those processes, through those experiences are the exact characteristics you should be able to take with you into the real world.

You have to learn sometimes by doing. And I guess, yeah, maybe the last thing I’ll say about transitioning of… in business, even since retirement, I’m getting involved. I’ve gotten involved with a couple of businesses. Don’t be afraid to fail I think is something [else.] Obviously you don’t want to spend a lot of your money and do something and fail at it, but if you can get involved in a few things, learn some lessons along the way. Don’t be afraid to fall and get back up. Yeah, you might fail. You might get knocked down a couple of times, but don’t be afraid to get up and keep looking for that right environment.
Participant Six: Frank

I grew up playing sports my whole life. My older brother played and my younger brother played and hockey was the one sport that I continually played. You know, I had played football here and there, played baseball here and there, but hockey was the one I always stuck with. My older brother played, my younger brother played, and hockey was the one sport that I continually played. I had played football here and there, played baseball here and there, but hockey was the one I always stuck with. I guess when I played a year in high school in Canada [is when I first considered myself an athlete.] It was a big step that I left home. That was the point where I thought that I could possibly go professional.

I would probably say once I turned professional [I thought of myself as an elite athlete.] I left college early to go pro and I think once you’re playing at NHL level, that’s pretty much as elite as you can get. [Asked when he decided to attempt becoming a professional athlete], when I got drafted I was eighteen and stated “If there’s any NHL team out there that thinks I can do it, then why shouldn’t I?” It’s probably a little bit earlier than that that I wanted that, but at that point I think I realized it was possible. And this past season was my sixteenth year pro. Yep, still playing the game for a living [overseas] and can’t complain.

[Describing the highlights of his career,] I would probably say getting drafted was a big deal. Getting a scholarship was a big deal [for college] and going pro, obviously that was a big deal. The highlight of my career probably would be playing in the Stanley Cup Playoffs or Finals I should say. We lost in the finals, but we made it there, and that was the most fun I ever had playing hockey. Probably that same series where we lost [was the low point of my
career. I’ve had good years, I’ve had bad years and everybody goes through that. But nothing really sticks out as something that was a real low, low time or anything like that. I just feel lucky that I’ve gotten to play so long in a game that I love.

[Discussing professional athletics as an all-encompassing experience,] people think ‘Oh, you just play a game for a living,’ but it’s more than that. We do get the entire summer off but that whole time we’re training just to be ready for the next season and during the season, we practice every day. We don’t get days off. We occasionally get one here or there, but otherwise we’re practicing, playing on the weekends and weekdays. There’s really not a lot of downtime. It’s as busy as a nine-to-fiver and on top of it you’ve got to be physically in shape, as well. If we’re not [in the gym,] we’re traveling. It is three, four cities in a couple weeks, so it’s a busy lifestyle. I’m not complaining! Don’t get me wrong. But it’s definitely, you know, it’s time consuming.

You always get the reports critiquing you and telling you you’re bad. You’re getting graded at all times pretty much and not necessarily just by your coach. You can please some of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time, right?

I know I do [have a life outside of hockey.] I’m not necessarily married or have a family or anything, but I’m happy with the way I’m living my life. I wouldn’t change anything at this point, other than still playing in the NHL, but other than that I’m a pretty happy guy. [Describes a business.] It’s not too shabby. It’s a little place to go and it’s been a fun little project we’ve had for – well, this is our seventh year this year.

[Thinking about retirement,] obviously not playing is going to be a hot mess. I’m sure I’ll still play, like, a men’s league but actually playing the game in front of a big crowd will
be something I’ll miss. And I actually do like road trips, that was fun for me. I was going to different cities and seeing different places, so probably those two things as far as the game goes [I miss.] That and hanging out with the boys. It’s definitely a different world. I’ve got friends that aren’t hockey players and [some] that are and it’s definitely a different kind of relationship. When you’re a team and you’re all doing the same stuff at the same time you definitely form a different kind of bond.

I think [professional athletes do like to be thought of as athletes after retirement] because it is a bit of the glamour lifestyle. You get recognized in the airport or at a bar or restaurant and that was something that I thought was pretty cool. That when I first turned pro people asked for an autograph, stuff like that. It’s kind of a cool thing. You know it can get, uh, you know, annoying at times. I don’t want to sound uptight or anything, but there is a place and a time for it. So I think that most guys would, you know, if they were asked what they were remembered for, I think they would immediately go to the male professional athlete.

I think it goes about half and half [in terms of professional athletes preparing for retirement.] I know there are a lot of guys that I’ve played with, this is going back a couple years and they came in the same time I did, and they were banking on being a superstar and never having to do anything else after hockey. And for a lot of them that didn’t work out, you know? So I see a lot of guys that, once they’re done they’re kind of scrambling because they’re not really qualified to do anything else. They didn’t finish their school, as soon as they signed they went out and bought a big house and a boat and all this stuff. A lot of guys went the wrong way and lot of guys were smart about it. I like to think that I’m one of the
smarter ones. I got involved in a business before I even became close to retiring and, you know, I didn’t go out and buy six boats and five cars and stuff like that.

I did get a lot of help from my dad. He actually looked at the town and kind of helped me. Um, I don’t know if I have [really started planning for retirement.] I haven’t really, you know, thought as far as being completely done with hockey too much to tell you the truth. I’m trying to play as long as I can, you know, I mean the last couple years I played in [names several countries] lower-level teams than the NHL. I’m obviously not getting paid nearly as much as what I used to, but I’m doing it because I love and, you know, they’re paying me at the same time. I have I got my [business] and I own quite a bit of real estate. I mean at the end of the day I guess that’s kind of planning because I do know that they’re real. I did invest in stock and stuff, but I like to have it, you know, some [here] some there, some in real estate. I don’t put everything in one place. It’s kind of diverse. My dad was a huge help. That’s how I got into [my business.] I figured once I do retire there’d be something I’d be able to tackle.

Some of the guys that I’ve been close to and talked to, they kind of – I don’t know, the way that they finished it’s kind of like a snap decision. One year they’re playing, the next year they weren’t, so maybe it was [a shock.] I think they wanted to continue playing, but it just wasn’t in the cards. I think one way to stay involved is to coach or something like that. I wouldn’t mind coaching at some point. I think it’s one of those things where you’re a player and it’s a little bit easier for you to make that transition because you know [that] you know the game, whereas some Joe Regular can’t just hop in and start coaching. That’s why they’re always going to look at the player before they look at somebody else. I think a lot of guys will take advantage of that which is a good thing.
Absolutely [professional athletes could benefit from counseling or career planning.] People have asked me over the years if an agency or a group or something [like] that would help. I mean and then not even just hockey players, [but] any sport. I mean you see it all the time in basketball where a guy is just spending every cent he’s got. Next thing you know they’re living on the street when they’re retired. I mean it would be a great idea for someone to start something like that. But the problem is whether or not the athletes are going to take the advice of the people. There are some egos in professional hockey and they all think they know what’s happening, but they don’t. And there [are] the others that you know will listen. But I think the earlier the better. Then once they’re retired depending on how long their career was and that, but I think, I definitely think, the earlier the better.

[Asked about what counseling or career planning might look like,] if I was speaking out for myself, I would’ve said the financial part. I had my dad, but there are athletes that could definitely benefit from the emotional stuff. You know, they don’t take things well in certain ways. I’ve seen it with guys that I’ve played with and you see in the news all the time. Guys just snapping here and there so I think it can go either way. , I’m sure it couldn’t hurt either way, but as for myself, the financial is the biggest part just because you’re so young and getting all this money that I didn’t really know how to – what to do with it.

I wouldn’t mind getting into coaching at some point. I would like to stay involved with the game. And you know, for as long as I have played, I have seen quite a few coaches and quite a few of them were not good. I’ve seen the good ones, I’ve seen the bad ones, and I think I know how to be a good one and I could honestly be successful at it. I see players that are coaches and they’re just terrible coaches and I think, “Man!” You see players do it all the
time so it’s definitely something I’d be interested in. I’ve seen more bad than good, that’s the thing. Over 15 years pro and I don’t know, maybe ten or twelve different teams, I’ve definitely seen some bad coaching.

[Asked to define himself today,] I would say I’m an athlete. I wouldn’t count myself done yet. And I suppose, you know, I’m a business owner so, I mean, I guess I have that. Other than that I really wouldn’t know what else to say. Easy going guy that likes to go the bar! I don’t know.

I think I’ll always consider myself an athlete. I think I’ll always be involved in it whether I’m coaching or, you know, if I have kids I’ll always be involved with [hockey.] I like to be active at all times, so I would never be the guy sitting around with a beer in my belly button smoking a cigar or anything like that. I actually have a bet with a few of my buddies that they think 10 years after I’m retired I’m going to be about 250. I’ve got a thousand dollar bet on that one! So I have some motivation as far as that, besides what I said I would always want to be that way anyways.

[In giving advice to fellow athletes about the retirement process,] start thinking now. I think I’ve done a good job of it, but I’ve seen a ton of people that haven’t so it’s something that everybody needs to think about and the earlier the better. Earlier is not going to hurt you, but later is.
APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

Doctoral Dissertation for Elizabeth M. Cox-Franklin

For a doctoral dissertation in Counselor Education at North Carolina State University, Elizabeth M. Cox-Franklin is investigating the maintenance of the athletic identity by retired professional athletes. In order to accomplish this task, she is interviewing retired professional athletes. If you agree to participate in this study, Ms. Cox-Franklin estimates that the interview will take approximately one hour.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you do volunteer for this study, the researcher does not anticipate any risk in your participating. However, you may choose to not answer any question(s) you do not wish to for any reason.

Your information will be kept completely confidential. *At no time will you be asked to supply any identifying information* that would connect your identity to your responses to the interview questions. All study records will be kept on a password-protected computer in password-protected files. Only the principal investigator, Elizabeth M. Cox-Franklin, and the chairperson of her doctoral committee, Dr. Edwin Gerler, will see these records.

By signing below, you agree to participate in this research project.

Signature: ________________________________________________

Please Print Name_________________________________________

Date: ____________