
Female and Male Student Athletes' Perceptions of Career Transition in Sport and Higher Education: a visual elicitation and qualitative assessment

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ABSTRACT The termination of a collegiate athletic career is inevitable for all student athletes. The purpose of this study was to explore student athletes' perceptions of the athletic career transition process. One-hundred-and-forty-three ($n = 143$) National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II student athletes were administered the Life After Sports Scale (LASS) designed by the authors. The LASS is a 58-item mixed method inventory. The scope of this inquiry explored the qualitative section, which examined participants' perceptions that were visually primed with a narrative description of a student athlete who made the transition out of collegiate sport successfully. Three major themes emerged from the participants' responses: *Career Path Well Planned*, *Balancing Academics and Athletics*, and *Positive Role Model*. These themes are discussed in relation to the contextual approach used to explore human enactment in life and career.

Most college students are dealing with constant changes in their lives (Astin, 1993; Petitpas et al, 1996). Dealing with various transitions is simply the nature of being in college. The collegiate student athlete is faced with some unique challenges that the non-athlete student escapes, such as the physical and time demands of competing in intercollegiate athletics. For the majority of student athletes, graduation indicates the termination of their formal sport careers (Petitpas et al, 1996). Until recently, the post-career concerns of student athletes have been neglected. Most of the athletic support systems fail to consider what

happens to athletes when they must make the transition to another career (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Gradually, the issue of career transition in sport is being recognised. Sport administrators, coaches and sport psychologists are realising a need for educational and vocational training for retiring athletes.

Athletic career termination and transition are inevitable issues that all student athletes must eventually experience (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Many student athletes who must terminate their participation experience adverse affects simply because making the transition from an athletic career to a new one can be extremely difficult (Lapchick, 2002). Within the career transition and retirement literature, some researchers have focused on the elite and/or professional athlete (Gorbett, 1985; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). Most of the research that has been conducted in this area has borrowed from the fields of thanatology and gerontology (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Basic theories of career transition from the retirement research have been adapted to the field of sport psychology.

This study is part of a larger study conducted with student athletes ($n = 143$), which utilised both the qualitative and quantitative sections of the Life After Sports Scale (LASS; Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2004). Due to the abundance of data collected in the larger study, the scope of this study was on the qualitative responses of the student athletes. This study qualitatively investigated collegiate student athletes' perceptions of athletic career transition. It examines the perceptions of collegiate student athletes in response to a visual student athlete profile. The profile describes a student athlete who has made the transition out of sport and into the work world successfully. The collegiate athlete's process of exiting from athletic involvement can be viewed from Chen's (1998) theoretical framework of career as meaning making.

Central Focus and Theory

Career choices for student athletes may be better understood by examining 'career' as meaning making (Chen, 1998). Based on a very thorough synthesis of the literature, Chen (1998) concluded that the existing career literature appears to have paid little attention to contextual factors or individuals' subjective perspectives of career. Scholars, such as Collin & Young (1992) suggest three models for theory development: ecological, biographical and hermeneutical approaches. In short, these three models cultivate less objective inquiries of knowledge and enable subjective perspectives. The biographical approach focuses on participants as acting agents in narratives of their experiences. This is only one subjective model of approaching career phenomena. Some scholars have suggested other subjective and conceptual frameworks, such as the contextual model (Collin & Young, 1992).

The contextual model (Collin & Young, 1992) is the underlying philosophy of Chen's (1998) career meaning making concept, and focuses on three significant aspects: context, interpretation and narrative. The context consists of a multiplicity of possible connections and interrelationships. Interpretation refers to an individual's perspective, which is critical as it influences what will be perceived and how it will be interpreted. Narrative remains open-ended and is always changing by creating new meanings (Young et al, 1996). All three co-exist with one another and collectively constitute people's subjective careers. Gaining a perspective of how these core constructs interrelate involves helping people search for and make sense of meanings entangled in their career path. For the purpose of the current study, these aspects (context, interpretation and narrative) will be addressed by giving participants an opportunity to respond and share their experiences. Each individual has a personal story, which involves detail and various meanings for himself or herself. With this in mind, subjective career is about interpreting what has happened and is going to happen in one's life career enactment. Narrative is considered an important feature of interpretation. Life career development is a very complex and dynamic person-in-context process (Chen, 1998), therefore, outdated approaches of depicting human experience cannot fully complete the complex explanation of experience. Chen (1998) called for an integrated, reflexive and open approach to explore human enactment in life career, which was the aim of the primary researchers in the current study.

The primary researchers suggest that the aforementioned theoretical underpinnings in the context of intercollegiate athletics may reveal new and different understandings of the career literature. Based on these theoretical assumptions, a visual elicitation research design was used to cultivate thoughts and perceptions by male and female student athletes in higher education.

The purpose of this study was to explore qualitatively student athletes' perceptions of the athletic career transition.

The primary aim was to get athletes to begin thinking about their own athletic career transition process. A student athlete visual profile and instructions (listed in the methods section) were utilised to elicit responses to an athlete who made a successful career transition. The central research questions were as follows:

- Do student athletes spend time preparing for their life after sport?
- Do student athletes aspire to play professional sport?
- What were the primary perceptions of the student athletes after viewing and reading the visual student athlete profile?

Method

The methods employed in this study were grounded theory and visual elicitation. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is an interactive process by which the researchers become more and more 'grounded' in the data, and develop increasingly richer concepts and models of how phenomena emerge. Grounded theorists attempt to understand individuals' experiences and thoughts in as rigorous and detailed a manner as possible (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). Coding is essential to qualitative analysis. Codes act as a tag to mark off text in a group for later retrieval and indexing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researchers' interpretations of data shape their codes. The researchers' goal is to identify categories and concepts that emerge from text. The end results of grounded theory are portrayed through the presentation of verbatim quotes from participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), which are displayed in the results section.

Visual elicitation is a technique of interviewing in which photographs are used to stimulate and guide a discussion between the interviewee and the researcher(s) (Snyder & Kane, 1990). The visual elicitation technique is used to elicit first impressions and perceptions in regards to the pictures that are being viewed by the participants. It is primarily used to allow the participants to report their first ideas that come to mind and the intent is to avoid controlling the participants' responses. This method has been utilised by anthropologists, but has been used little by sport science researchers (Curry, 1986). Acknowledging the salience of cultural artifacts and images in sport, the use of photographs is pertinent to study the attitudes and meanings people associate with sports (Gonzalez & Jackson, 2001). Johnson et al's (1999) study titled, *Picturing Success: photographs and stereotyping in men's collegiate basketball*, built on two previous studies, one conducted by Snyder & Kane (1990) who explained, 'Photographs may be used as a research tool to evoke thoughts, reactions, and feelings from individuals about some aspect of social life' (p. 256). The second study was conducted by Cauthen et al (1971) who claimed, 'The use of pictures is the best because it allows the most latitude in determining the content of the stereotype' (p. 105).

Participants

Participants ($n = 143$) were student athletes who attended a predominately White National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II south-eastern college. Research was conducted in the state of South Carolina in the United States. There were 79 males ($n = 79$, 55%) and 64 females ($n = 64$, 45%). The mean age of participants was 20. One-hundred-and-three participants were White, twenty-seven were classified

as African American, seven participants reported Other for their race, four were Hispanic and two were American Indian. Participants competed in the following 12 sports: men's/women's tennis, men's/women's basketball, men's/women's soccer, men's/women's cross country, men's golf, women's volleyball, baseball and softball. A little over 80% of the student athletes in the sample came from middle class families, 11% grew up in lower class homes, while almost 8% came from homes that were upper class. Twenty-one per cent of the student athletes in the sample were first generation students to go to college. A little over 90% of the student athletes in this sample received an athletic scholarship to attend college. (For participants' undergraduate majors and undergraduate classifications see Table I.) The range of classifications is from freshman to senior. A freshman is a first year college student, a sophomore is a second year student, a junior is a third year student, and a senior is a student in their fourth year or with 1 year or less until graduation. Participants' undergraduate majors and classifications are described in Table 1.

Undergraduate Major	Undergraduate classification				
	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Total
Sport Management	4	15	7	13	39
Business	6	12	6	6	30
Biological Sciences	4	3	5	3	15
Education	3	1	3	0	7
History/Political Science	3	2	1	0	6
Technical	3	0	1	0	4
Communications	2	1	0	0	3
Humanities	2	0	0	1	3
Undecided	5	0	0	0	5
Total	34	41	32	28	135

* Note: Seven participants failed to indicate which major they were enrolled in.

Table I. Frequencies of undergraduate major of participant and undergraduate classification ($n = 143$).

Life After Sports Scale

The Life After Sports Scale (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2004) was developed based on relevant literature (Brewer et al, 2000; Brown et al, 2000) and previous instruments (Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale: Taylor & Betz, 1983; Career Development Inventory: Super et al, 1981) that investigated athletic identity issues in sport psychology and sport sociology. The LASS (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2004), is a mixed-method 58-item inventory utilised to examine perceptions of the career

transition process. The scale consisted of a qualitative section and a quantitative section. The qualitative section included a visual student athlete profile (see Figure 1) and instructions for the participant (see procedure section). The quantitative section included four domains:

- career transition;
- athletics;
- academics;
- social.

In addition, student athletes were asked to partake in three sentence completion items and various demographic questions, such as age, academic major, sport played, family income and race/ethnicity.

The visual student athlete profile came from the Texas A&M athletic department's media guide. The male student athlete (Will Brooks) portrayed in the profile is a real person and his profile accurately depicts his life and accomplishments. The photographs, which accompanied the profile, were utilised in this study because the researchers were using the visual elicitation technique. This specific profile was selected by researchers because it depicts a well-rounded student athlete who made the transition out of college successfully. Will Brooks currently maintains a professional position in the corporate world.

Procedure

Participants contributed to this investigation on a voluntary basis and received a four-course dinner as part of their incentive fees for their participation. Participants were asked to complete the LASS (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2004). Prior to the completion of the scale, participants were informed of their rights to confidentiality by reading and signing the consent form. Participants took approximately 30 minutes to complete the entire scale (qualitative and quantitative sections). The scope of this study was on the qualitative section of the LASS. In the qualitative section of the LASS, participants had 5 minutes to read the student athlete profile (see Figure 1). Next, participants were asked to respond to the student athlete's (Will Brooks) profile by relating it to their own lives as student athletes. Participants were given instructions to offer their thoughts and feelings in response to reading the profile. The instructions were as follows: 'Please write your thoughts based on the former student athlete's profile. Please relate this profile to your personal reality as a student athlete.' This particular instruction was given to participants in efforts to give the control to the participant and allow them to freely associate. In other words, researchers wanted the participants to report their first perceptions of the visual student athlete profile. Finally, participants had unlimited time to write their responses. It took participants a total of 7 minutes to finish their responses.

STUDENT ATHLETE PROFILE

Please write your thoughts based on the former student athlete profile. Please relate this profile to your personal reality as a student athlete.

**Former Student-Athlete Profile:
Will James Brooks**

Will James Brooks is a former student-athlete now working for Whitehall-Robbins in Dallas, Texas. James, an offensive lineman, was the starting left guard for the 1995 Aggie Football team that won the Alamo Bowl. Prior to the 1995 season, James was a member of three A&M teams (92,93,94) that reached the Cotton Bowl. Included in those seasons were two Southwest Conference Championships in 1992 and 1993.

While at A&M, James received a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture Economics (May '96). He made the Dean's List in 1993 with a 4.0 GPA. James was very active as a member of several organizations. He was involved with Southwest Black Student Leadership Conference (SBSLC), elected SBSLC director of hospitality and entertainment, directed the SBSLC career fair, SBSLC guest speaker tour, Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), and Aggie Athletes Involved (AAI).

Upon graduation in 1996, James began working for Armetex Swift-Eckrich. He was an account manager for Randall's in Houston, Mizzyard's in Dallas, and Sack 'N' Save in Dallas. Currently James is working for Whitehall-Robbins as a Pharmaceutical Sales Manager and is based in Dallas. He began working for Whitehall-Robbins in 1998 and enjoys working for them. James enjoys managing his own territory, which includes managing brokers throughout the southwest area. He also enjoys developing quarterly business plans concentrating on growth for Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and New Mexico.

James is a family man who enjoys spending time with his 19-month-old son Will James Brooks III and his wife. He also enjoys traveling with his wife who works in the airline industry. Outside of his family, James continues to stay in shape by "shooting hoops" and lifting weights. Occasionally getting the opportunity to hang out with a few of his former teammates gives him the opportunity to reminisce about the old times.

When asked what advice he would give to current Aggie athletes James stated, "Find a career which best suits your personality. You'll achieve greater success, with a sense of pride in the quality of work you produce. Also, dedicate yourself to learning on a year round basis, most companies seek employees that are ambitious and eager to learn."

5 <http://sports.tamu.edu/career>

Figure 1. Student athlete profile.

Prior to data collection for this study, a pilot study was conducted specifically for the utilisation of the visual student athlete profile (visual

elicitation technique) and qualitative section of the LASS (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2004). Five student athletes and five students participated in the pilot study. Based on the responses to the profile, data collected and data analysed, evidence was found that the visual elicitation technique would be useful for narrative collection and development of themes. Consistency in participants' responses was found by identifying similarity in the raw-data themes from the transcripts; thus, researchers proceeded to complete the larger study.

Data Analysis

The written responses to the profile were transcribed into a hard copy for data analysis. An investigative team was formed, which consisted of four individuals trained in qualitative research methodology, two of whom were the primary researchers. This investigative team was utilised throughout the data analysis process. All of the members of the investigative team examined the entire data set.

Following transcription, each investigator read each of the participants' transcripts line-by-line in order to get a sense of the student athletes' responses. This process is referred to as line-by-line coding (Glaser, 1978). Next the process of 'open coding' was utilised in which investigators identified potential themes by pulling together real examples from the text (Agar, 1996; Bernard, 1994). This process is also often referred to as identifying raw-data themes. The raw-data themes are quotes that capture a concept provided by the participant (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The third reading of the transcripts by the investigators involved a memoing technique, which is utilised to record relationships among codes and/or raw data themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). There are three types of memos that could be employed. Code notes is the type the team used. Code notes were formed by the investigators attempting 'to summarise his or her ideas about what is going on in the text' (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 783).

After code notes were recorded, the investigative team met to discuss the transcripts. The primary purpose of this meeting was to interpret and identify major themes. During this meeting investigators shared and discussed their code notes with the group. There were only a few incidences of inconsistent categorisations among investigators, which were resolved by engaging in discussion with all investigative team members. Final decisions were made that would accurately reflect the transcripts and saturate the themes. Themes were derived from all of the transcripts and attempts were made to interpret commonalities among the thoughts described in each of the transcripts (Patton, 2001). Primary researchers identified major themes, across transcripts and support for each theme was located in each of the transcripts (Patton, 2001).

Theme	<i>n</i>	Percentage	Quotes
Career Path Well Planned	74	52	<i>This profile made this guy, Will Brooks, sound very interesting and in control of his life. He had a very successful collegiate career not only in football but also in the classroom. He did a good job and sounds like he has a lot going for him and gave good advice by saying find a job that best fits your personality.</i>
Balancing Academics and Athletics	72	50	<i>This story relates to my and most others' personal reality as a student athlete. It shows how determined athletes are when they put their mind to it. It shows how he learned how to be successful from the playing field. Learning how to put your mind to it, focus on a goal, work hard everyday and never give up.</i>
Positive Role Model	53	37	<i>This is an example of a good student athlete. He was a hard worker on the field and in the classroom. He, like I, feel that it is important to maintain good academic standards and to participate in clubs and organizations. It is vital to success in our future after graduation that we (student athletes) lead a well-rounded life. Will James Brooks was a prime example of how athletes should look to lead their lives.</i>

Note: Please keep in mind that participants wrote anything from two- to three-sentence responses to an entire paragraph. Each of the responses included several key concepts that coincide with the study's major themes. Very few participants' responses exclusively coincided with only one theme, and therefore the percentages should *not* add up to 100% and the *n* should *not* equal 143.

Table II. Major themes: descriptive percentages of transcripts (*n* = 143)

Finally, utilising the major themes that emerged from the data, transcripts were coded by the primary researchers. The process by which codes are assigned to contiguous units of text and act as tags to mark off text in order to retrieve and index later was suggested by Denzin & Lincoln (2000). Codes associated with each theme were identified in each of the transcripts in order to determine the number and percentage of participants who responded within each of the major themes (see Table II). According to Denzin & Lincoln (2000), computer-assisted programmes offer assistance in coding the data and also assist in grounded theory analyses. The ATLAS software program is a powerful software package

utilised for qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual data. ATLAS was utilised to verify and assist with the accuracy of determining the number and percentage of participants who responded within each of the major themes. The ATLAS data analysis was consistent with the investigative team's coding procedures.

Results

Due to the large participant pool ($n = 143$) there was variety within participants' responses. The lengths of participants' responses varied from two to three sentences to an entire paragraph. Each of the responses included several key concepts, which coincided with the major themes. Very few participants' responses coincided exclusively with only one theme.

The following sections will outline the major themes and provide participants' quotes. At the end of each of these sections there is an indication of the number and percentage of the participants who reported responses coinciding with the major theme of that section (see Table II).

Major Themes

Three major themes emerged which are descriptive of the participants' ($n = 143$) perceptions concerning the visual student athlete profile: *Career Path Well Planned*, *Balancing Academics and Athletics*, and *Positive Role Model*. The titles of the major themes are directly from the participants' words, which is a technique termed 'in vivo coding' (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Career Path Well Planned. The theme of *Career Path Well Planned* consisted of participants' statements that acknowledged the valuable career advice that Will Brooks (the student athlete in the profile) gave to them: 'Find a career that best suits your personality'. Participants began contemplating their future careers and some even stated their career of choice. Participants also recognised the significance of planning and having a passion for their future careers. They realised having plans and a passion could contribute to their overall success in life and their professional careers. The following three participants' quotes demonstrate this idea:

I strongly believe that you should go into a work field that fits your personality. Sports has been the backbone of my life and it has shaped and molded me into the person I am today. Not only should someone be an athlete but they should also have other options to go to after their career as an athlete.

Now, I understand why it's important to find a career that one is comfortable in doing. The more you know what you want out of life, the easier success will be accomplished and he is perfect example of that. Organization also has lot to do with his success in my opinion. As a student athlete I try to be organized and know what I want out of life.

I think he was an amazing athlete. He won a great deal of awards dealing with his leadership on and off the field. After he graduated I think its great for him to do what he loves as a career. He seems to have accomplished a lot in his life. I think his right he's right when he said 'Find a career which best suits your personality'. That is very true, in life I know I want to work hard a graduate so I can wake up every morning and go to a job I enjoy.

Participants continued to agree that finding a job that fits their personalities is vitally important to their success and happiness, as the following quotes demonstrate:

I feel that he was on the right track in college by doing well in the classroom as well on the playing field. I would like to do something that suits my personality when I am done with college. Hopefully I can combine business and sports and make that my profession somehow.

I feel that most athletes will end up working just as James did at the end of his career. A few will go pro but not many. I think it is good that James stuck with his hard work ethics. I totally believe in getting a job that fits your personality because you will enjoy what you do. Instead of not wanting to go to work you will want to and achieve more.

Some student athletes reported their specific career choice as the following three comments illustrate:

I give my all when I play just like he did so I can relate how he felt. I also agree with his advice about making sure you pick a choice or career that goes along with your personality. Well now that I think about it this story really make me think. I am going to be a lawyer. And I think this fits my personality to perfection.

This profile relates to me as a student athlete by the things this individual possesses. I work hard in the classroom and also very active on campus. Being on a team gives me reality of what's to come in the real world. Dedication, teamwork and

many challenges. I like his quote, 'enjoy yourself pick a job that reflects your personality'. That's my goal to be a physical therapist.

He knew what he wanted to do with his life and he followed it through. I have also set a goal for myself, to become a pharmacist. It is going to be a lot of hard work, but if I stay focused then I will do just fine.

Student athletes (74/143 = 52%) acknowledged the advice given in the profile to pick a career that fits their personalities (see Table II).

Balancing Academics and Athletics. The theme *Balancing Academics and Athletics* involved participants' perceptions that to be a true 'student athlete' one must juggle schoolwork with their athletic responsibilities. Participants expressed the significance of both academic and athletic success to the career transition process. Participants also were cognizant of the hard work that it takes to be successful. Student athletes recognised both the academic and athletic achievements made by Brooks. Consider the following two comments:

I think that he has been successful both on and off the playing field and I believe that it takes a determined person to be able to balance being a student and an athlete. You have to find faith in yourself and your ability so that you can be successful.

James was an all-around guy. He had a well-rounded career both in the classroom and on the field. He was very successful at both, as well. Athletic wise I wonder why James did not want to pursue a career in the NFL. He seemed like he had the talent. Most important, James excelled in the classroom with a 4.0 GPA. To be a student athlete requires you to manage your time wisely. He never had a spare minute, would be my guess.

Student athletes were able to learn a valuable lesson from reading the profile and implemented it into their plans. Consider as illustrated by the following comment:

Reading the student athlete profile, I've come to the conclusion that if you're an athlete, you should not only get it done on the field and court, but in the classroom as well. Education plays a very important role in an athlete's life. You can have all the talent in the world, but if you don't have any book knowledge, it will be hard on you in the long run. It's good that James got his degree, because you have something to fall back on. Those who are trying to go pro and rely on their talents to make

money, have to be aware that they could get hurt or anything. I plan to graduate from here in 2004.

Participants realised the hard work and dedication put forth by the student athlete in the profile both on the field and in the classroom as these three quotes reveal:

I think he sounds like a great athlete and a good student. Based on his involvement in football, his schoolwork and the extracurricular clubs, etc. He seems to be a dedicated student athlete. I am not as involved in the school-related organizations as he was.

Will James Brooks seems like a hard worker who got the most out of his collegiate experience. He has had success in all phases of his life. He did well on the football field, in the classroom, in his employment off the field and in his relationships. He is a very involved individual who is really into life.

Will Brooks knew that there was a life outside of football and that he should work hard in school. He became involved in activities in college such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Aggie Athletes Involved (AAI). His strong work ethic made him a successful student that carried over into his professional career. He understood what it takes to be successful on and of the field.

Some participants also reported the significance of being able to manage their time and balance the different aspects of their lives. Consider these examples:

Will, like many of us student athletes, has to be very sensitive in time management. To be successful in life you must be able to juggle more than one task at a time. From reading Will's profile he seems to be very sufficient in time management. As a student athlete myself, I feel I am and will be able to handle the tasks and pressure life puts on me.

I can relate to Mr. Brooks. I play two college sports and I still balance other aspects of life without compromising in any areas. Anybody can be a student athlete and still have the full college life; time management is the key.

Fifty per cent (72/143) of participants reported the significance of both the academic and athletic excellence in the career transition process.

They also realised the hard work displayed by Will Brooks in the student athlete profile (see Table II).

Positive Role Model. *Positive Role Model* involved participants looking towards Will Brooks in the profile as a role model and also using him as a motivator. Participants aspired to be like Will Brooks. Student athletes' also experienced feelings of inspiration in response to the profile. Consider these examples from participants:

I think this profile is a great inspiration to student athletes because not only was this man a great football player, but he was also a great student. Many athletes, especially football players, don't take their academics seriously, but he takes both of them seriously and wants to be the best of his life, in all aspects.

It was very inspiring to see how someone can over-achieve both on and off the field. His accomplishment foremost in the classroom is quite impressive. Furthermore, to see how well he has continued his success in a career and as a family man. He is an inspiration to us all! His life is an example that there is life after 'sports', whether it be collegiate or professional.

Participants acknowledged the importance of having role models and recognised that Will Brooks is a great example of a student athlete. Consider the following four comments:

The athlete is a model citizen for any community. He obtained his goals of graduating college, getting a good job he likes, and raising a family. William Brooks is someone we can all aspire to be like. Brooks is someone I would aspire to be like. I think we all have his similar goals in mind. Brooks shows that all your goals can be maintained with hard work and dedication.

I feel that this person was and is a very dedicated person. He has led a very successful life, and it appears that he will continue to do so. He sounds like, from the information presented in the article, the model student athlete to follow.

Will James Brooks made something good out of his life. I think that he is and can be a good role model to many people. He has a good job and spends time with his family also. When I graduate from college I tend to do the same thing.

It's impressive to read about a student athlete who's done so well for himself. I hope people look up to him as a positive role

model. As an athlete I know how hard it is to not only dedicate yourself to a sport but also to academics.

Aspiring student athletes related the profile to their lives and compared themselves to Brooks, as the following two comments illustrate:

I think that the profile was very beautifully written! Will James Brooks is a wonderful example of someone who has achieved much in his life, as well as being apart of many victories on the field. As for my personal reality, I think that Will Brooks is an above average athlete. I hope to have a successful career in sports as well as the rest of my life. I can only hope that my life will be as great as Will Brooks.

Brooks would be a good student athlete to model your life by. Brooks had to be a hard worker and very intelligent person to achieve what he did. Brooks was also good enough to apply the skills he learned in school to the real world. He will probably continue to be successful in life achieve anything. I try and take everything serious and set and achieve the goals I set.

Participants (53/143 = 37%) perceived Will Brooks as a role model and a sense of inspiration. They developed aspirations to achieve success in life and become a model student athlete.

Discussion

The scarcity of qualitative studies (Parker, 1994; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998), and less attention to research designs that utilise both quantitative and qualitative methods motivated this investigation. This approach, which utilises an open-ended narrative response, is unique to the career transition literature of sport and non-sport participants. In what ways is the present study unique? The present study's findings originate from a synopsis of a student athlete that is less stereotypical and from the perspective(s) or 'voices' of the student athletes. This is unique from a theoretical and practical framework, as previous research focuses on vocational issues from a deductive, rather than an inductive perspective (Brewer et al, 2000).

Following Chen's (1998) suggestion, researchers utilised an integrated, reflexive, and open approach to explore student athletes' perceptions and narrative responses. The challenge of investigating human perceptions, according to Chen (1998), 'can only be described and understood with its inner and associative meanings within the particular context' (p. 449). Student athletes are rarely presented with a successful

representation as the one depicted in the student athlete profile (Johnson et al, 1999).

Representations such as this can have a powerful affect on the psyche of student athletes. The opportunity to see a student athlete succeed in both academics and athletics, as well as make the transition out of sport into the real world is encouraging and inspirational, which is evident in the themes *Balancing Academics and Athletics* and *Positive Role Model*. Initially, the primary research questions that fuelled this study will now be addressed. This will be followed by a discussion of themes related to the contextual model of career meaning (Collin & Young, 1992).

The scope of the first question was to explore whether student athletes spend time preparing for their life after sport. The student athlete population is unique due to the intense athletic competition, which they participate in on a regular basis. The student athlete profile could have served as a validation for student athletes by confirming their efforts both academically and athletically. The profile confirmed that by investing in both academics and athletics an individual can make the transition into the work world successfully. The contextual models' major tenets (Collin & Young, 1992) focus on 'the complexity and multiplicity of the context, it is necessary to focus on time, space and inter-relationships. Time denotes the changing nature of human life while space signifies the setting where events and stories take place' (p. 450). Examining college student athletes during the ages of 18-22 is relevant to this notion of time and cultural context. The college experience is like no other and the college years can be a difficult time for many students and student athletes. Some college students fail to maintain a career-minded focus due to the various forms of distraction (sports, fraternities, sororities, clubs, parties, etc.) involved in college life (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

Participants articulated how inspired and encouraged they are to start preparing for their futures. This was clearly demonstrated in the development of *Career Path Well Planned* and *Positive Role Model* as major themes. The inspiration and encouragement which athletes experienced in this study are instrumental in an individual's career development. For the participants who were failing to plan their future careers prior to participation in this study, taking the LASS (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2004), motivated the athletes to begin contemplating their future non-athletic careers. This is a significant finding due to the urgency and necessity of developing a career-minded focus in student athletes. Drahota & Eitzen (1998) found that for those athletes who had not planned for their futures, exiting involuntarily heightened the difficulty of their transition into a new role. Student athletes that have a career minded focus will have better chances to succeed in their transitions and future non-athletic careers. They also concluded that athletes should realise that their athletic careers are tenuous at best,

with the possibility of injury or for better athletes to surpass them in the competition for scarce positions.

The second research question focused on whether the participants' aspire to play a professional sport. The major findings failed to reveal participants' aspirations to compete professionally. Due to the lack of professional opportunities for college athletes (Coakley, 2004) the participants realised the significance of planning their careers and pursuing academic endeavours. For example, 58 total college basketball players will get drafted to the National Basketball Association (NBA) each year and less than 2% of college seniors (in football) will get drafted to the National Football League (NFL) (Lapchick & Matthews, 2001; Coakley, 2004). Opportunities for women are very limited with only three major American professional sport organisations: Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). The Division II student athletes investigated in this study were fairly realistic which was consistent with findings from a previous quantitative study conducted with the same population. Harrison & Lawrence (2002) found that 16.7% of student athletes strongly agreed to having the desire to become a professional athlete. Will Brooks made a voluntary exit from collegiate sport into the work force, which was positively portrayed in the profile.

The scope of the third research question was to explore the primary perceptions of the student athletes after viewing and reading the visual student athlete profile. The male student athlete in the profile served as a role model for the participants, which was evident in the *Positive Role Model* theme. Participants viewed Brooks's profile as successful and positive. This is a significant finding due to the lack of positive role models for student athletes in the media and within their direct environments. Many media representations of current and former student athletes fail to expose their academic successes (Harrison, 2002) and also fail to depict details of their careers after collegiate competition (Parker, 1994). Participants who looked to Brooks as a role model, were inspired by his career path, and were encouraged to plan for their futures. Specifically, they reported what they wanted to do and several even admitted that they had not thought about their plans. The advice that Brooks gave to the participants about finding a career that best fits their personalities resonated with participants as well. They reported such ideas as, 'I know I want to be a lawyer, it fits my personality' or 'I have always wanted to be a dentist' or 'I would like to find a job that fits my personality'.

Participants also recognised the significance of being able to balance their responsibilities and were inspired to work hard in their academic pursuits while simultaneously being committed to vigorous athletic endeavours. Participants reported being encouraged and ready to work hard towards their non-athletic careers, which was evident in the

major themes of *Career Path Well Planned* and *Balancing Academics and Athletics*. Participants were given an opportunity to create new meanings surrounding their careers by reporting and creating narratives about their career process and reflection of a model student athlete. Participants were able to personalise their stories and offer very specific detail about their career plans. For example, several participants specifically stated what profession they wanted to pursue, one wanted to be a dentist, another a lawyer, and another a pharmacist. Not only were they able to utilise the important construct of narrative (Chen, 1998) they were also able to utilise interpretation (Chen, 1998). Participants were able to interpret what they want to happen in their life career enactments.

According to Chen (1998), life career development is a complex and dynamic process, which includes a person-in-context process. Using visual elicitation and a request for a response to an open-ended statement allowed participants to share their complex human experiences, and put themselves in a similar context and/or situation to that Will Brooks was in. Through this process, participants were able to begin to find career meaning and to make career plans. They were able to invest and actively participate in the career meaning making process (Chen, 1998). A huge component of this process is career as individual agency (Chen, 1998), which means the element of individual human participation in the process is vital. In order for the life career phenomena to exist, there must be individual agency. People are their own actors in planning career development tasks, and they are the self-agents in shaping their lives (Cochran & Laub, 1994; Collin & Young, 1986). Participants began to make specific goals and plans surrounding their careers. In a sense, the athletes in this study were becoming self-agents in an effort to shape their lives and careers. These qualitative approaches enabled the voices to be heard from a subculture of student athletes that are traditionally silenced. In other words, the student athlete reflective context offers a unique and large database of self-illustrations and vignettes. This is key, for athletic illustrations in mass media are often narrowly focused and centre on the body as a commodity versus the cognitive transitions of athletic participants. An example of this would be the career of superstar basketball player and popular culture icon Michael Jordan. There are very few people informed of his return to the University of North Carolina a couple of years after leaving school early to receive his degree in geography.

The findings of this study can serve to assist support service personnel working directly with these athletes. The primary researchers shared the results with the director of the career centre on campus and with the athletic director. Both of these directors reported that the results were helpful and informative. Future studies will investigate specific details of how the information from the LASS (Harrison &

Lawrence, 2002, 2004) was helpful and informative. Athletes need an opportunity to tell their stories, which is what the primary researchers allowed by providing a forum in which athletes could tell their stories and share their perspectives on the issue of career transition.

Limitations and Recommendations

The student athlete visual profile, which was utilised in this study consisting of male and female participants ($n = 143$), was a description of a male athlete making the transition out of collegiate sport. Future studies will utilise a female visual student athlete profile with female participants and a male visual student athlete profile with male participants. A comparison of female and male student athletes will also be explored. Researchers acknowledge the use of a male image with female participants may have caused limitations. However, female participants failed to mention in their responses that the image was not female; as well, they were still inspired by the image that is evident in the themes.

The continuation of the use of qualitative research designs to investigate the career transition process for the unique population of student athletes is suggested. Coleman & Barker (1993) suggested the necessity of 'a new paradigm and model to facilitate and incorporate research that will hopefully lead to a better understanding of student athletes' (p. 89).

Coaches, professors and administrators working directly with student athletes need to become aware of the intimate details of their experiences in career development in order to address such issues in the sporting environment. The more opportunities that student athletes have to voice their concerns and report their experiences the more informed others will become. The plight of student athletes and their future careers could improve through awareness and effort on the part of support services personnel (i.e. coaches, professors, trainers, academic counsellors, administrators) and by providing a vehicle for student athletes' thoughts, concerns, and experiences to be expressed and heard.

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