PLAYING IN THE PAST, TRANSITIONING INTO THE FUTURE: AN
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF ATHLETIC IDENTITY

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Athletic Identity

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DEDICATION

To my Parents
Family
Coaches and Professors
My Teammates and Dear Friends

The love and support that I have received from friends and family through my journey are strong indicators of my success in all aspects of life, whether it be in school or athletics.

The future is bright and I thank you all that have had a hand in it.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Playing in the Past, Transitioning into the Future: An Ethnographic Study of Athletic Identity

by
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For fans, athletes, and coaches, the experience of intercollegiate competition is quite powerful. While most fans may cheer less enthusiastically for women’s sports, female athletes are no less skilled or dedicated to their sport. Unfortunately, female athletes usually do not have a future beyond college and continue to play just for the love of the game. Despite the increased visibility of Olympic softball, college softball players have little prospects of playing professionally. College is a time in life where students create and maintain their personal identities, but serious athletes develop their identities as they also develop and sustain a physical and psychological commitment to sport; college softball players are no different. This internalized self-concept influences every other area in an athlete’s life. With the conclusion of athletic eligibility, student-athletes find themselves in transition from being a current member of a team to a former membership status. Like most athletes, when a female softball player retires from competition they experience a loss of identity, find little guidance or support from their coaches and college administrative staff, and are usually left to figure things out on their own. Employing the theory of identity foreclosure, this study draws on semi-structured interviews to explore athletes’ experiences of being National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I softball players as they transition out of collegiate athletics. The themes (a) “losing my identity,” (b) “of course I’m a softball player,” (c) “family, friends and coaches influence me,” (d) “my schedule keeps me busy,” (e) “no one there to help me,” and (f) “what happens next” illustrate that improved communication between collegiate softball players and their parents, coaches, and peers is needed to encourage the exploration of other identities. As identity foreclosure is part and parcel of becoming an elite athlete, the NCAA is responsible for creating programs to help participating athletes develop a healthy transition out of their college career.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I loved that time. The time when things made sense. The time when I felt important, special. When I felt like I belonged. I felt so warm inside, my senses were overwhelmed, but oh, so clear. The sounds of teammates and coaches were all different and distinct, and together sounded so harmonious. It was like the smell of the hot dirt with the white chalk lines perfectly angled on the softball field was crafted just for me. The bright green orb fit perfectly in my hands, those seams felt like lifelines to my pulse. I was in my element: my element was softball, and softball was me. We were one, and because of that I was alive. Off the field, my fidgety hands and feet tried to keep busy, just waiting for the time when I could perform my trade. I could be me, and do what I was made for. My strong body was made for this: the pain, sweat, and hours I dedicated reflected in the dips and curves of my muscles. Everything centered around this one place, this one experience, that was so familiar but now so distant.

My hands are still fidgety, but there is no relief. Competitive softball is done for me, but my passion for it is still there mingled with confusion, pain, and frustration. I want life to make sense again. I am lost. The game that surrounded me, that formed me, was snatched away in an instant. Everything just stopped. No one told me it would be like this. Still defined by the game I can no longer play, I feel inadequate. That sphere that used to bring such a thrill in my hands no longer carries those feelings; it is just a ball and I am just me, just going through the motions, wishing for someone to guide me, to just tell me what to do now. I just want someone to tell me where to go from here.

I played softball, the women’s version of America’s favorite past time for 16 years. I graduated from wearing rubber cleats before college to metal spikes, and from a smaller squishy ball before the age of 7 to a larger and harder neon green orb. I tried every position possible before finding my calling as a catcher. So much of my life was spent out on a softball field. Outside of school there was practice, tournaments on the weekends, batting cages, weight training, drills, and injuries. Making it to college felt like I had made it to the
“big-leagues” of softball. I was where I had always dreamed - playing at an NCAA Division I institution. For five years, I was privileged to wear a jersey with MY number 22, and MY school, San Diego State University.

And my story, while an important part of me, is one of many. Scores of women across the country play sports like softball with commitment and intensity, carrying that passion into college. College athletics have become increasingly significant since the 1930’s. Although intercollegiate athletics are common around the world, no other country boasts the popularity it has in the United States. Sports are so integral to our culture that it would be difficult for many of us to imagine college life without intercollegiate athletic programs (Bowen & Levin, 2003). In fact, although colleges are academic institutions, it seems they are recognized for sports just as often as for academic achievements. Kissinger and Miller (2009) explain that many universities are financially dependent on the media attention from televised college sports competitions. Such recognition often comes from high profile athletic programs, and their athletes, because television supplies almost 90 percent of revenue for the NCAA (Bowen & Levin, 2003) with college athletics estimated to be a $60 billion industry (Ilfill, 2001). Just as for universities, the experience of intercollegiate competition is a quite powerful identity marker for student-athletes. College student-athletes have long been one of the most recognized and valued groups on college campuses nationwide (Valentine & Taub, 1999).

Many athletes find it a privilege to play and represent their institution for four years. Luschen and Sage (1981) called the NCAA “one of the most important institutions of modern life” (p. 4). As the preeminent governing body of amateur sports, the NCAA enforces the rules of sports teams across the nation. These athletes are not paid professionals, are still students, but are valued by universities because of their ability to play a game and potentially generate revenue for the school. While being such an important part of the campus community, an unguaranteed scholarship for school is the only compensation for their participation. The elite collegiate athlete personifies many values such as loyalty, hard work, discipline, commitment, dedication and passion. These select few athletes participate in competitions nationwide, have the opportunity to play in front of thousands of fans, sign autographs, and see their names on the internet, television, in news articles and in lights. Besides generating exposure and revenue for the school, this attention may satisfy basic
human needs for approval, validation from others, recognition, and the feeling of being a part of something important and valuable.

From an early age, athletes begin to comprehend their self-worth on their athletic performance (McKnight et al., 2009). They have dedicated most of their lives to the precision of their respective sport and in the process, have satisfied some very fundamental and life-sustaining emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social needs (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Parham, 1993). Through much commitment and time, an athlete develops a personal identification to his or her sport. Previous research has noted that student-athletes have greater identity foreclosure as compared to their non-athlete peers (Shurts & Shoffer, 2004). When an identity is foreclosed either consciously or subsequently, the person has relinquished all other options and sees themselves as one thing. Identity is a self-concept that is willfully created and maintained but can also be influenced by an individual’s environment. Sports can be a double-edged sword. On one side, a sport can offer athletes ample opportunities that others do not have. On the other side, being exclusively committed to a sport (which is demanded of collegiate athletes) can dominate the athlete’s lives so much so that they will not be prepared for any other activity when it is done (Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danicash, & Murphy, 1997). Participants in NCAA sports want to continue being a part of sports because of a heightened feeling of athletic identity.

Finding a role or an identity is one of the most fundamental parts of discovering themselves and an integral part of elite sports participation. Athletic identity is defined as the degree of self-concept to which the individual identifies with the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993). For very few athletes, college is just a stepping stone for them to pursue athletics at a professional level. Most of these athletes, like me, play their last competitive competition in college. There are adult recreation leagues, but it is difficult to mimic the competitive and exclusiveness of collegiate athletics in these groups. Athletic identity has been reported to generate feelings of emotional loss due to the completion of the competitive experience (Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavallee, 2005).

Self-identification has an important role in sports. Petitpas et al. (1997) suggested that participation in sports offers opportunities to enhance athletic skills, to engage in social interaction, and to build self-confidence. Athletic identity is believed to be the most influential psychological factor as these people adapt to retirement from serious competitive
sports (Oglivie & Howe, 1982; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Taylor et al., 2005). As such, when an athlete retires from competition, they may experience a loss of identity. Researchers have suggested that participation in intercollegiate sport places demands on the student-athlete that exceeds those placed upon the non-athlete student (Lottes, 1991). Further, as female athletes have even fewer opportunities to play their sport at a professional level, the loss of identity may be compounded.

As sports are such important institutions in our country, questions arise about how collegiate athletes will identify and pursue their life goals once their NCAA experience is over. The NCAA (National Collegiate Association of Athletics) is the governing body of every intercollegiate athletic team in the United States. They create all of the rules that are to be followed by every student-athlete, coach, and athletic support staff at each college and university. Athletes at this level of competition have a strong identification with their sport, and those athletes in particular are the ones who experience difficulty with their post-retirement identity (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). In my experience as an NCAA “retired” athlete, I have had numerous conversations with my fellow athletes who are going through tough times with transitioning out of their sport. We all express how we wish someone would help prepare us for life after competition. Athletes report feeling disadvantaged after the termination of their athletic career since they did not have time to explore other avenues outside of sport (Gordon & Lavallee, 2004). Because of the exclusive nature of NCAA sports, other athletes and I have felt behind in career and scholastic avenues of experience. Thousands of NCAA athletes complete their eligibility each year and are potentially unaware of the impending psychological repercussions that come along with completing their athletic careers. The following section will provide a review of the literature that will be the basis of the study.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

My weekdays started at 6:30 am. It didn’t matter if it was Wednesday or Friday I was in the gym or on the field moving in some way or another. NCAA regulations stipulate an athlete can only practice 20 hours a week, but the rules do not include competition and all of the “extra” responsibilities of being a student-athlete. Besides practices there were study hall sessions, meetings with an academic advisor, team meetings, watching video, community
service projects, weights and conditioning, bus rides and waiting in airports. When my non-
athlete friends complained about their workload I would silently snicker in amusement,
wishing I could just give them a rundown of not even my week, but an average day. All of
the opportunities that I have been given because I was a student athlete have shaped my
college experience into a unique one very different from every other student. Just like my
non-athlete friends, most college students have difficulty understanding all that is involved
with being a student athlete. In order to understand the student athlete, it is important to be
aware of the organization that facilitates the sporting for all colleges in the U.S. The
governing body of intercollegiate athletics provides the rules and regulations that athletes are
held by. These rules are not specific to just the avenues of competition, but are also a major
part of what athletes can do in their everyday lives.

**HISTORY OF THE NCAA**

The NCAA is the governing body of all intercollegiate athletics in the U.S regardless
of the level of competition. Theodore Roosevelt, the President of the United States at the
time, encouraged university leaders from around the country to meet collectively to develop
reforms. In 1905 alone, there were 18 deaths and 149 injuries in college football. The
intercollegiate athletic association of the United States was founded by 62 members and the
institution of the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) was born, taking its
current name in 1910 (NCAA Membership Services Staff, 2005). By 1919, there were 170
institutions in the NCAA and it directed 11 sports (NCAA, 2010a). With expedient growth
and expansion, the NCAA was split into three Divisions (I, II, III) in 1973 and today as the
official governing body of intercollegiate athletics includes 335 Division I schools, 288
Division II schools, and 447 Division III institutions representing 353,424 intercollegiate
athletes (NCAA, 2010b). Previously, only male sports were governed by the NCAA, but in
1980, the NCAA included women’s athletics programs, services, and representation within
their governance (NCAA, 2010b).

The greatest distinction in collegiate athletics is the division affiliation (Griffith &
Johnson, 2002). The NCAA is divided into the three following unions: (a) Division I-A is the
most publicized division of college sports. These Division I-A institutions sponsor at least
seven sports for men and seven for women with two team sports for each gender (NCAA,
Division II-A institutions sponsor at least four sports for men and four for women, with two team sports for each gender, (NCAA, 2010b); and (c) Division III-A institutions that sponsor at least five sports for men and five for women, with two team sports for each gender. Division III athletics feature student-athletes that do not receive athletic scholarships from their collegiate institution (NCAA, 2010b). Although the visibility of each institution may depend on its division, with I-A sports garnering the most media attention, the competition is not diluted in other divisions. Similarly, the recruitment of athletes and the attention they receive on their own campuses may also be intense.

As the NCAA is a governing body for intercollegiate athletics, it attempts to monitor the athletic, academic, and financial aid of participating athletes. The mission of the NCAA is to “govern competition in a fair, safe, equitable, and sportsmanlike manner, and to integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student-athlete is paramount” (NCAA Membership Services Staff, 2005, paragraph 2). Not only are they trying to develop strong athletes, but also create well-rounded individuals.

Participation levels in NCAA championship sports were at an all time high in 2008-09 for both male and female student-athletes, with total participation surpassing 420,000. In 2008-09, the average NCAA member institution had approximately 399 student-athletes, 228 males and 171 females (NCAA, 2010a). Being a college athlete is such a unique privilege that only approximately 3% of college students are offered an athletic scholarship to attend college (O’Shaughnessy, 2009). These individuals are called “elite athletes” because they are currently, or have previously, competed at a college varsity, professional, or national or international level; they are also athletes that exhibit a heightened self-awareness and define themselves in terms of their physique and physical performance (Barkhoff & Heiby, 2004). As its primary goal is to produce safe and equal-playing environments, the NCAA tends to neglect the actual person who possesses the athletic talent. The quality of life after sports is influenced by the gradual process of athletic retirement (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993), but the NCAA does not service athletes once they are complete with their eligibility. With such a responsibility to student athletes, the NCAA would presumably be just as conscientious of the transition out of athletics as well. Outside of just sports competitions, the NCAA provides other services and programs, however these are primarily for current student-athletes.
NCAA CHAMPS/LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM

The NCAA established the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program for student-athletes and requires that all member institutions participate within the program (NCAA Membership Services Staff, 2005). The goal of the program is to provide an environment where student-athletes have the chance to develop a well-rounded college experience that is not just centered on athletics. The NCAA implemented the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program in 1993, and focused on five commitments to help student-athlete’s personal growth: (a) academic excellence, (b) athletics excellence, (c) personal development, (d) community service, and (e) career development (NCAA Membership Services Staff, 2005).

Although the program is provided to athletes free of charge, many student-athletes do not take advantage of this program (Erpic, Wylleman & Zupancic, 2004) and see it as a burden during their busy schedules. The program attempts to enhance the “quality of the student-athlete experience within the university setting” (NCAA Membership Services Staff, 2005, paragraph 5). The career development element of the CHAMPS/Life Skills program is to “encourage the student-athlete to develop and pursue career and life goals” in order to have a back-up plan outside of professional sports (NCAA Membership Services Staff, 2005, paragraph 9). Unfortunately, the program often is seen as burdensome to athletes and athletic support employees, since it is just another time consuming activity that they must fulfill in order to play their sport. Further, the programs are not directed toward the well-being of post eligible-athletes, and it is often this group of athletes that need the most attention in terms of a post-sport identity. In the next section, I address this process of creating and sustaining an identity that is closely communicated with sports.

IDENTITY

The way people identify themselves guides their approaches to performance in their lives. This process is not only psychological. In fact, these identities are communicatively co-constructed. For student-athletes, the athlete portion of their identity is emphasized more than the student by coaches and most of the support staff. Identity, as defined by Erikson (1968), is a process that connects an individual’s personality to the social world. Identity can further be defined as “how an individual comes to define oneself and make meaning of that self” (Stewart, 2009, p. 253). According to Erikson (1968) an important part of the identity-
formation process happens during adolescence when individuals have the chance to experiment with different possibilities and roles that correspond with their interests, values, behaviors and talents. “The relationship between behavior and identity is circular” (Miller, 2009, p. 71) and this is no different for collegiate athletes. For example, college athletes play sports because they are identified as athletes, and they are known to be an elite athlete because they play sports competitively. Identity helps to guide a person through categorizing how they are like some and different from others. Theories about identity say that individuals accumulate the meanings that they attach to the roles that they play in interpersonal situations (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identities are also associated with a person’s level of commitment to a certain role, which reinforces the link between role performance and identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). There are two theories of identity that are integral to understanding athlete’s connection with their persona. They are communication theory of identity, and social identity theory, and I address them both below.

The creation of identity is something that is an integral part of a person’s social life. Hecht (1993) created the communication theory of identity in order to connect how personal identity is merged with group identities. There are four lenses or frames of identity: (a) the personal lens in which “identity is an image we construct within ourselves” (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007, p. 23); (b) an enactment lens which our identity is formed through the communication with others (Guerrero et al., 2007); (c) a relationship lens which “we define ourselves in terms of relationships with other people” (Guerrero et al., 2007, p. 23); and (d) a communal lens that connects our identities to the groups in which we are a part of (Guerrero et al., 2007). This theory can be used to view athletes’ communication during their daily interactions as competitors. References to athletics, particular games, and other sports associations are often talked about among athletes.

Social identity theory was created by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and it concentrates on group dynamics, intergroup relations, and the processes in a group. This theory posits that a person has several selves that correspond to the groups in which they belong. It is mostly developed through an individual’s membership with a group (Brown, 2000). The basic argument of social identity theory is that people’s identity is formed based on group membership (Brown, 2000). Membership in a group and being seen as a member of a group helps to determine people’s cognitive and behavioral processes (Hogg, Terry, & White,
Individuals use those social categories to establish the groups in which they belong (Brown, 2000). They have to determine the similarities and differences in order to distinguish themselves from certain people. Identity formation occurs based on a person’s ability to relate to group members (Brown, 2000). They seek to find positive distinctiveness which gives a person a sense of being a part of “we” instead of just “me” (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). Self-image, relationships, and activities within a group enable a person to develop a sense of who they are. The more significant an identity is to a person, the more likely it will be used across contexts (Stryker, 1968).

Athletes who have strong identities formed through their sport will utilize the same attitudes to school work, family life, and friendships. Miller (2009) agrees by stating, “A college student whom athlete is a highly salient identity might bring this frame of identity not only to their field of play but also to the classroom, the workplace, or even the family dinner table” (pp. 70-71). Social identity theory is important to consider because it elaborates on the communication theory of identity, further explaining the relationship and communal frames. In short, athletes identify with other athletes in order to define themselves.

Besides social identity there is both a public and private sense of identity. Private identity has to do with how we see ourselves and is most often described as being unavailable for public opinion. It includes one’s attitudes, beliefs, feelings and emotions. While public identity is concerned with how we think others see us, or may judge us (Symes, 2010). In regards to the commitment, dedication, and demands of intercollegiate athletics, scholars believe that the emphasis on athletics interferes with the student-athlete’s opportunities to explore their own behavior, a process which promotes identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966). Because athletes do not engage in exploratory behavior they do not have a commitment to an occupation or ideology outside of sports (Ogilvie & Howe, 1982). A strong athletic identity can have both positive and negative effects on an individual. As female athletes do not have the same opportunities to move into professional sports as males, they still have strong athletic identities and still experience the negative effects of having an athletic identity.

**Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity has both positive and negative consequences. Having a strong athletic identity increases self-confidence and can carry over into other aspects of life (Ryska,
But over identifying with an athletic role may be detrimental not only towards academic accomplishments but can also have a negative effect on overall development (Miller & Kerr, 2003). Due to the exceptional demands of high-level sport, however, adolescent athletes tend to not explore other interests and immerse themselves, instead, in a strong athletic sense of self (Brewer et al., 1993). Collegiate athletes can go from identifying as an athlete in a positive and healthy way into over identifying and experiencing negative psychological effects.

In the early years of their collegiate life, they juggle with the simultaneous dual identities of being a full-time athlete and full-time student (Chen, Snyder & Magner, 2010). After committing themselves to their sporting role not just physically, but also mentally and socially, athletes are often left without time to understand other types of self-exploration which is needed to make the best life choices outside the sport background (Gordon & Lavallee, 2004). By the time athletes reach their junior or senior year of college, they can be completely immersed in their role as athletes. When athletes have completed their intercollegiate experience, their athletic identity does not just disappear. The strong athletic identification that was built through the years of membership on a team creates a difficult transition for student-athletes into a stage where athletics is no longer their central identity and role.

Due to a required heightened commitment to their sports, elite female athletes are likely to not explore other options besides their sport since they participate in athletics in their everyday life. Casual athletes learn lessons from other experiences and avenues of growth because they did not focus on just athletics. Richards and Aries (1999) explain that athletics teach individuals self-discipline, teamwork, confidence, work ethic, and leadership, social, and interpersonal skills. Athletic identity is described as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). Others elaborate that, “athletic identity is a good indicator that shows how one’s athletic involvement and experience can affect the person psychologically and cognitively” (Chen et al., 2010, p. 178). Despite the applicable skills learned on the field or court, the incomparable demands of elite level sports can prevent athletes from engaging in a wide range of developmental tasks across their lifespan, including those that are needed to form a mature and well-rounded self-identity (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997). Identifying as an athlete brings focus to physical
attributes and competition rather than academics. Athletic identification is not equal in all athletes. Males and females differ in the strength of athletic identity. Brewer et al. (1993) found that athletic identity was stronger in males than in females as well as in older athletes than their younger counterparts. Chen et al. (2010) conflict the previous research when they found that female athletes identify just as highly as males. The participants in my study felt as if they had a strong athletic identity.

Sports become an athlete’s existence, because it permeates all aspects of their personal lives. These time commitments cause student-athletes to identify even more with their athletic social identity than people who play for leisure. Coaches and athletic administrators explicitly and implicitly encourage this identification for the success of a team. They promote bonding, and spirit among team members with the idea that a strong sense of team identity increases rates of success (Klausner & Hoch, 1997). NCAA Divison I athletes exhibit high levels of athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). Anderson (2004) found that a person’s athletic identity was correlated to four particular factors: (a) athletic appearance; (b) importance of exercise, sports, and physical activity; (c) competence; and (d) encouragement from others. In my experiences, the athletic support staff attempted to create a familial atmosphere, which enhanced the feeling of “we.”

The athletic identity is created by the amount of time that is obligated to their sport. Participating on athletic teams has been found to be the most time-consuming extracurricular activity (Richards & Aries, 1999). The Division I policy in the NCAA (NCAA Membership Services Staff, 2005) states that athletes may only participate in 20 hours of practice each week. The time demands on athletes are not limited to these prescribed 20 hours. This time does not include voluntary practice, travel as a team, community service activities, and other team obligations. With all of the time commitments, typical Division I student-athletes spend at least 40 to 50 hours per week participating in their given sport. Young athletes have been required to sacrifice large amounts of their time and energy in order to have success in the name of their sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). By the time any athlete experiences a few years at a highly competitive elite level of sporting such as Division I-A sports, the experience has moved beyond just surface level. Further their identification moves into other avenues of their collegiate experience.
IDENTITY FORECLOSURE

Athletes who identify a sense of self with their sport foreclose their identity from a young age all the way through retirement. The athlete’s potential options of other activities are closed off before being experimented with. A person with a foreclosed identity is defined as one “who has failed to thoughtfully investigate available roles, yet who has made a premature, serious commitment to a socially prescribed role” (Miller & Kerr, 2003, p. 212). Athletes lack the development of a multi-dimensional self that encompasses various identities (Symes, 2010).

Brown and Hartley (1998) asserted that student athletes who identify strongly with the athlete role may not explore other career, educational, and lifestyle options as a result of their extensive sports involvement. This is especially prominent in athletes who participate in high profile sports and for high profile institutions (Miller & Kerr, 2003). Shurts and Shoffer (2004) found from their study that student athletes are more likely than their non-athlete peers to prematurely foreclose on their identity. Social isolation is the result of having a narrow self-concept, which many athletes posses and which coaches think is essential to competition (Gordon & Lavallee, 2004). Social isolation, career immaturity, depression, and other psychological difficulties can develop from having to adjust to the retirement from sports. Adler and Adler (1987) commented that individuals with foreclosed identities do not have the ability to foresee and plan for the future.

RETIREMENT FROM INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

When athletes are viewed by their peers for being successful at their sport for a majority of their life, what happens when they no longer play that sport? Athletic careers are usually short-lived because of high competitive selection procedures and the increase of injury (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). The phrase “sports career” is defined as “the multiyear sports activities of the individual aimed at high level sports achievements and self-improvement in sport” (European Federation of Sport, 2000, p. 260). Many college athletes, especially female athletes, understand that the last competition of their senior season may be the last competitive experience that they will have in their sport. However, when a playoff system is in place and their season is extended, there is uncertainty as to when the last event will occur, sometimes being more abrupt than originally thought. With approximately 45% of
athletes (Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom, & Annerel, 1993) not thinking about their life after they are done with their sports career, the transition out of a sports career can be detrimental to their well-being. If an athlete has an exclusive athletic identity then their entire sense of self and self-worth is centered on being an athlete. Consequently when they are not able to participate in their sport due to retirement, they experience a drop in self-esteem and can even experience an identity crisis especially upon retirement since they have lost the only thing they have ever known (Symes, 2010). The retirement stage is the most significant stage of transition in this examination of identity foreclosure.

**Schlossberg’s Transitional Theory**

There are various stages of the sports career that affect individual athletes. Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory examines the impact that a specific transition has at a particular period in time. It was developed as a theory to aid adults through the transitional processes that occur in life. There are three phases within a transition: (a) moving-in, (b) moving-through, and (c) moving-out. For college athletes the moving-in phase consists of the recruitment process for some, or walk-on phase for others. It also includes starting a new school and the adjustment of playing their sport under a new coaching style, as well as the added responsibilities entailed with being a collegiate athlete. The moving-through phase entails establishing one’s role on a team, becoming a leader, learning to adapt to new players coming onto a team as well as leaving. The last phase of an illustrious athletic career is the termination, or transition out of the sport. For athletes, this phase is the hardest because many do not like to think of the end. Transition is “an event or non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). A celebration, like senior day, for example, which commemorates the player’s last home competition, may not be a pleasurable event for an athlete since it marks the end. In my experiences, senior days have often been filled with tears and feelings of sadness.

Athletes have also been reported to find the termination of their athletic career extremely distressing (Brewer et al., 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). This can be an anticipated transition due to the knowledge of the end of eligibility to play, or it can be unanticipated due to an injury (Schlossberg, 1984). Psychologists have observed athletes
struggling with the loss of their role as an athlete, and piecing together a new identity during their retirement (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Scholars have consistently suggested that athletes experience career termination as a transition that can be extremely long and especially distressing (Taylor et al., 2005). Webb et al. (1998) find that athletes are often psychologically unprepared for the imminent retirement from the sport. Athletes fail to find the lifestyle change after competitive sports to be satisfactory (Baillie, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). There are four sets of factors directly related to the coping ability of an individual through a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 1984). Depending on these factors, an individual can either grow from a transition or it can lead to a decline for that person (Schlossberg, 1984). The transition from participation in sport to not participating in sport lasts between six months to one year (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). The transition that student-athletes go through is a change of relationships, activities, routines, and roles. Webb et al (1998) argue that there are two reasons that athletic retirements differed from other types of retirements: the fact that there are special circumstances that may lead to an early retirement, and enduring athletic identity that was enduring despite the termination of competition. In relation to the adaptation to life after sports; a gradual transitional process may lead to fewer difficulties (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Werthner and Orlick (1986) also discovered that athletes who achieved more of their goal in regards to sports experienced an easier athletic retirement and less difficulty in the adaptation to a post-sports life.

The purpose of this study is to examine the issue of identity during athletic retirement by using survey and ethnographic research methods. Athletic identity is believed to be the most influential psychological factor in regards to adapting to retirement (Oglivie & Howe, 1982; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, Taylor et al., 2005). As studies show, student-athletes develop a social identity of athlete from a young age that abruptly, after exhaustion of eligibility or injury, no longer describes them. Student-athletes who participate in NCAA athletics can face significant difficulties after they end their sports careers. As very few athletes continue onto professional sports, it is important for the NCAA and universities to prepare these athletes for their life post-athletics. When a student-athlete comes to play for a university, parents and players have been reassured that they will be looked after. Especially during the
recruiting process, coaches try to communicate that parents can entrust their children into the hands of the institution.

When these athletes have completed their allotted time to play, the care that was promised is no longer available. It is an ethical responsibility for these institutions to ensure the overall well-being of the athlete, not only physically but emotionally and psychologically. They are responsible not only during their service as student-athletes but also as they transition out of athletics. Student-athletes who are not prepared for this particular transition may lead to a lack of development. Athletes are told what classes to take, what to eat, where to be, who to live with, what to wear, and how to perform in public. Often they are punished for not following coach’s orders or team rules. In my experience, if any of my teammates got into trouble we would all have to run laps or do some type of manual labor. As athletics is in every part of student-athlete’s lives, they may have little idea how to conduct their lives on their own. When athletes retire from competition, they experience a loss of identity. Because of the exclusive nature of NCAA sports, other athletes and I have felt behind in career and scholastic avenues of experience. The lack of athletes’ preparation for the transition out of their sport and into everyday life is a serious issue for both the college athlete and the NCAA governing body. The goal of this study is to further understand the transition out of intercollegiate athletics by looking at it through the female perspective. This research may ensure provisions of better services and programs that will help student-athletes better navigate the changes in their social identity. The following research questions will guide the study in order to gain insight on this impending dilemma:

RQ1: How do softball players communicate the transition of moving in, through, and out of their collegiate athletic identity?

Looking at old pictures, I envy my life at that time. My body was the best it had been. I was so strong but so lean. Man, what I would give to be in that kind of shape again! We had so much fun, always together; those girls were my sisters. They replaced my family during this time. They understood all that I was going through. I couldn’t turn to my friends who didn’t play because they didn’t get why I stressed over a lost game, or why I could not hang out on the weekend. These girls were my confidants. I miss the camaraderie, the late nights on the road, staying up to recap what had happened during the day. I miss the long practices and then cooking dinner together afterwards. I miss waking up early in the morning and
knowing that there were 20 other girls dragging to get to the weight room. Now those times are just memories. A thing of the past that is well documented in old pictures.

The previous section offered a comprehensive literature review of background on the National Collegiate Athletic Association, recounted previous research on the topic and focused attention on certain aspects of the former athlete experience. It also explored concepts of identity including identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and scholarship that focuses on retirement from NCAA sports. However scholarly research can only scratch the surface of the lived experiences of female athletes. It is important to listen to the stories of athletes who have endured this transition post-athletics. By utilizing ethnography and reflexivity, not only will the participants be able to express themselves, a rarity for athletes who often have their weekly scheduled mapped out for them, my perspectives on this phenomenon will be integrated as I am not just a researcher, but also an ex-athlete. To better exemplify the process of identity foreclosure and the ways it constrains self-understanding and exploration, the narratives of my experience playing collegiate softball will be woven throughout this study. The methods section that follows explains this process in more depth.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Preparing for my first interview, I am nervous. I had been interviewed numerous times by reporters and sports journalists, but it was always about a specific game or what was happening in our season. Being on the other side of the interviewing process with not only my ex-teammates but my close friends is much different. I look down at my hand to see it nervously in my mouth. Biting my fingernails is such a bad habit and not very professional. From my mouth, my hand moves to the list of interview questions that sits before me. These questions are nothing like I had been asked before. I know I never wanted to let anyone know that I was struggling with not being an athlete, but now I am asking them to express their feelings about this very subject. As I continue to bite my nails I see Mary arriving. I take a deep breath and prepare for my first interview.

This study is designed to investigate the communicative practices of athletic identity in elite intercollegiate athletes after they have retired from their sport by using ethnography, reflexivity, fieldnotes, and interviews. By incorporating these various research tools I created a comprehensive view of this private communication and how it is expressed outwardly. First, I will describe the research methodology of ethnography used by explaining reflexivity and the process I used when taking field notes. Next, I give details about the interviews I conducted. And lastly, I describe the demographics of my interviewees who participated in the study.

ETHNOGRAPHY

To explore how athletes resonate with their identity even when they no longer are considered an athlete. I have chosen to use ethnography because it “gives voice to people in their own local context, typically relying on verbatim quotations and giving ‘thick’ description of events” (Fetterman, 2009, p.1). The term “ethnography” can be broken up into two roots: “ethno meaning people and, -graphy meaning describing” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 16). Ethnographers attempt to describe and interpret observed (communication)
relationships in a particular cultural setting. By using ethnography, my task as a researcher was to not only collect accurate information from the insider’s perspective, but also connect and make sense of all of the data from a communicative perspective (Fetterman, 2009). As I have recently been a part of the NCAA collegiate culture by playing Division 1 softball at San Diego State University my role as a researcher also allowed me to be reflexive with my own experiences. It allowed for a unique blend of traditional ethnography and autoethnographic sentiments.

To be reflexive means to turn back on ourselves the lens through which we are interpreting the world. It involves a writer’s scrutiny of ‘what I know’ and ‘how I know it’ (Goodall, 2000). Reflexivity asks researchers "to explore the ways in which their involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research." (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228). Personal reflexivity involves the reflection on personal values, beliefs, social identities, and experience and how they have shaped the research, as well as how the research may have affected, and possibly changed the researcher (Willig, 2001). A researcher is unable to be separate or outside of their subject matter (Goodall, 2000). In my paper, I incorporate my voice, thoughts, feelings, and questions with my observations.

These musings can be found in my field notebook, where field notes, or the recording of verbal and nonverbal exchanges between the people in my study, the notes on the nonverbal performances, and array of practices occur in the setting (Goodall, 2000). Throughout the process of interviewing, I took 16 hand-written pages of field notes before and after my interviews which in turn became 7 double-spaced type-written pages in addition to the interview transcriptions detailed below. As “reflexivity pushes for the researcher to gain an awareness of their contribution to the structure of meanings during the research process” (Willig, 2001, p. 10). I incorporated what I heard, wondered about, and observed during my interviews as well as kept a diary of my personal thoughts. Through field notes, taken before and after interviews, I reflected on my observations during the interviews. My participants sparked thoughts and flashbacks of memories that allowed me to relay those into my field notebook. Often I would carry my field notebook with me so I had the opportunity to transcribe the memories that I would remember. Some of my field notes were like diary entries. “Diaries are typically an outlet for turbulent emotions, doubts and private prejudices”
which can be kept together between the observer and participants in the study” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2010, p. 167). This enables the reader to “get inside my head” at certain moments and gain insight to my struggles and feelings about this topic as I am experiencing it as well. I kept a notebook with me, for the times that I reminisced on past moments. There are no field notes cited in the results section. Instead my field notes were transformed into narratives and memories from my experiences as a player and post athletics. My field notes helped to inform the interview questions as well as affirm what I discovered within them. The narratives provide insight into my personal experiences.

**INTERVIEWS**

In addition to my personal journaling, I conducted interviews with each of my subjects in various apartments and coffee shops. Semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions were used to elicit stories of the participant’s personal experiences (See Appendix A). I allowed my participants to have the chance to expressed their experiences however they wanted. Survey interviews would only allow their answers to be channeled in certain directions because it would allow participants to choose certain answers without the opportunity to elaborate on their answers, qualitative interviews enable the interviewee the power to guide the interview. This makes them a partner in the interview instead of an object of research (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The research questions were created after analyzing the research on athletic identity and identity foreclosure. A portion of the questions were included in order to understand the players background in the sport and to gain further knowledge of the impact of pre-collegiate competition on their self-identification. Another grouping of questions was intended to discover what their experience was like while playing at San Diego State University and the last questions were created to gain insight into the struggles they had when transitioning out of college athletics. I interviewed 9 female participants about their experiences, thoughts, issues and feelings about no longer playing softball. Originally, I planned to interview 12 of my former teammates, but was unable to set up interviews with three due to scheduling issues and distance. By using open-ended questions rather than a more structured objective interview, I was able to safeguard against them providing what they thought were responses I wanted to hear. In the results, I examine the interviewee’s and my own feelings, thoughts, and emotions that were
extracted in the interviews (Ellis & Berger, 2002). Excerpts from the interviews are weaved together with personal stories. The names in the results are all pseudonyms of the contributing players. I removed the names the players who contributed their feelings and experiences in order to honor their openness with such sensitive material. All the interviews were conducted one-on-one. The average interview took 24 minutes with the shortest being 17 minutes and the longest 38 minutes. When transcribed, the double-spaced typed interviews accumulated 34 pages.

After transcribing the interviews, the transcripts were read and reread in order to create groupings of common themes. The initial themes consisted of feelings and emotions. They were organized under athletic identity, identity foreclosure theory and transitional theory. After concluding that all of these “themes” could be grouped under all of the transitional theory, I was able to further separate them into the different phases of transitional theory. This allowed for me to generate the organization of my results section. My themes were described in the native language of my participants and were inserted into the moving in, moving through, and moving out phases of Schlossberg’s transitional theory. Table 1 illustrates the creation and organization of my themes. I chose the themes that were expressed during the phases of my participant’s collegiate experience. These particular themes take on different meanings during the different transitional phases. Each of the women explained their transition in through and out of college softball at San Diego State University.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample of athlete participants was comprised of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I softball players from the same university. Each of the participants who I interviewed were softball players who participated for at least 2 years at San Diego State University. They averaged 15 years of softball experience, the least amount of participation was 13 years and the longest was 20. These participants no longer played a Division I sport at any academic institution. Another recruitment guideline was that participants must have had at least 5 months of not participating as an intercollegiate athlete. A total of 9 participants were utilized in my study. The youngest participant was 22 years old and the oldest was 27, with the average age of 24. Participants were interviewed at various
Table 1. Theme Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transitional Phase</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moving In:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification Through Recruiting</td>
<td>Losing My Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What Happens Next?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moving Through:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure and Performance</td>
<td>Family, Friends, Coaches and Teachers Influence Me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My Schedule Keeps Me Busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Of Course I’m A Softball Player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moving Out: The End of a Lifestyle</strong></td>
<td>What Happens Next?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No One There To Help Me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Losing My Identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

times and locations that were agreed upon by the researcher and participant. Prior to being interviewed, each participant read and signed a consent form in order to participate in the study (See Appendix B). The sport of softball is currently one of twelve female athletic teams at San Diego State University.

Once I had completed and compiled my interviews and field notes, I read and reviewed them multiple times in order to distinguish any common patterns among the participants. Through my review I discovered there were multiple ways in which my participants talked about their post-athletic experience. These included feeling a lack of guidance, a fear of the unknown, feelings of loss and confusion, being a “has-been”, feeling stuck and an intense transformation. After I identified these emergent themes, I began to group themes that overlapped one another and combined them if necessary. As I continued the process I began chunking the data I received according to each theme. I also expanded on my own narrative as a collegiate athlete as these themes prompted me to remember certain experiences and feelings.
From a total of 9 preliminary categories, I was able to combine the raw data themes into a few overarching themes. Eventually 6 major themes emerged and formed the basis of my results section. I utilized the native language of participants to develop the themes: (a) “losing my identity,” (b) “of course I’m a softball player,” (c) “family, friends and coaches influence me,” (d) “my schedule keeps me busy,” (e) “no one there to help me,” and (f) “what happens next.” These themes, intertwined with my own narrative illustrate that female elite athletes struggle with losing their athletic identity that has been engrained in them from outside influences. Below I explore these themes in depth in my results section whereby, using ethnography as my methodology, I was able to create a study that would express all of the various emotions that were felt by my participants.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

In the previous sections I have discussed the issue of loss of identity that is faced by many athletes when they retire from their sport. This problem is a part of collegiate athletics and affects both male and female athletes. I discussed major theories such as identity theory, athletic identity, gender identity and identity foreclosure to frame my study. By utilizing ethnography, I give voice to the struggles of female softball players who have transitioned out of collegiate athletics. When analyzing my field notes and interview transcripts, the following themes emerged as common patterns in communication about identity and the transition out of collegiate athletics: (a) “losing my identity,” (b) “of course I’m a softball player,” (c) “family, friends and coaches influence me,” (d) “my schedule keeps me busy,” (e) “no one there to help me,” and (f) “what happens next.” In the following section, I examine how female players and outside influences such as parents, peers, coaches, and teachers co-construct athletic identity from the recruiting process. I also explore how this identity is maintained in the daily experiences as a collegiate athlete. Lastly, I look at their transition out of athletics when they retire from their sport due to the end of eligibility. I wanted to embody the journey through the women’s collegiate softball experience. The results section is organized by the three transitional phases of Schlossberg’s theory. This chronological organization allows certain aspects of communication to be highlighted as it occurs throughout. All four themes are present, but a couple show up in multiple transitional phases. I am able to explicitly explain them differently within the different phases.

The results of this study will suggest a better understanding of the distinctive attributes that lead to a strong athletic identity and subsequently identity foreclosure. By understanding the factors that go into having a strong athletic identity, a framework will be provided for better meeting the needs of college athletes in a preventive manner (Williams, 2008).
MOVING IN: IDENTIFICATION THROUGH RECRUITING

There is an intense recruiting process for potential collegiate athletes. This is a more prominent experience for male athletes but female basketball and softball players also experience a courting relationship with different coaching staffs because they participate in the most visible female sports. There are numerous books and websites centered on how to get recruited for athletics. In one such article, the author writes “Teenagers should consider creating their own Web site to tout their athletic abilities. On the site, a student athlete could include a sports bio, coach recommendations, upcoming tournament appearances, and video clips of his or her performance” (O’Shaughnessy, 2009). Not only are coaches putting pressure on young athletes by looking at prospects as young as 14 years old, but parents also encourage their children to play on multiple teams to get exposure for athletic scholarships. For example, a New York Times article uses imagery to explain receiving a sports scholarship as the Holy Grail, with parents pushing the use of weekends and vacation time to go to tournaments and specialty camps (Pennington, 2008, p.1). In the moving-in phase the women experience a fear of the unknown because of the change of a new environment that comes with starting a new school. They also experience a loss of identity, but also develop a new identity as a college softball player.

Losing My Identity: I Guess I’ll Be an Aztec

As Danica (25), a five-year starting infielder/outfielder whose eligibility was extended due to injury explains, the process starts from the early teen years:

When I was 15 and 16, my ASA [club teams] traveled a lot to tournaments out of the state so we could be sure to go to tournaments where the most college scouts would be. I was getting “looked at” by multiple schools, but a lot of them were on the east coast. One day, driving home to Arizona after one of these weekends, my family drove through San Diego. San Diego State is right off the I-8 freeway and we decided to tour the school on our own and introduce ourselves to the coach. I fell in love with the school and the coaching staff. I gave them some of my contact information since I had not seen them at any of my recent tournaments. Soon after, I saw head coach Kathy Van Wyk at a tournament my team was at. Shortly after that, I received a letter from SDSU expressing interest. Eventually, we set up a recruiting trip. After my recruiting trip, within hours of leaving San Diego, I cancelled all of my other visits I had set up. I knew I wanted to be an Aztec (Danica, interview transcript, January 26, 2011).
Another example comes from Mary (23), a five-year starting infielder whose eligibility was extended due to injury. She offers insight into the constant attention that she was given from different coaches:

I was recruited through travel ball softball [highly competitive club teams that participate in tournaments around the state in order to gain college exposure] and going to exposure tournaments with college scouts there. I always was getting mail and calls from different coaches. You knew who was interested in you because they always had someone at your games, and your coaches would let you know that a scout from so and so school would be at the tournament or game that day. That’s a lot of pressure to put on a 16-year-old. I mean, making decisions on the trajectory of my next 6 years (Mary, interview transcript, January 21, 2011).

I was not offered a scholarship coming into my freshman year. I walked on to the team, which meant that although there were no scholarships available, and I was invited to be a member of the team. I had played this female version of baseball for 12 years already. There was no chance that I was not going to have softball not be a part of my life when I went to college. I did everything I could to get my name out to the coaches. My teams played at the college exposure tournaments, where I would see the different representatives from their schools in the stands. I made a skills video to send out to coaches. It had clips of me playing defense, and included my coaches talking about my talents as a player. I toured the campus at SDSU and fell in love… I knew that this was where I wanted to be. After many back and forth emails between the coaching staff we finally set a date to meet up. I was so excited to meet them in person and really talk about my future at SDSU.

They took me on a tour of the athletic facility; I saw the softball complex and even met Tony Gwynn. They explained that they had been impressed with my video and transcripts and were excited that I was interested in SDSU. The coaching staff expressed how they were interested in me becoming an Aztec softball player but they didn’t have any more scholarships to give out. Despite the lack of money, they painted a picture of me being a part of this up-and-coming team. Leaving San Diego, I felt on top of the world, I was going to do whatever it took to be there. I remember getting the email from one of the assistant coaches a couple weeks later inviting me to meet the team to see if it would be the right fit. Making it to college softball felt as if I had made it to the “big-leagues.” I was where I once dreamed of being - playing at an NCAA Division I institution. Softball was always supposed to be a part of my life. And this was the start of something bigger than myself. I never imagined what it would be like when the ride ended.
Similar to my experience, Stacy (22), a four-year pinch runner and outfielder, walked on to the softball team although she went through a try-out. She explains:

As a freshman, I decided to walk on and tryout for the softball team. I really had nothing to lose so I went out and gave it my all. Out of 13 girls I was 1 of 2 that were kept for the 2006-2007 team, and I played all four years (Stacy, interview transcript, February 2, 2011).

Most of my participants were recruited to play at SDSU. They expressed that recruiting process is similar to dating a school. As Eliana (23), a four year starting catcher puts it,

Yea, they took me out to dinner, the girls took me out to parties, and they were all really excited for me to be a part of their team. I could count on always getting a call from coach every Tuesday night to hear about how my games went the last weekend (Eliana, interview transcript, January 28, 2011).

In an article that featured answers to recruiting questions from the football recruiting coordinator at Utah State, T.J. Woods explains, “Recruiting is like dating… You are going to form a relationship with this person that is very important to both of you…This involves trust…Gaining trust, in my opinion, is the number one priority while recruiting” (NCSA Sports, 2010).

The recruiting trip is the culmination of the hard work put in by both the prospective player and the coach. The recruiting trip is when there will be a verbal agreement on being committed to accepting a place on the team. As Briana (27), a four-year starting outfielder shares,

I was recruited through my travel ball team to play for SDSU. SDSU was the first school I took a recruiting trip to and I had such a great time. They took me out to a fancy dinner and we went to a football game, I signed the night I got home from my trip (Briana, interview transcript, February 3, 2011).

As the women explain their experiences being recruited and the preparation they went through in order to get recruited they all speak of a significant amount of communication between the prospective players and the coaches. The recruiting trip starts the transition into not just being a softball player but also a San Diego State softball player. It solidifies the player’s identification. As the women commented, they were wined and dined and made to feel a part of the organization even before they had signed any paperwork. It is the start of their experience at the collegiate level, and it also set precedence on the lifestyle that they would have once there. The recruiting trip is a major part of the moving in phase of
transitioning into collegiate athletics. Recruits only get a taste of what is to come but are not aware of the responsibilities that will come next.

**What Happens Next?**

With creating an athletic identity, the courting process of recruitment transfers the player’s identity to resonate as a member of the collegiate athletic team. Coaches build a relationship with prospective recruits in order to heighten their identity as a softball player. Guerrero et al. (2007) define this as a relationship frame of identification, in which a person defines themselves by the relationships they have with others. The establishment of this frame is important to coaches because doing so creates a sense of team unity that contributes to overall team success. The female athletes above mentioned connecting with the coaches, other players, and being taken to dinner and parties.

In order to understand how athletes develop a foreclosed identity during the collegiate level of athletics, it is crucial to understand their recruiting experience. This experience corresponds to the moving-in phase of Schlossberg’s transitional theory which says that moving-in is the process of leaving one known circumstance behind and entering into a new one. Along with choosing a new school, moving away from home, and the adjustment of playing their sport under a new coaching style, there are also the added responsibilities entailed with being a collegiate athlete. Mary shared, “Coach promised my mom that everything would be taken care of for me. You know my mom is super overprotective. Coach said that not only would they be there to help but also the other girls on the team” (Mary, interview transcript, January, 21, 2011). Essentially coaches are courting young players, and communicating what their experience will be like with them. Parents are being reassured that their children will be taken care of and looked after. The women also lose their identity as a child. Now with the added responsibility of being on their own, they are shifting from their identity as a dependent girl to an independent woman. Going to college is a major milestone for young adults because of this very shift. With women coming in as the best players of their team to not knowing where they stand on a new team, there is also a major shift as well in how they think of themselves as a player.

The recruiting process contains the major communicative shift of identity. Coaches, parents and players not only make verbal but contractual agreements on a committed identity.
They commit to the identity of a San Diego State softball player for the next few years of their lives. Once the softball players transitioned into collegiate athletics, they move from thinking about themselves as just softball players to considering themselves as San Diego State softball players. For example with Mary adding the “college player” to her identity brought a feeling of exclusivity. According to the NCAA, only 2 percent of high school athletes, roughly 130,000 kids, score a full or partial scholarship. The female athletes are also moving from home for the first time into a new environment, where they are not sure of what will come in the everyday lives. From school schedules, new people, and the shift in the intensity of the competition all of the women communicated a fear of the unknown when they move into the college environment. Not only are the women now self-identifying as collegiate softball players, the people around them are also reinforcing that identity. This transition into collegiate softball exemplifies Schlossberg’s moving in phase of transitional theory. Not only are the women dealing with the all of changes that come with their newfound experience, but they also go through losing their old identity and figuring out what happens next. With the low odds of transitioning into collegiate athletics, identifying oneself as a collegiate athlete is something that is often communicated to others which will be described in the next section.

**MOVING THROUGH: PRESSURE AND PERFORMANCE**

The former athletes that I interviewed all highly identified with being an athlete before any other characteristic. While in college, external forces such as parents, coaches, teachers, and friends all communicated to them to embracing their identity as a softball player. This emphasis on the identity enhances the strength of their foreclosed identity. The women have a sense of that is to happen while they move through their years as a player. They are familiar with their schedules and the expectations that are demanded on a daily basis. Transitional theory describes this as the moving through phase, and during this phase the players athletic identity is now reinforced and encouraged through the increase of obligated time to their sport. This stage of transitional theory is important to keep in mind as the women I interviewed explain how and why they consider themselves as athletes before anything else.
Family, Friends, Coaches and Teachers
Influence Me

One of the themes that arose in this section of transitional theory was how much the people that surrounded the athletes influenced their self-identity. Kelsey (23), a three-year outfielder and pinch runner explains,

> When I think of myself, I most identify with playing sports and being an athlete. It’s what I have done my whole life. But I don’t want to say that a sport is my whole life, you know, because it’s not… It has been a big part in who I have grown up to become (Kelsey, interview transcript, January, 23, 2011).

Similarly Eliana states, “I definitely identify myself as being an athlete. My entire life has always revolved around softball, so people see me as the “good” softball player” (Eliana, interview transcript, January 28, 2011). As Miller (2009) clarifies, “The relationship between behavior and identity is circular” (p. 71). As Briana was the oldest participant at 27, she had played softball at SDSU from 2002-2006, the way she had identified herself was different than the other participants because of one crucial motivation. “Until I became a mother 2 months ago, I most closely related to being an athlete. I wanted to play sports, talk about sports and watch sports as much as I could…. Yeah, I was that girl” (Briana, interview transcript, February, 3, 2011). But regardless of age, each of the above responses illustrates a slow recognition of a singular identity: that of athlete. Clearly, these women communicatively frame their participation in sports as occurring because they are identified as athletes, and they are known to be an elite athlete because they play sports competitively. This may seem backwards, as participation in a sport obviously occurs first, forming the foundation for these women to identify as athletes. However, reiterative identification seems to emerge when Kelsey and Eliana explain that, since their lives have always revolved around softball, they naturally think of themselves as softball players. This illustrates the ways in which external communication between the athletes and others, slowly leads to a foreclosing or narrowing of other options for thinking about one’s self.

So I made it. There is a sense of pride you feel being a collegiate athlete. You are easily identifiable, especially with the attire that is provided for you from the athletic department. Naturally, you walk around campus in Nike gear from head to toe with the school’s emblem embossed all over it. There is a sense of swagger when you walk around campus, feeling unique, special and that you belong. You feel like you are a part of the
institution; that you helped to create the notoriety. I was always so proud to mention that I
was a softball player. It wasn’t like people didn’t know but I always reminded them, “Oh
yeah, I play softball at SDSU.” That’s how I always introduced myself. Somehow in every
conversation I had, no matter who it was with, my identity of being a collegiate athlete
always came up. It was my go-to subject, my comfort blanket, it was me.

“Where do you go to school?” Someone would casually ask.

“SDSU. Yeah I play softball there,” I always responded, with a tenor of pride in my
voice. Eliana similarly experienced the frequent interjections about softball in her
conversations with others: “Any conversation that I’d have with someone, other than the last
year, always mentioned me playing the sport” (Eliana, interview transcript, January 28,
2011).

Most of an athlete’s time is spent with their coaching staff and teammates. This not
only creates a unified identity, but it also reinforces a strong athletic identity. Scholars Adler
and Adler (1987) proposed that college athletes engulf themselves in their role which further
isolates themselves from other non-athletes. They comment that collegiate athletes are
structurally, socially and academically isolated from other students both in and out of the
classroom settings. Briana comments:

We would have conditioning at 7am Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Those
workouts were so hard too. We would finish our workouts in the weight room
with enough time to get to our 9am classes. I know I struggled to stay awake in
my classes because I was so exhausted from the workout before. We would either
have class or be in study hall until about 1:30. From 2 or 3 in the afternoon we
would have practice until around 5, and then we would finish our day with the rest
of our other classes or more study hall. Tuesdays and Thursdays we would just
have practice from 2-5pm along with our classes, which in turn would be a light
day for us. If we had away games we would be traveling Thursday through
Sunday and sometimes it would even run into Monday (Briana, interview
transcript, February 3, 2011).

As the journey through their collegiate athletic career moves into the competition and daily
requirements, the participants I interviewed discovered that getting recruited was not the
biggest challenge. For example, Adler and Adler (1987) observed that on many campuses
athletes eat, live, study, practice, and travel together. They also have isolated workout
facilities study facilities, and tutors, from the rest of the college population. When looking at
the exclusivity and the role involvement of athletes, Barber, Eccles, and Stone (2001) stated:

“Together, peer group membership and activity involvement are linked to identity
exploration and to a sense of belonging to a particular type of peer group and having a particular activity-based persona” (p. 431). While in this phase, the women are creating and maintaining their new identities. My participants’ family, friends, and coaches have a significant influence on their identity and how it is communicated externally to them. Because they belong to this particular group, the women are identified as a whole entity instead of individuals. This is the most significant difference that makes the moving through phase unlike the other two phases. The women are not worried about changes in their life, but they are solidifying their identity in this phase. As collegiate athletes have a unique experience that is different than any other college students, they are able to relate with one another on their distinctive lifestyle and problems. I thought about my daily experience that I went through when I was playing. All of my participants recounted a similar situation.

**My Schedule Keeps Me Busy**

I don’t think people truly understand what goes into being a college athlete. I think people see the glitz and the glamour and choose to see only the positive aspects of our experience. Yes, we do get to travel, play on television, and receive free clothing. People are quick to overlook the sweat, the pain and the time that is put into being a part of a Division I program. Not only do we take a full load of classes that we are expected to do well in, but we don’t have the opportunity to have most of the normal college experiences.

I wasn’t just a student like everyone else, I was a student-athlete, and that’s how I identified myself. I was different because of my talent. My talent as an athlete defined me, and I wanted to be defined by it. It went a lot deeper than the clothes and the newspaper clippings; being an athlete was embedded into me. The adults in my life made sure that I was fully focused on my athletics. In order to keep us on such a set schedule, things are extremely structured. We are told where to be at what time, what we can eat, and what we can and cannot do.

Because of softball I missed a lot of class. Some teachers would hate the fact that you were an athlete because you were missing so much of their classes. Others would be really cool and would be understanding of the reasons why you were gone. You could definitely figure out who the good teachers would be. In fact, our academic advisors who scheduled our classes made sure that we were taking classes from the professors who were fans of athletics.
These professors would use you as examples in class, would know your stats from the weekend before, or would want to talk about how the team was doing and who was next on our schedule. I can remember the first team meeting we had. We were on the third floor of the athletic center in one of the conference room. We all sat around a table with stacks of papers in front of us. Signature after signature on more than 40 pages giving permission to the NCAA to use our images, to not bet on sports, looking back now I was signing my life away. At the end of the meeting, our coach handed out yet another page, but this one was different -- it was our weekly schedule (Figure 1).

The conversation continued: “You need to understand you will be missing class. This is what I expect from you on a daily basis,” she stated, looking down at us over her black rimmed glasses. “Late is on time so I expect you to be at least 5 minutes early to practice, weights and meetings.”

In the New York Times article by Bill Pennington (2008), his accounts of the demands on athletes are similar to the personal accounts of my interview participants. He states:

There are 6 a.m. weight-lifting sessions, exhausting practices, team meetings, study halls and long trips to games. Their varsity commitments often limit the courses they can take. Athletes also share a frustrating feeling of estrangement from the rest of the student body, which views them as the privileged ones (p. 1).

The women I interviewed were surrounded by their teammates and other athletes. In social situations they were still with the same people. In short external communication from teammates enforces the foreclosure of athletic identity. In social situations they were still with the same people. Danica states about her experience at SDSU,

The average week in the life of a softball player can be compared to a full time job. Our schedule depended if we were in season or out of season. During the season with our travel schedule we were even busier (Danica, interview transcript, January 26, 2011).

Not only do athletics affect the ways that other students look at a student-athlete, but teachers also perceive athletes in a different way. Baucom and Lantz (2001) comment that faculty automatically assume that collegiate athletes are only in attendance at the university based on their athletic prowess versus their merits in academics. Even the smartest student athletes must face this “dumb jock” perception. It is easy to fall into that category because no one expects you as an athlete to be smart and take classes seriously. Because of this schedule and the extensive time commitments, my participants had a far removed experience from their
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**Figure 1.** Weekly softball schedule.

peers. By missing classes, traveling and also garnering media attention for their talents, the
women did not have time to think or explore any other activities that influence self-
identification. The constant “athletic environment” that consists of fields, gyms, training
rooms, study halls, and locker rooms directly influences how foreclosed their identities were
of being a college athlete.
Of Course I am a Softball Player

External communicative influence does not necessarily mean direct communication when it comes to athletes. External communication for softball players included their environment, their social groups, and constant busy schedule. Despite the overall perspectives that outsider’s influence has on collegiate athletes and the countless hours committed to their sport, the women that I interviewed expressed feeling an intense pressure that was always placed on performance. Collegiate athletes are some of the most visual students on campus. Their performance is subject to public critique and assessment. Kelsey explains how she wishes she had more fun and embraced the experience more when she comments:

Looking back, I took softball so seriously. Like it felt as if it was the end of the world if I made a mistake. Now that it is over, it is so much easier to put things into perspective. If I could give myself advice, I’d have more fun. I wish someone would have told me that it doesn’t matter. People don’t remember that missed play, or not getting a hit in a clutch situation. Our coaches just made us feel that way (Kelsey, interview transcript, January 23, 2011).

Being a success is all that matters to an athlete. With such emphasis put on winning and being the best, many times players do not want to let their teammates, coaches and parents down. Being an athlete is what they are known for, and if they did not succeed at something that they put all their time and effort into they would let all the people who believed in them down. After hearing what Kelsey said about having more fun, various scenarios popped into my head. Scenes like film clippings passed by…

Failed Execution: One. Two. Three taps. That’s a sacrifice bunt. My eyes go back and forth from coach to the batter. They are connected with the understanding. There is a runner on first for us, no outs. All she has to do is move the runner to second. The pitch leaves the hand of the pitcher. The bright green orb spins its way and hits the bat. It twirls up and levitates in the air for a few moments too long. It becomes enveloped in a black leather glove. Shit! I think and look to coach from my spot in the dugout. Her hand presses to her forehead as she looks down at the dirt, and she turns her back to her player. I bet she’s saying shit too.

Saturday Night Lights: *I always felt pressure from my parents being at the games. I just want them to feel proud of me... to be proud of who I have become. Since softball has become an even bigger part of my life I feel the pressure to excel... for them.*
Peering up into the stands full of many different faces, I see my parents donning their Aztec gear so proudly. We heard earlier that it was a sell-out, standing room only. My dad’s round and aging face is under his bright red baseball cap. His eyebrows and mustache are turning grey, and from my position on the field, I can see the deep wrinkles that probably formed from sitting in stands just like these in my earlier years of play. My mother’s wavy hair flows around her face, tousled from the cool evening air. She wears an old jersey of mine, the red one with the gold and black lettering. It’s funny how you can instantly spot the ones you love in the sea of faces.

Playing in front of all those people is totally intimidating. It’s funny how the game that I have played for so many years has changed over the years. It has become so much more important to me, because I live it now. It’s not a recreational thing, it’s an avenue that has gotten me to school, and it has become a part of who I am at the core.

Under the bright lights that stand 50 feet above us to illuminate the field; I see the small brown bats flying around in the night sky. The light catches the shape of their body, and I bet they have the best view in the house. The air is crisp and cold, but I am hot from the warm-up and the black under armor sleeves that cover my arms. I am shrouded in my red jersey and white pants, and it is dirty already. I play with the soil beneath my feet and fiddle with my glove as my heart beats faster.

I play for my teammates because they are just like me. They know all of the trials and tribulations that I have gone through because they have been there with me. They aren’t just teammates; they have become my best friends.

The echoing voices of 21 girls are heard in this cheer. These girls who wrap arms around each other before every game, we unite, and we become one. As a component of this well-oiled machine, we don the red and the black, are taught to bleed Aztec blood and to be a warrior on and off the field. Pressure is what we are all fighting. We try to figure out how to play to the best of our abilities, to make everyone proud, to feel good. Everyone is watching you. Don’t mess up. Be the best, be the fastest.

The above passages illuminate the external communicative practices that enhance feelings of identification as an athlete. Coaches and athletic administrators explicitly and implicitly encourage this identification for the success of a team. They promote bonding, and spirit among team members with the idea that a strong sense of team identity increases rates
of success (Klausner & Hoch, 1997). We definitely bonded the most while we were on the road. Being confined to a hotel, a bus, or in an airport, you can’t help but get to know the people around you. We were isolated from our lives back in San Diego, and sometimes, even if our families came to watch us play, we couldn’t go off with them. We were always, constantly, with one another because when we came home from tournaments we would return to an apartment shared with teammates.

There are many factors that contribute to the foreclosed identities that athlete’s experience. For the women that I interviewed, the early experiences before college led to passion for the sport. In the moving-in phase coaches, parents and peers communicated to the players that they were athletes and should act accordingly. After entering the moving-through the recruiting process that led to furthering their careers in college, they were bombarded with a team and school identity. Their lives were engrossed with softball and an extracurricular activity into a 24-hour responsibility. Many of the women that I interviewed enjoyed their time as a student-athlete. As Eliana puts into words,

All in all, I loved my college softball experience. I made life-long friends, made it through some difficult physical battles with my torn ACL, and I think gained a lot of respect from people that I care about. It was easily the most difficult 4 years of my life but I cherish them still like no other (Eliana, interview transcript, January 28, 2011).

The experience of Eliana and others was extremely time-consuming and overwhelmingly inclusive; the span of time that the women participated in their sport trickled into many different avenues of their lives. Their sport was at home, on their spare time, and in the classroom. The constancy of their schedule, the demands, and their overt identity creates a solidified identity for these female athletes. There is no fear of change because they know exactly what is required of them. Having consistency relieves the fear of the unknown and reinforces their strong identity. The pressure of maintaining this identity is relayed from outside influences such as family, friends, coaches, peers and academic staff.

In the moving through phase, three themes emerged in this part of the transitional process. The first theme of “family, friends and support staff has a strong influence” was apparent when the women commented about the conversations they had with other people about their identity. The next theme of “the schedule always kept them busy” was explained when my participants spoke of how playing softball was just like having a full-time job outside and during school. The added pressure of maintaining such a schedule as well as
succeeding in competition really illuminated the last theme of “of course I am a softball player.” Ultimately the pressure that was put on them was all because of a game. Once eligibility is done however, players are no longer in the moving through phase of the Schlossberg (1981) transitional theory but have entered the most critical phase that pertains to this study. The moving-out phase of transitional theory will describe the imminent end to a lifestyle for athletes.

**MOVING OUT: THE END OF A LIFESTYLE**

There are numerous ways that an athletic career can end. For most college athletes their career ceases due to the end of their eligibility. A normal college athletic career lasts for four years. Sometimes it can be extended because of a “red-shirt” season due to injury or because the coaches feel it is most beneficial for a freshman due to lack of experience. All of the women that I interviewed experienced the end of eligibility to end their college career. Similarly to the moving-in phase, the women experience the “losing my identity” theme in conjunction with the themes of “what happens next”, “no one there to help me” and “everything just changed.” The end of their collegiate athletic careers eliminates the consistency of their lives. There was one distinct situation that separated a few of the women from each other. Besides the imminent end to their collegiate softball careers, three of the participants had a prematurely abrupt ending to their seasons due to injury. There are both positives and negatives to their unexpectedly early end. They were able to understand what life would be like without softball before the actual and true end of their softball career. However, they experienced a feeling of loss more intensely than the other women who just ended their softball careers because it was their senior year. Both identity foreclosure and retirement from intercollegiate athletics are important to look at during this section.

As Danica explains about her experience at San Diego State University:

My softball experience at SDSU was quite a lengthy one. After my freshman year, I tore my ACL and meniscus and was forced to “sit out” my entire 2nd season. Because of this decision, I was given another year of eligibility (typically athletes can play 4 years, since I sat one out I was allowed an extra 5th year). Sitting out my 2nd year in college has to have been one of the biggest challenges I have had in my entire life. Being a new college athlete, we all were the “all-stars” of our prior teams, and we were all confident and successful. Not only do you get a shot of reality when you have to actually compete for a position on the team. When I was recovering from my surgery, it was a long process to get back to my
original self. I was forced to practice with the team in early mornings and late nights, but I wasn’t allowed to travel with the team on out of town road trips or be able to “dress out” in uniform for home games. Even the little things like not having my name called before a game was a very hard pill to swallow. This year of my life was a time that I think I had done the most growing. I had completely changed my attitude, and was forced to take on a new perspective on my role in softball and even in life. I knew that it could end; I knew that it would end one day (Danica, interview transcript, January 26, 2011).

Another participant, Mary, explains the feelings she went through after getting a “taste” of what life was without softball:

You know, I actually had a taste of having softball taken away abruptly. I had a pretty significant identity crisis with not playing when I injured my back my junior season. I was unable to play for a whole year and thought I would never be able to play again. All of a sudden my role on the team was switched from being a leader, and a dominant contributor, to being simply a spectator. I had a very deep identity crisis because I had to accept the fact that I might not ever be able to play again. I was forced to think of other avenues where I could compete and succeed, which was a transition from my previous mentality of sports. I poured myself into academics and became very involved with my major. I got really passionate about international security, and the welfare of people all over the world became my passion. I was able to start to think of my goals and future outside of softball which I really hadn’t been encouraged to do before. This injury, although it was hard, taught me to look outside of the box instead of focusing on nothing but softball (Mary, interview transcript, January 21, 2011)

These individuals had a unique experience as their injuries removed them from their normal schedule and commitments as an athlete. A majority of the women I interviewed were not prepared, and had no idea of what their lives would be like post-college athletics. I can remember an experience that I had in the middle of my research with one of my ex-teammates. It was shocking to me that someone that seemed to have everything figured out, that had a dream softball career could harbor such intense feelings. As the theory of identity foreclosure explains, if an athlete has an exclusive athletic identity then their entire sense of self and self-worth is centered on being an athlete.

Consequently, when they are not able to participate in their sport due to retirement, they experience a drop in self-esteem and can even experience an identity crisis especially upon retirement since they have lost the only thing they have ever known (Symes, 2010). These particular experiences of going through a preemptive athletic retirement illuminate the
varied circumstances that come along with experiencing identity foreclosure. These women had a more gradual retirement out of their collegiate experience because they had a prior experience due to the injury. Due to their injury, the amount of fear, and lack of the unknown was diffused since they had already experienced it before. One of the common outcomes of their injury was they were forced to look beyond their sport while they were not able to participate. The women’s reactions to their injury contradicts what research proposes will occur. Suinn (1967) comments that athletes will adjust poorly because they go through a sequence of shock, denial, and anxiety. My interviewees no longer had a foreclosed identity but instead understood that softball was not the only activity that they should focus on. They were forced to communicate with people outside of their immediate social circle. Injury is common for athletes; with research claiming that there were over 203 million sports related injuries in 2002 (“Injury rates in sports,” 2003). Athletes can experience a premature transition from their sport which inevitably makes it an easier retirement process in the long run. As the women states, they were forced into considering other activities other than softball.

This early transition enabled them the opportunity to experience what the loss of sport will be like. It is a powerful experience because these women were abruptly removed from competition. Similarly to retirement due to injury, retirement because of exhaustion of eligibility does create psychological problems. In the next section, I explore the rest of the stories of the women who did not anticipate what would happen after they were done with their final season. They all experienced not knowing what was to come next after softball ended, a loss of identity, and an overall transformation from what their lives had been before. These themes differ from the previous sections especially the moving through phase. The women did not have to worry about any changes or uncertainty. Although the loss of identity theme appears in the moving in phase, there is a plan for what happens next for high school athletes moving into college. The first theme of “what happens next” exemplifies the lack of planning for athletes leaving college.

**What Happens Next?**

Within in the last year I have been experiencing the ups and downs of not participating in softball. I cannot tell you how amazing it felt to sleep in a few days in a row,
to go to class with real clothes on, and to actually have a weekend. After the initial excitement wore away, the chaos of everything being different settled in. After learning the term of what I was experiencing -- identity foreclosure-- I needed to know that I was not alone. I wanted to understand what caused these feelings and fears. Learning that social isolation, career immaturity, depression, and other psychological difficulties can develop from having to adjust to the retirement from sports. All of the things that I was experiencing were located in the research. I just did not understand why this was so prominent in athletes. What was causing such an abrupt loss of identity? My participants and I had maintained an athletic identity which was reinforced due to a group identity.

Coaches and athletic administrators explicitly and implicitly encourage this identification for the success of a team. They promote bonding, and spirit among team members with the idea that a strong sense of team identity increases rates of success (Klausner & Hoch, 1997). The saying, “there is no I in TEAM” was explicitly mentioned by coaches during my time as a San Diego State athlete. As one unit we were always punished together despite who messed up and recognition was rarely individualized. After analyzing the moving-out phase of the transitional theory, I realized that the athletic support staff emphasized and attempted to create a familial atmosphere which enhanced the feeling of “we.” Once an athlete’s eligibility was complete, there was no longer a “we” but alienation without the support and guidance that was once there. Through the lens of athletic identity foreclosure, this next section will give voice to the harsh feelings that surfaced for my participants and me after we retired from our college careers. The overarching theme of this last phase was there was a big unknown set before the women that I interviewed. They did not know what their daily lives would look like, who they would be interacting with frequently and how things would change for them. These are all aspects of the moving out phase that the women I interviewed were unsure of. Along with the other themes of “losing my identity” and “no one there to help me”, they frequently overlapped to create a theme of “everything just changed”. When deciphering these themes I remembered this particular instance when one of my teammates that had finished playing the year before I did came over to talk about how she was transitioning.

She sits in front of me with her eyes red. “I just, I feel stuck!” She starts to cry again. Her blonde hair is piled up on the top of her head in a bun. Outside of my apartment, the sky
is dark and the rain falls down hard. I think how appropriate it is for the scene. “I don’t want to be here anymore, I feel like San Diego isn’t what it was for me in college. I mean I think back and yea, it was a great opportunity but there was no time to think about life after college.” I think back to playing with her on the softball diamond. She was the player who always had her name in the newspaper articles; when we traveled, other teams knew her name. She was the poster child for San Diego State softball. Coach loved her, why? Because she was the All-American pitcher Christa Riley. She once dominated the sport and now, at age 24, she sits on my couch crying with mascara running down her face. “All we thought about was softball and school you know? We went to class, we went to practice. There was no time for anything else, and it was okay then, but now that it’s over I wish someone told us to think about what happened after. There was never time to think about what happens after, you know? Now I’m stuck at this job that I get no fulfillment from, and all of my friends live somewhere else. And I know I have you and Mary, but you know Mary just does her own thing, and you are busy with your stuff, I just feel so alone.” I can’t stop but think, “Wow, you are my thesis in a nutshell.”

No One There to Help Me

At this ending point of an athlete’s experience, they are feeling loneliness because they have been removed from their normal social group. After thinking of my experience with Christa, I wrote a poem to express the overall feelings my participants and I felt through the process of our college softball careers. Ellingson (2009) explains that crystallization joins multiple forms genres of representation such as poetry and narratives to build a rich account of a particular phenomenon. There were multiple ways that I wanted to express and interpret my own experiences. By utilizing more creative approaches like poetry, I am able to offer not only comprehensive interview excerpts but also a wide variety of creativity. We were coddled and provided for, we were promised security and a home away from home. Through our journey we learned to be a unit, to be an oiled machine in order to compete at the elite level. But once the clock struck midnight on our careers, we were kicked to the curb. This poem expresses the emotions that I felt after retiring from softball.

They Held My Hand

Guide me. Help me to understand
As the end of an athlete’s career comes to an abrupt halt, players experience a sense of loss (Suinn, 1967; Symes, 2010). Through my interviews, one of the themes that echoed within was a feeling of loss. As Danica explains,

It was very difficult to transition. It was very humbling to have the feeling of not being a part of a team anymore. I didn’t have a sense of belonging or a sense of responsibility to do anything. And I really miss the competition in general. I especially miss the feeling of being part of a 2nd family like how it was with my team. I have missed this so much recently that I started a recreational volleyball team and we play once a week (Danica, interview transcript, January 26, 2011).

Many of the women I interviewed longed for the sense of “family” that they felt being a part of a team. Kelsey agreed when she commented,

I guess the thing I miss the most about being part of a sport is the special friendships that were built. I live pretty far from my teammates now, so I don’t get to see them often. Then there are the adventures that we have had, the inside jokes we shared, and just being part of a group of girls who no matter what is always there for you (Kelsey, interview transcript, January 23, 2011).

Besides losing the friendships, the women also discovered newfound responsibilities that they never thought of before. Eliana shared with me,
Since I was on scholarship, all of my bills were paid for. Once that was taken away, I had to learn how to budget money, how to pay for bills, things that I should have learned before, but it was always taken care of for me (Eliana, interview transcript, January 28, 2011).

After listening to my former teammates explain their experiences I thought about what was being communicated to us from the coaching staff. I know that I realistically was not planning on playing competitively my whole life. Our coaches did always make it seem like that would be the plan. If not play, then there is coaching. The encouragement was always centered on softball and I do not remember there being conversations about my plans after college. They put blinders on me. There was never talk about the end, or about what happens after softball. They never said anything about it. Mary explained that it took time to realize that she was done playing when she shares,

It took me a week to actually figure out that it was over. Things wouldn’t be the same as before. When school started back again in the fall, I realized that I wouldn’t have the same schedule, I wouldn’t magically run into my teammates on campus like before. These girls were my friends and my confidants. I had to find new friends, because even though I hung out with the girls that were still on the team, it wasn’t the same. I didn’t know what was going on in their lives because I wasn’t around them as often. I felt old, like I didn’t belong in their circle anymore. This experience forced me to not have a safety net of friends like I did before (Mary, interview transcript, January 21, 2011).

As most of the women commented on their feelings of loss when it came to their relationships with their teammates and coaches, they also felt a sense of being stuck once their softball career ended. Eliana comments,

I didn’t really have any plans after college. Once I graduated, I decided to change career paths and become a nurse. Now, almost 2 years after ending my softball career, I’m just adjusting. I can honestly say that I went through a stage of depression last year. I was a graduate assistant for the team my first year out and it was one of the hardest things being around my old friends, and the competition all the time, but not being able to play. It was also hard to see two of my closest friends still on the team and continue to play. It’s a crazy feeling knowing that things move on regardless of you. Being such a significant part of the team in the years before, they didn’t need me anymore and that was tough to realize (Eliana, interview transcript, January 28, 2011).

Almost all of the former athletes who were interviewed expressed feelings of loss when their softball career ended. I can remember the last game that I played so clearly. It was the beginning of the end. It was exhilarating and devastating all in one day. I wish I could go back and do it differently. Maybe I would have prepared myself a bit better,
like taken a deep breath and enjoyed it. I wish I could go back even further. I wish someone would have told me that it would now be like this. I wish I someone would warn me to expect feeling that I would be lost searching for some way to be found. That I would feel stuck without it. I hate that it’s over now, I hate that I can’t go back. I hate that I am done. Mary clarified when she said,

> I feared the end of my softball career. I feared a time when I wasn’t known as a softball player. I feared losing it faster than I what I was ready to let go. This game has allotted me with so many opportunities, and it has helped me grow as a person. Through resistance and finally acceptance I’ve realized that I’ve been waiting for something that probably won’t come for me this year. I will always be an Aztec; I will always be a softball player. But I am also me. It’s time to get to know that person beyond the bat and glove. I’m just afraid of who I will discover without it” (Mary, interview transcript, January 21, 2011).

All of the women communicated that they felt a lack of guidance after leaving the softball program. They once were a part of a unit and now they are being removed although the unit still remains. While transitioning out of being a collegiate athlete, they not only still felt like they were a part of this group but they were not allowed to still interact like they used to. Without the direction that they were used to receiving from their coaches and support staff, during the moving out phase they did not know what was to come next in their journey. This lack of a plan also enhances the loss of identity since there is no known activity or object that will fill the place that softball was in their lives.

### Losing My Identity

Each of the participants in the study highly identified with being an athlete, and did not take the time to really think about the changes that would occur when they finished their athletic career. We never talked about the end of the season. It was kind of kept “hush-hush.” If anything was spoken about it was how senior day was going to be so exciting. As it drew closer, the younger girls started to get sadder; they expressed how greatly we would be missed and how they could not believe that the season was almost over. I remember reassuring them that everything would be okay and that of course we would hang out despite my exit from the team. Besides feeling stuck in the past, losing their identity, another theme that showed up after analyzing the interviews was the fear of the unknown. Many of the women I interviewed feared what was to come after the end of their softball careers. Briana stated it best when she shared,
I definitely did not feel prepared for life after softball. It was scary not having a plan for the rest of my life; all I had known was softball and school. I looked into playing with a team overseas so I could postpone having to grow up but it didn’t work out, and that was it for playing competitively (Briana, interview transcript, February 3, 2011).

As our conversations continued, there were comments about how the male athletes were being prepared for post college life even if it was for a transition into professional sports. Studies dealing with athletic identity and identity foreclosure in collegiate athletics have found that there is a lack of academic achievement and career planning by athletes (Chen et al., 2010). No one else encourages post athletic career planning since there are not many professional opportunities for softball players. Danica shared how she is not letting the unknown inhibit her perspective on her future,

It was very difficult to transition for me after college. It was very humbling to have the feeling of not being a part of a team anymore. I didn’t have a sense of belonging or a sense of responsibility to do anything (Danica, interview excerpt, January 26, 2011).

All of the women felt a sense of loss due to the lack of planning for the end of their athletic careers. Having a strong athletic identity is both crucial to the success of an athlete, but as noted it can also be a double edged sword and inhibit athletes when they end their careers. Identity foreclosure theory (Miller & Kerr, 2003) claims that individuals who overly identify with a self-concept do not consider other options. Overcommitting to an athletic identity creates difficulty when transitioning out of competition. The interview excerpts support the research on the negative aspects of identity foreclosure. Both the physical and mental demands of being a collegiate athlete as well as the restrictiveness of the athletic structure restricts them from exploring other roles and promotes identity foreclosure (Murphy, Pepitas, & Brewer, 1996). The research was extended because the ill feelings were not the end of their transition. Although there were negative reactions to the initial “moving-out” phase, circumstances did change and develop into a more healthy and positive situation.

One of the most refreshing themes that came out of the interviews was that there is a transformation of mentality and perspectives on their situation. Briana had the biggest transformation in lifestyle as since ending her softball career she entered the work force, got married and had a child. She shares:

It’s nice to reminisce about playing a college sport with people I meet but growing up and being an adult has been a fun ride, too. When I first stopped
playing it was a very tough transition to being a normal person. I didn’t know what to do with all my time off even though I was working 40 hours a week. Until I became a mother 2 months ago, I most closely related to being an athlete. It was everything that was me. I wanted to play sports, talk about sports and watch sports as much as I could. Now things have changed because I have a little one. I now see myself as a mother (Briana, interview transcript, February 3, 2011).

Briana has transitioned into a positive and healthy identity that has many facets, unlike her previous foreclosed athletic identity. She was one of two participants who became a mother, but many of the participants applied their talents in athletics to their best advantage in the workplace.

Although the former players longed for the times when they were competing, a couple of the women also expressed that the skills they learned in competition were able to help them outside of the sports arena, such as a new job. Kelsey shared that she was able to utilize the skills she developed during her highly competitive college athletic career.

I definitely think that playing a sport helped me understand a lot about working as team and with others, despite whether you like it or not. That’s what work is all about, dealing with a team of people to reach a common goal. Through softball I learned how to become self motivated and driven. I learned passion you know wanting something so bad and doing whatever I could through hard work for that something. All of those characteristics I have developed through my time playing softball. I am so grateful for those experiences and life lessons that I learned playing softball because I feel prepared to work in the real world (Kelsey, interview transcript, January 23, 2011).

Despite the painfully emotional transition through retirement from their sport, all of the former athletes maintained their involvement in sport, even if in new roles from their previous competitive ones. Briana explained that she has been able to play in a recreational league when she shares,

Although I miss playing, I wouldn’t change what I have now for anything. Here in Vegas, I work as a server in a sports bar and I’m also a substitute teacher. I’ve also found a way to play slow pitch softball when I can, so I can reminisce (Briana, interview transcript, February 3, 2011).

Unlike Briana I have been unable to transition into a less competitive avenue of softball. I have chosen to explore other activities instead of playing softball. Other players have had the rare opportunity to more forward competitively with softball. Mary still maintains an active softball lifestyle. She states,

After my final season, I finished an internship for my major, graduated and started to volunteer catch some of the weekly bullpens for the SDSU team. I also coach a
12 and under travel ball team, give private lessons, and head the softball department of a local batting cage. I just recently found out that I am going to play professional softball in Munich, Germany (Mary, interview transcript, January 21, 2011).

None of my participants had a textbook experience after their retirement. Each situation was unique; although there have been similarities, no one has had the exact same experience. Each of my participants all had difficulty with managing their loss of athletic identity. Research on identity foreclosure theory (Blann, 1985; Murphy et al., 1996) confirms that there are psychological issues when the end comes to that sense of self. My participants are in various stages of their moving-out phase (Schlossberg, 1984) yet, they each feel optimistic about their future. The “losing my identity” theme is noted in multiple phases of the collegiate softball experience. During this phase though, the women did not know what the next step would be for them once they completed playing softball. In the moving in phase where “losing my identity” also appeared, the women knew the next steps as they would be moving from playing a recreational sport into an elite position on a college team. These feelings of loss are communicated in numerous ways as well as for different reasons.

At this point in my life, I am still learning to navigate my transition out of athletics. I am embracing and exploring my newfound femininity as I no longer dress in sweatpants and t-shirts. Although I earned a college degree in four years, school was always the second priority. The coaches encouraged us to do study hall, but it was only to make sure that we were going to be eligible to play. I had such great and unique experiences while I was playing, but I am also really behind when it comes to my peers. They prepared themselves for life after college. No one prepared me for life after softball. I kind of feel like my world stopped but everyone else’s continued on. I do not have the qualifications that my peers that didn’t participate in athletics have. They were able to work jobs, take on internships and build resumes. I do not really know what qualifies me to be on the same level as them when competing for jobs. When I think about it, I am essentially 5 years behind everyone else. Life went on and it left me behind.

Athletes struggle with the loss of their role as an athlete, and piecing together a new identity during their retirement (Miller & Kerr, 2002). My participants voiced that they felt stuck in a player mentality. I learned that they longed for the community, family and friendship that were a huge part of their collegiate experience. Not only did they find that
their routines changed, but their relationships, roles and activities consequently did as well. Because of their foreclosed identities which were encouraged by coaches, parents, peers and support staff the women I interviewed did not think of the implications of the end of their career. Brown and Hartley (1998) asserted that student athletes who identify strongly with the athlete role may not explore other career, educational, and lifestyle options as a result of their extensive sports involvement. The research on identity foreclosure primarily explains the individuals’ identification with their role. The theory lacks the influence of outside authorities such as coaches and parents. The theory lacks the pressure of social influence that comes with being a collegiate athlete in the college environment.

Overall, this has been the most exciting experience of my life. Now that it is over I have a hard time trying to cope with the loss of it. I feel like a huge part of me is gone. Most people could interject that it is just a game, but to me, and now learning to my interviewees, it was so much more. After interviewing my fellow peers, I feel comfort in the fact that we all had the same feelings toward softball. The transition from participation in sport to not participating in sport lasts between six months to one year (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Within all of these transitional phases, time is what separates all of our experiences in through and out of athletics. I found that as time goes on my participants and I will also start the transitional process over again and move into a new adventure in life. A few of the women I interviewed and myself are all still within that time frame. After learning about the experiences of the participants such as Briana who have exceeded the time frame and have had success in their lives, it gives me solace that things will be okay in the future and the feelings that I am experiencing are common.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS/ IMPLICATIONS

I began this study to examine how Division I softball players athletic identity was communicated to them by their peers, coaches, and outside influences as well as how they communicated being an athlete through their transition out of collegiate athletics. I wanted to understand how the identification became internalized and deeply ingrained even before college and through their collegiate careers. Through my observations, interviews, and stories of my former teammates I discovered how they dealt with identity foreclosure and their feelings of loss of identity. Essentially, I was looking to discover how softball players who have transitioned out of NCAA Division I athletics communicate a foreclosed identity. After interviewing my participants certain themes emerged when asked to discuss their experience after retiring from a competitive collegiate athletic career. The themes included (a) “losing my identity,” (b) “of course I’m a softball player,” (c) “family, friends and coaches influence me,” (d) “my schedule keeps me busy,” (e) “no one there to help me,” and (f) “what happens next.”

In the next three sections, I will present my conclusions and interpretations, theoretical and practical implications, limitations and directions for future research, as I will reflect on the results of the study.

Nationally, on a typical week when an individual’s sport is in session, 82.1% of student-athletes report spending over 10 hours a week practicing their sport, and 40.2% report spending over 10 hours a week playing their sport (Jolly, 2008). These statistics do not take into consideration the numerous hours players spent together off the field. There are the bus rides, waits in airports, on planes, in restaurants, study hall, hotel rooms, and usually they live with one another. College athletes spend countless hours together, and that much time spent collectively helps to form bonds, friendships, realizations and a makeshift family. All of this time spent together can heighten the feelings of identification with not only being an athlete but as a whole. Since the sport had been present in all aspects of their lives since a young age, the female participants expressed a strong sense of identification with being an
athlete. As Briana stated, “… I mostly identified with being an athlete. I wanted to play sports talk about sports and watch sports as much as I could.” The term “athletic identity” is defined as the extent of importance and exclusivity that is attached having an athletic role that is both maintained by athletes and influenced by their environment (Cieslak, 2004). It is clear both from the research and the personal experiences from the participants, when athletes start playing a sport at a young age they develop an identity. From the many years of training and preparation, the females who were a part of my study agreed that they already had a strong sense of athletic identity before they participated in collegiate athletics.

**THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

One of the purposes of this study was to examine the transition out of college athletics and how the loss of identity was communicated. Brewer et al. (1993) found that “as college students mature and become exposed to a variety of activities and influences, their exclusive identification with the athlete role decreases” (p. 13). I found for most of my participants, the initial ending of their softball career also created a loss of self identity. Eliana stated about her transition, “Now, almost 2 years after ending my softball career, I’m just adjusting. I can honestly say that I went through a stage of depression last year” (Eliana, interview transcript, January, 28, 2011). Each of the participants in my study identified themselves as athletes, or former athletes. The problem for not only these select women, but many collegiate athletes, is the over identification of their role in athletics. Research on elite professional athletes by the International Olympic Committee share, “for many top athletes, athletic identity is central, as they dedicate 100% of their resources and time to the pursuit of their sporting goals” (n.d., p. 1). From their responses and experiences post-retirement, all of the women I interviewed initially experienced a loss of identity. Although all of the women had different stories, a certain theme arose from their interviews. The theme of feeling like a “has-been” was quite strong in many of my participants. In the softball community and on the college campus they always experienced notoriety for being an athlete. After their retirement, they no longer felt special. Eliana explains the feeling when all of her friends were still playing but she was not, “It was also hard to see two of my closest friends still on the team and continue to play. It’s a crazy feeling knowing that things move on regardless of
you. Being such a significant part of the team in the years before, they didn’t need me anymore and that was tough to realize” (Eliana, interview transcript, January 28, 2011).

Another theme of loss was communicated both internally and externally to others. Many of the women lost the sense of community and family. They explained that they spent a majority of their time with their teammates and coaches but after they finished playing they longed for the time that they had with their peers. Ultimately, the coaches who constantly experience players coming into the program and leaving, have an obligation to counsel their players on what happens after “the game ends.” One of the most unique participants was Briana. As the oldest, she had the most different lifestyle change than the other women. Briana was the only participant who had gotten married and had a child and therefore, was the only subject who had transitioned into the role of being a mother and wife. Both of these roles can be considered milestone events in a woman’s life. Her athletic identity took a backseat to her new roles.

All three of Schlossberg’s transitional phases were illustrated in this study. I wanted to emphasize how important time was to the transitioning process. The women communicated their athletic identity in different phases of their athletic career. What was interesting was that certain themes such as “I’m losing my identity” appeared in multiple phases like moving in and moving out. The moving-in phase was exemplified in the recruiting process of the women, the moving-through phase signified the experiences of communicating their athletic identity during college and the moving-out phase was revealed when the women transitioned out of their collegiate careers. The transitional theory was expanded because although the women in the study were moving-out of being an athlete they were also in the process of moving-into a new role. The theory should put more emphasis and elaborate on how constant the cycle of transitioning actually is. Both the moving-in and moving-out are interchangeable and often overlap. This shows that there is a constant state of transition that is not efficiently discussed in Schlossberg’s (1984) theory.

What I found after interviewing my participants was that there is a thin line between identifying as an athlete and having a foreclosed athletic identity. There is major emphasis placed on the importance of success in competition on collegiate athletes. A person with a foreclosed identity is described as an individual “who has failed to thoughtfully investigate available roles, yet who has made a premature, serious commitment to a socially prescribed
role” (Miller & Kerr, 2003, p. 212). The stories I received from my participants highlighted a major extension to the identity foreclosure theory. The theory does not elaborate on the fact that external forces influence the maintenance of an athletic identity. There is always a constant flow of people contributing to the athletic identity of players in their communication. A lot of the creation and maintenance of an identity comes in the conversations that have occurred between an individual and others. One major contribution to the foreclosure of athletic identity is that athletes are treated as university employees. Athletes have to follow particular rules, guidelines and schedules. Despite being an academic institution, a college’s main source of revenue and media exposure comes from high profile athletics. Players are groomed to be an “athlete” and an image of the university not only during competition, but also in their personal lives. So many times the coaching staff told us that we were always a representation of the school and our team even on our off time. Many of the participants in the study had not thought about what it would be like when softball would be done and they would no longer be a part of the community. More than 70% of the overall student athlete population has reported needing psychological counseling assistance from their coaches (Etzel, Ferrante & Pinkney, 2002). The coaching and support staffs have a major influence on the route that student athletes take. From the recruiting phase when coaches convince parents that they can entrust them with the next 4 years of their child’s life, to the decisions that they make daily these adults have a direct effect on the student-athletes futures. Athletes look to these mentors for guidance, but when they complete their eligibility to play, they find themselves let go with no plan or direction. Foreclosing an identity is not just an internal communicative phenomenon; athletes not only internalize the role of being a competitive athlete, but it is also a character that is reinforced by other people such as parents, coaches and peers. The external influences on identity foreclosure add a layer to the theory that has not been fully explored. These theoretical implications lead to practical implications as well.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The next theme that surfaced in the results was the lack of a plan or direction after the end of their collegiate career. There is also an overall feeling that when competition ends, the supporting staffs such as coaches and advisors do not care what happens to athletes once they
have stopped competing. There should be open communication about the transition after college with players and coaches. The discussion should be encouraged and embraced as a positive change, instead of kept secret and full of dread. Team building has such an integral part in creating a cohesive group of athletes. Coaches focus on creating a united identity within their team. These extreme team building actions create an environment that encourages a foreclosed athletic identity. Coaches and the athletic support staff have an obligation to their athletes who are retiring. Through focusing on the competition and winning, they contribute to the narrow view of options besides softball. Studies have found that it correlates with both poor career planning as well as psychological and emotional distress when there is removal from a sport (Murphy et al., 1996; Webb et al., 1998).

As my research confirmed, many of my participants did not feel prepared for what was to come next after their athletic careers ended. Feelings of anxiety, stress, and depression affect more than 25 percent of the whole US athletic population (Etzel et al., 2002). In a high profile sport such as softball, there is an extreme pressure on winning. Although a game, student athletes feel stressed to perform always. Kelsey mentions this aspect of competition when she shares, “Looking back, I took softball so seriously. Like it felt as if it was the end of the world if I made a mistake. People don’t remember that missed play, or not getting a hit in a clutch situation. Our coaches just made us feel that way” (Kelsey, interview transcript, January, 23, 2011). Murphy et al., (1996) commented that commonly student-athletes may think that having a narrow focus on sport is necessary for competitive success. This may come from the coaching staff, which reinforces a narrow-minded scope due to their job being based in winning. The university’s pride around athletic achievement can also put pressure on having to uphold the persona of an athlete. There is external pressure from parents, clubs and sponsors who feel as if they have made an investment into the success of an athlete. Mary stated, “There is no better feeling than having your whole university root for you to succeed. It is an awesome feeling when you know there are so many people pushing for you, but you also feel like you have let them down if you don’t” (Mary, interview transcript, January 21, 2011). As a result, student-athletes may be less inclined to pursue external activities that distract from their primary focus in sport, which helps them to foreclose in their athletic identity even more.
In regards to the emotional and psychological effects of retirement and the age of the participants, I found that the longer they had not played at San Diego State University, the fewer emotional difficulties they had with identity foreclosure. Time from their sport seemed to be the resolution to the end of identity foreclosure. With Briana having the most time away from college softball, she was also the furthest from solely and primarily identifying with being an athlete. In order to help these athletes, it is essential to understand the symptoms of distress in the environment of college athletics. This sets the groundwork for a retirement program for college seniors. The program would consist of both psychological counseling, and career training. Tutoring opportunities and academic counseling will continue for these retiring student-athletes to provide them the same tools allotted when they were competing. Instead of having an abrupt end, student athletes will go through a process out of their athletic career just like they went through a process going into a college environment.

There are additional practical implications of this study. The study highlights the value of identity research with female collegiate athletes. Many times, female athletes are overlooked in the research, but as exemplified in this study, they have the same feelings of loss of identity when their athletic careers end. Studies like this can help create better programs for student athletes to help the make the mental transition out of athletics more gradual. The communication of athletic identity is both internally and externally communicated, which creates an intense foreclosure that can be detrimental to student athletes if not addressed. Coaches and other support staff will benefit from this information by further understanding the dangers and implications of over identification with a single role or identity. They can provide better information to athletes about identity development and the dangers of over identifying with the athlete role when the student-athlete first enters the college or university and also as they depart. Since the NCAA’s primary goal is to create a well-rounded experience for amateur athletes, they need to maintain the strong relationship with players that are transitioning out of their organization. By understanding the dynamics that lead to a high athletic identity and athletic foreclosure, university staff can develop and utilize programs that may prevent a narrowed focus on athletics (Miller & Kerr, 2003). This study adds to a foundation of research that cannot be ignored by officials who are in charge of guiding and mentoring student-athletes.
LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although steps were taken to reduce the potential limitations for the study, it should be noted that the sample of participants consisted of former softball players from one Southwestern NCAA- Division I university. This was the same university that I had attended and participated in collegiate softball from the years of 2005-2010. There can be limitations in generalizing the data to other universities, levels of sports, and other competitive sports. Other college institutions may have a program set up for retiring seniors. Different levels of NCAA sports also bring varied levels of competitiveness in the players and programs. Lastly, female athletes focus on their athletic role differently than male athletes due to the potential of furthering their athletic careers outside of college. These disparities will highly change the results of impending studies.

As a participant observer, I found it challenging while being a researcher, I was also experiencing all of the same emotions and feelings as many of my participants. Each participant in my study had once been a teammate of mine in the previous years. Because of an already established relationship with each of the participants, they might have disclosed more personal information to me as the researcher. This sample of participants is less representative of the NCAA population of student-athletes, but reflected the struggles that are unique to athletes ending their college experience.

Research should continue to study the effects of identity foreclosure on female athletes who do not have a professional outlet for their sport outside of college. For male athletes it is expected for them to pursue a future in professional sports. There are more avenues for them to make it past college. As I discovered a gap in the research on identity foreclosure, further research should illuminate how much influence outside communication contributes to the foreclosure of an athlete’s identity. The messages that they receive from external forces are more appropriate because there is a greater chance for them to continue utilizing athlete as an identity. Regardless of being female or male, having a greater chance at playing professional sports or not, it is important for academic institutions to prepare their athletes for their futures without sports. The athletes that I interviewed for this study all felt unprepared for their post athletic experiences. The NCAA has already teamed up with Champs Sporting Goods to create a program to ensure athletes are retaining life skills. Future
research should also be done of the benefits and value of counseling throughout the careers of college athletes.

**REFLECTIONS**

By choosing ethnography as my methodology, I was able to incorporate a more candid voice to the stories of my participants. The transitional phase out of collegiate athletics is an emotional process that would not be fully extracted if another methodological procedure was used. My integration of personal anecdotes, layered with the accounts of my participants and varied expressive illustrations were a benefit to the overall organization of the study. My goal was to provide the reader ample avenues to explore the story of these softball players. Overall I created a study with more depth by giving “thick descriptions of events (Fetterman, 2009, p. 1) and using ethnographic research methods.

I learned a lot from my peers more than I knew before starting this study. There are three major conclusions that I found. The first is that an athlete’s ego is a double-edged sword. The struggles that I discovered through research and my interviews are more common than I initially thought. It is kept quiet because of the ego involvement and the mentality of never letting someone else see you weak. The second conclusion that I realized was that a lot of the issues that occurred could be prevented or fixed with better communication. Having an open forum, a safe outlet, or more access to counseling can ease the transition out of athletics. Lastly, the influence of coaches and parents had a direct correlation with how deeply an athlete was foreclosed in their identity. Even before college young athletes primarily focus on their sport in order to obtain an athletic scholarship. Parents invest their time, money and energy into their child’s potential for an elusive scholarship. The outside influences in an athlete’s life have a major affect on their trajectory in through and out of college athletics.

The term “has-been” comes to mind when looking at the loss of identity in collegiate athletes. For individuals that have been a part of high profile teams like NCAA Division I athletics, these participants are accustomed to being in a unique environment where they have been idolized by the college community around them. This is a very important research area because so many athletes have trouble balancing work and life or sport and life. There are so many ways in which athletes can hurt themselves when losing a real sense of self and
identity in their sport. It is important for athletes to gain a clear sense of self “off the field” court, or any arena of competition. It will not only prevent them from having significant psychological difficulties, but also will allow for a greater focus when it is time to compete. There has been a quote that has inspired me throughout this process of conducting my study. It was something that was relayed to me by my head coach when I was on the team at SDSU. “What you get by reaching your destination is not as important as what you become by reaching your destination” (Ziglar, 2007, p. 1). This experience has been so beneficial to me, and my fellow peers. Despite the hardships that have followed with figuring out what is next in our individual journeys, we have all concluded that being a part of this unique team has molded us into better people.
REFERENCES


Goodall, H. L. (2000). *Writing the new ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. How long have you been playing your sport?

2. Tell me about how you came to play college sports at San Diego State University.

3. When you think of yourself, what do you most identify with?

4. When others think about you, how do you think they identify you?

5. Tell me about your final game of your college career.

6. What have you been doing since your college athletic career ended?

7. What, if anything, do you miss being a part of the sport?

8. Do you still see your teammates? If so do you hang out with them?

9. What was your experience like after you stopped playing your sport?

10. Tell me about the feelings that you had anticipating the end of your college career. Now that you no longer play what are your feelings now?

11. What were your plans for after college? Since ending your college sports career, have they changed?

12. Did you feel prepared for life after your sports career? Why?

13. How could the NCAA better prepare student-athletes for life after college athletics?

14. What would you tell college athletes about the transition out of athletics? Do you have any advice?
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM
San Diego State University
Consent to Act as a Research Subject

*(Playing In the Past or Transitioning Into the Future:*
*An Ethnographic Study on Athlete Identity)*

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

**Investigators:** This study is being conducted by Sydney Alexis Fleming, MA candidate in the School of Communication at San Diego State University. It is being supervised by Dr. Kurt Lindemann, professor in the School of Communication at San Diego State University.

**Purpose of the Study:** To explore the feelings, stories, and experiences of NCAA Division I softball players after transitioning out of collegiate athletics. For athletes they develop their identities earlier in age due to their physical and psychological commitment to sport. This internalized self-concept becomes attached to every other area in an athlete’s life. With the conclusion of athletic eligibility, student-athletes have to transition from being a current member of a team to a former membership. Fifteen San Diego State University softball alumni will be interviewed.

**Description of the Study:** To be eligible, participants must have played softball at San Diego State University for at least two years before or during the 2010 softball season. Potential participants must be at least 18 years of age, and no longer playing any Division I sport at a collegiate institution. To determine if you are eligible to participate, you will be asked how long you have been retired from Division I softball. If your responses indicate that you are eligible, you will be asked to participate in an interview for this study. If you are not eligible for an interview, you may still be asked for references of other San Diego State softball alumni.

Research will be conducted at a location agreed upon outside of San Diego State University. If you are eligible for an interview, you may be interviewed on more than one occasion. As a study participant, you will be interviewed during the dates of January 1\(^{st}\) and April 10\(^{th}\) and may be asked to participate during any of that time.
What is Experimental in this Study: None of the procedures or interviews used in this study are experimental in nature. The only experimental aspect of this study is the gathering of information for the purpose of analysis.

Risks or Discomforts: Some interview questions may be uncomfortable to answer or may require breaking confidentiality between camper and staff or between two staff members. Before an interview begins, the subject will be informed of the potential for discomfort and told that if she begins to feel uncomfortable, she may discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently. In addition, any interview question may be skipped by the subject if they feel uncomfortable answering it.

Benefits of the Study: San Diego State University may be able to improve their training and better facilitate athletes that are completing their athletic eligibility. In addition, they will gain some insight on what makes athletes identify so heavily with their sporting experience. This research may help the NCAA provide a better resources for collegiate athletes in regards to athletic identity foreclosure and maintenance. I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law. Research files will be stored for at least one year by researcher in a locked file cabinet in researcher’s place of residence. Only principle researcher and faculty advisors will have access to the research. Video recordings will be used as a means for documenting interviews and counselor performances and will only be used for educational purposes. The recording will be erased when all interviews have been transcribed and files are no longer needed for stated research. On request, the subject may review or edit their interview prior to publication.

Federal regulations require that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) periodically review all approved and continuing projects that involve human subjects. To ensure that your rights as a subject are being protected in this study, it is possible that representatives of the Institutional Review Board may come to this research site to inspect study records.

Incentives to Participate: Participants will not be paid to participate in this study.

Compensation for Injury: If any complications arise as a direct result of participation in this study, we will assist you in obtaining appropriate attention. If you need treatment or hospitalization as a result of being in this study, you are responsible for payment of the cost for that care. If you have insurance, you may bill your insurance company. You will have to
pay any costs not covered by your insurance. San Diego State University will not pay for any care, lost wages, or provide other financial compensation. However, if you feel you have a claim that you wish to file against the State, please contact Graduate and Research Affairs - Division of Research Administration at (619) 594-6622 to obtain the appropriate claim forms.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with San Diego State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact Sydney Fleming by email at citygal_15@hotmail.com.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Division of Research Administration San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622; email: irb@mail.sdsu.edu).

**Consent to Participate:** The San Diego State University Institutional Review Board has approved this consent form, as signified by the Board's stamp. The consent form must be reviewed annually and expires on the date indicated on the stamp.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this consent form. *You have also been given a copy of "The Research Participant's Bill of Rights." You have been told that by signing this consent form you are not giving up any of your legal rights.*
Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Signature of Investigator

Date

Date