

**Maximising Opportunities for Elite Women Athletes Who Retire Suddenly and Need to
Transition to a Career Beyond Elite Sport**

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BSc, BA (Hons), MSc

Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Victoria University, Australia

Institute for Health and Sport

October 2024

Abstract

Retiring from elite sport presents one of the most formidable and disruptive career transitions for athletes. When athletes decide to retire and transition to a second career, research overwhelmingly recommends the need for them to be prepared for this transition (Knights et al., 2016). However, when athletic retirement occurs suddenly, due, for instance, to an acute injury or deselection from a national team or squad, an elite athlete is often left with little choice of 'when' to retire, and their plans for a second career may be significantly disrupted.

The role of national sporting organisations (NSOs) in providing support during the transition phase from sudden elite athletic retirement to a second career is crucial (Brassard et al., 2022; Knights et al., 2019). The nature of this role however, is yet to be studied, particularly for elite women athletes who face unique challenges when transitioning out of their elite sport (Wylleman et al., 2016). The existing body of research on athletic retirement and career transition support has predominantly focused on mixed-gender or men-only cohorts.

The aim of this research was to expand the knowledge on how NSOs can support elite women athletes with the transition to a second career after sudden athletic retirement. A two-stage qualitative research design was implemented, incorporating a document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The document analysis involved the interrogation of 18 publicly available documents from 17 Australian NSOs to determine the support they provide elite women athletes with the transition to a second career, including any reference to specific support for athletes who retire suddenly. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 NSO participants and 13 women who retired from being an elite athlete under sudden and unanticipated circumstances. Data was then subject to thematic analysis using deductive and inductive techniques. The analysis was guided by a bespoke conceptual model incorporating the ecological-intersectional model (LaVoi, 2016) and transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981).

Findings revealed that when women athletes retire suddenly, NSOs most often refer them to external agencies, such as the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and Players'

Associations, for support. Additionally, NSOs concentrate on ensuring women athletes are prepared for the transition from athletic retirement to a second career (i.e., during their athletic career), with little support provided at the point of sudden retirement. Furthermore, these athletes can face any one of eight distinct challenges when transitioning to a second career. They also possess at least four key assets which could be effectively leveraged in the transition to a second career. Based on these challenges and assets, this research offers several recommendations for NSOs to enhance the support they provide to suddenly retired elite women athletes who need to transition to a second career.

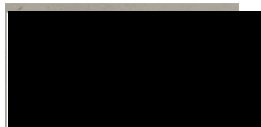
These findings build new knowledge practically and theoretically. Practically, there is potential to improve the support system for elite women athletes, making this knowledge crucial for NSOs (and other stakeholders) in supporting elite women athletes during the phase from sudden athletic retirement to a second career. New theoretical knowledge is also gained by advancing the original conceptual model designed for this research. Building upon transition theory, this research identified three distinct phases through which elite women athletes move when they retire suddenly (pre-transition, during transition, and post-transition). These three transition phases were then applied to the organisational level of the ecological-intersectional model to (1) discover what NSO support practices assist suddenly retired elite women athletes and (2) in which phase (pre-transition, during transition, and post-transition) of sudden retirement these practices should be implemented until a second career is gained.

Student Declaration

I, Ashleigh Peta Marshall, declare that the PhD thesis entitled “Maximising Opportunities for Elite Women Athletes Who Retire Suddenly and Need to Transition to a Career Beyond Elite Sport” is no more than 80,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University’s Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

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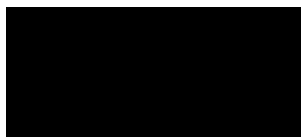


Date: 04/10/2024

Ethics Declaration

“All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Victoria University [HRE21-152].”

Signature:



Date: 04/10/2024

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my PhD supervisors, Professors Clare Hanlon and Camilla Brockett, whose expertise and knowledge were invaluable during the past four years.

My sincere thanks also go to the Amy Gillett Foundation and the anonymous philanthropic donor for their financial support, which was crucial in ensuring that Amy's vision of completing a PhD that would enhance the experiences of women athletes became a reality. I'm particularly grateful to Amy's parents, Mary and Dennis Safe, for their support and encouragement throughout the past four years. I'd also like to recognise Professor Murray Drummond, who was due to be Amy's PhD supervisor and provided me with invaluable advice and encouragement throughout the PhD journey.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my family for their unwavering love and encouragement, particularly my aunt, "Dr" Janet, who, despite having her own academic projects and special interests, took the time to read and edit parts of my work.

This thesis is dedicated to Amy Gillett and her teammates, Katie Brown, Lorian Graham, Kate Nichols, Alexis Rhodes, and Louise Yaxley.

Presentations

Marshall, A. (2022). *Maximising Opportunities for Elite Women Athletes Who Retire Suddenly and Need to Transition to a Career Beyond Elite Sport*. HDR Student Conference Presentation, Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand, 1 July 2022; Gold Coast, Australia.

Marshall, A., Hanlon, C. & Brockett, C. (2023). *Maximising Opportunities for Elite Women Athletes Who Retire Suddenly and Need to Transition to a Career Beyond Elite Sport*. Conference Presentation, Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand, 1 December 2023; Canberra, Australia.

Marshall, A. (2022). *Maximising Opportunities for Elite Women Athletes Who Retire Suddenly and Need to Transition to a Career Beyond Elite Sport*. Visualise Your Thesis Entry, Victoria University's Visualise Your Thesis Competition, August 2022. [1st Place].

Marshall, A. (2024). *Maximising Opportunities for Elite Women Athletes Who Retire Suddenly and Need to Transition to a Career Beyond Elite Sport*. Visualise Your Thesis Entry, Victoria University's Visualise Your Thesis Competition, August 2024.

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List of Definitions

The following terms are defined to clarify the context in which they are adopted throughout this thesis.

Athletic career: An athletic career can be defined as a sequence of stages and transitions in an individual's athletic development aimed at achieving their peak athletic performance in one or several sport events (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014, p. 617).

Athlete check-ins: Conducted when an employee from the NSO contacts athletes after retirement. The aim of these check-ins is to monitor the wellbeing of recently retired athletes and to communicate the support available for them (Knights et al., 2019).

Athletic retirement: Athletic retirement occurs when athletes no longer maintain the level of participation they had previously achieved. Unlike traditional career retirement, which typically occurs after many decades of work experience, a career as an elite athlete cannot be sustained throughout an individual's entire working life and often concludes well before pensionable age. Athletic retirement is often depicted as a decision made voluntarily by the athlete or forced upon them by external factors (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

AIS CPRN: A national network of professional career practitioners servicing athletes in Australian states and territories, including those living regionally and internationally via 'online' capability. Career practitioners work with elite athletes and provide up-to-date knowledge about career development and the impact of the changing world of work (Australian Institute of Sport, n.d.-a).

AIS MHRN: A group of expert psychologists and mental health clinicians who understand the pressures and complexity of life in a high-performance setting. The AIS MHRN offers free and confidential mental health support to elite athletes, coaches, and support staff, with a team of psychologists and other mental health clinicians specialising in areas such as depression, anxiety, trauma, and disordered eating (Rice et al., 2020).

Career transition: A deliberate and gradual process involving an individual's internal psychological disengagement from one career situation and preparation for a new one (Bridges, 2003).

Chief Executive Officer: The highest-ranking executive in a company. A CEO's primary responsibilities include making major corporate decisions, driving the workforce and resources of a company toward strategic goals, and acting as the main point of communication between the board of directors and corporate operations. The CEO serves as the public face of the company in many cases (Hayes, 2024).

dAIS Athlete Grant: Direct Athlete Income Support (dAIS) grant. As part of the HP 2032+ Sport Strategy outcomes, the ASC dAIS scheme aims to provide athletes with direct financial support to enable them to focus on training and competitions to achieve the strategy targets in Olympic, Paralympic, and Commonwealth Games sports. While dAIS is a direct athlete grant, athletes do not apply for a dAIS grant by themselves. Athletes are nominated by their NSO (Australian Institute of Sport, 2022).

dAIS Transition Support grant: The scheme provides financial support for retiring athletes for various purposes, including career transition, education, and mental health support (Australian Institute of Sport, 2022).

Deselection: A situation in which an athlete is no longer considered for selection in a team or squad due to various reasons such as poor performance, age, or changes in team strategy (Fairlie et al., 2020).

Dual career: Combining a high-performance athletic career with an academic or vocational career (Stambulova et al., 2015).

Elite woman athlete: A woman athlete who competed at the national level of their sport or higher.

General retirement: Athletic retirement that was planned or voluntary.

Life plan: A strategic framework that helps individuals outline long-term goals, and the steps needed to achieve them. It serves as a guide to help prioritise what is important, make informed decisions, and stay motivated (Australian Institute of Sport, n-d).

National Sporting Organisation: The governing body responsible for overseeing a specific sport at the national level (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015).

Non-linear career: A path that does not follow traditional, predictable progression up the corporate ladder (Edwards, 2021).

Para-athlete: Athlete who has a health condition that presents as an impairment and leads to a competitive disadvantage in sport. They compete in para-sport (Paralympics New Zealand, 2024).

Players' Associations: The official representative bodies for current and retired athletes of specific professional sports. They serve as the collective voice for players, advocating for their rights, negotiating contracts, and providing crucial support services. These support services include financial support, psychological support, and health screenings, particularly for retired elite athletes (Coalition of Major Professional and Participation Sports Association Inc, n.d.-a).

Policies: The rules or framework that govern how certain situations within an organisation should be handled (Cohen, 2012).

Practices: The steps or actions that organisation employees follow, are often developed over time and however they may not be formally documented (Cohen, 2012).

Professional network services: The services of the NSO professional network staff and medical exit screenings (Australian Institute of Sport, n-d).

State Institutes of Sport: Since the early 1980's, the eight State and Territory governments in Australia, established Institutes and Academies of Sport to assist their elite athletes. These organisations, often in partnership with NSOs, offer comprehensive support services to athletes during their athletic careers and at retirement (Clearinghouse For Sport, n-d).

Second career: The professional journey on which athletes embark after retiring from their athletic career. This profession is a significant departure from their previous profession as an elite athlete (Edwards, 2021, p. 156).

Sudden athletic retirement: Athletic retirement that is forced, unplanned, or involuntary.

Transition: 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 behaviour and relationships' (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5).

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations appear in this thesis multiple times and are listed in alphabetical order:

AFL	Australian Football League
AFLPA	Australian Football League Players' Association Incorporated
AFLW	Australian Football League - Women
AIS	Australian Institute of Sport
ASC	Australian Sports Commission
AW&E	Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement
CBA	Collective Bargaining Agreement
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COMPPS	Coalition of Major Professional and Participation Sports
CPRN	Career Practitioners Referral Network
dAIS	Direct Athlete Income Support
EIM	Ecological-Intersectional Model
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HP	High-performance
IOC	International Olympic Committee
MHRN	Mental Health Referral Network
NCP	National Categorisation Panel
NIN	National Institute Network
NRLW	National Rugby League - Women
NSO	National Sporting Organisation
PE	Personal Excellence
TT	Transition Theory
WBBL	Women's Big Bash League

WLIS	Women Leaders in Sport
WNBL	Women's National Basketball League
WNCL	Women's National Cricket League

Chapter One – Introduction

Opportunities for women to pursue athletic careers are on the rise. Ultimately, these increased opportunities lead to more women retiring and transitioning to a second career. Over recent years, National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) have made significant progress in enhancing support for elite women athletes (Rowe, 2019), including when they transition to retirement. Unfortunately, a support gap remains for elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career. Research examining the unique needs of elite women athletes to prepare for the transition to a post-athletic career is sparse (Park et al., 2013), as is an understanding of the practical support provided by NSOs. This knowledge gap is concerning given that extant research indicates that elite women athletes who retire suddenly (unplanned or forced) are at a higher risk than those who retire generally (planned or voluntary) of facing challenges during their transition out of elite sport, including the transition to a second career (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). This research aims to address this knowledge deficit and the practical challenge by expanding the knowledge on how NSOs can support elite women athletes with the transition to a second career after sudden athletic retirement.

The first chapter introduces this research by discussing the background and practical context, followed by the research aims, questions, and significance. It concludes with the structural outline of this thesis.

Background

As noted previously, opportunities for women to pursue athletic careers are increasing. For the first time, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) distributed quota places equally (50:50) to women and men athletes for the 2024 Paris Summer Olympic Games (International Olympic Committee, 2024). There has been a steady rise since the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympic Games, at which only 38.2% of the athletes were women (International Olympic Committee, 2021). This upward trend is also evident in various professional and semi-professional sport leagues in Australia that were traditionally dominated by men. In recent years, these leagues, including cricket, Australian rules

football, rugby league, football, and rugby union, have introduced women's competitions at the national level along with related programs (Rowe, 2019).

Aligned with these increased opportunities, the support from NSOs and other organisations for elite women athletes has surged in recent years. Established women's sporting leagues, such as the National Super Netball and the Women's National Basketball League (WNBL), have become more commercialised (Hustwaite, 2020; Maurice, 2019). Salaries for elite women athletes are steadily increasing (Maurice, 2019), pregnancy and childcare support are being offered to enable elite women athletes to balance their athletic careers and family commitments (Gearin, 2016; Jolly, 2019; Maurice, 2019), and research has been conducted on enhancing and prolonging women's athletic careers (Australian Institute of Sport, 2019).

Despite the increases in opportunities and commitments to support elite women athletes during their athletic careers, women athletes continue to face challenges when transitioning out of elite sport and into a second career. Athletic retirement is a profound life-changing event for most elite athletes regardless of gender (Stambulova et al., 2007). However, transitioning to a second career is particularly challenging for elite women athletes because they face several additional obstacles compared to elite men athletes. These obstacles include increased mental health issues (Walton et al., 2021) and limited options to remain involved in elite sport in high-performance coaching roles (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2018) or sport leadership roles (Burton, 2015). Furthermore, studies have consistently shown a significant pay disparity between elite men and women athletes throughout their athletic careers (Pascoe et al., 2022) and even in their careers beyond elite sport (Barriopedro et al., 2018), thereby demonstrating the need for gender-specific support strategies to ensure a smooth transition into a second career. It is crucial, however, to move beyond identifying differences between elite men and women athletes' retirement processes and towards identifying the patterns within the retirement experiences of men and women (Ronkainen et al., 2023) to understand how athletes can be better supported, particularly with the transition to a second career due to sudden retirement.

When elite athletes, men or women, retire suddenly due to non-normative factors such as injury or deselection, they find the transition to life beyond elite sport more difficult than elite athletes who retire voluntarily under general conditions (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004). These athletes often report lower satisfaction with their new career, contend with more negative emotions, and require a longer time to adapt to their post-athletic life (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Eggleston et al., 2020; Knights et al., 2019; Tshube et al., 2018). When elite athletes retire suddenly, they often put their financial security at risk due to the loss of funding from their sport, prizemoney, and potential sponsorship arrangements, making it essential for them to transition promptly to a second career.

While research on athlete retirement is abundant (Park et al., 2013), only 10 studies have been undertaken that focus solely on the retirement experiences of elite women athletes (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Chow, 2001; Clowes et al., 2015; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008; Young et al., 2006; Zhu, 2023). Furthermore, only four of these studies included elite women athletes who retired suddenly. These four studies recognised participants who retired suddenly due to injury (Clowes et al., 2015; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Young et al., 2006), deselection (Fairlie et al., 2020), conflict or dissatisfaction with their coach, or the high-stress environment associated with elite sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). There is a definitive need for more research into the retirement experiences of elite women athletes, particularly those who retire suddenly, to better understand their unique challenges and how they can be supported during their transition into a second career.

Within the four studies noted above, the number of elite women athletes who retired suddenly was significantly lower than those who retired generally. Despite these low numbers, three of the four studies identified that elite women athletes who retired suddenly faced unique and more challenging transitions out of elite sport compared to those who retired under more general circumstances (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Suddenly retired elite women athletes experienced higher levels of

distress (Clowes et al., 2015), underwent longer and more difficult transitions (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000), and reported negative emotions such as anger and sadness, which impacted their self-worth (Fairlie et al., 2020). In contrast, the fourth study (Young et al., 2006) found few differences between the experiences of elite women athletes who retired suddenly or generally. These authors speculated that the unique aspect of the researched sport (tennis) may have shielded these athletes from experiencing an elevated level of distress upon retirement because of tennis's highly individual nature, the low comradery among professional players, and the lack of selection by the NSO to participate at the highest level (Young et al., 2006). However, none of these four studies explored the organisational support strategies that could assist these athletes during their transition into a second career.

A further prominent research finding has been that elite women athletes report being deeply dissatisfied with the lack of organisational support they receive at retirement (Chow, 2001; Clowes et al., 2015; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008; Young et al., 2006). In the absence of support from sporting organisations, elite women athletes often receive emotional and tangible support, such as a place to live, from their families and partners (Chow, 2001). To assist these athletes, an opportunity exists for NSOs to address this lack of support and adopt targeted and practical strategies to support retirement transition for elite women athletes, particularly those who retire under sudden circumstances.

The lack of research on this topic has exposed a knowledge gap for support for suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career. Given the unique stressors and challenges elite women athletes face at retirement, it is imperative to adopt a gender-specific approach to exploring support for their athletic retirement and career transition (Wylleman et al., 2016). These reasons underscore the unique contribution this research will make to identifying evidence-based and gender-appropriate NSO support for suddenly retired elite women athletes to transition to a second career.

Research Aims and Research Questions

This research aims to expand the knowledge on how NSOs can support elite women athletes with the transition to a second career after sudden athletic retirement. For the purpose of this research, the organisational focus will be on Australian NSOs. To address this aim, three research questions have been developed:

1. What policies and/or practices do NSOs implement to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?
2. How can these policies and/or practices be enhanced to meet the needs of elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?
3. How can the Ecological Intersectional Model (EIM) and Transition Theory (TT) assist NSOs to target policies and/or practices to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?

These research questions will be addressed using a two-stage qualitative, narrative inquiry research design. The first stage of the research comprises a document analysis of NSO policy and/or practice documents to gain a broad understanding of the support NSOs offer suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career. Findings from this analysis will assist to address research question one.

The second research stage comprises semi-structured interviews with two participant cohorts: NSO managers responsible for supporting athletes at retirement (NSO participants), and suddenly retired elite women athletes (athlete participants). These semi-structured interviews serve two purposes. The first purpose is to build on the knowledge gained from the document analysis regarding the support that NSOs provide to elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career. The second purpose is to understand the support suddenly retired elite women athletes require to transition to a second career. Findings from the interviews with these two cohorts will assist to address research questions one and two.

A bespoke conceptual framework will be devised to guide the data collection and analysis. Two theories, the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) and TT (Schlossberg, 1981) will be combined

to form the conceptual framework. The EIM will be used to analyse the support that suddenly retired elite women athletes receive at different ecological levels (individual, interpersonal, organisational, and socio-cultural). Meanwhile, TT will help identify the appropriate timing for implementing support strategies during the transition from sudden retirement to a second career. The conceptual framework offers a structured approach to determining organisational support strategies needed for elite women athletes transitioning to a second career, thereby addressing research question three.

Significance and Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

Theoretically, this research contributes to knowledge by developing a bespoke conceptual framework. As previously stated, this conceptual framework merges two theories, the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) and TT (Schlossberg, 1981), thereby providing a unique lens to a situation yet to be comprehensively investigated. The conceptualisation of athletic retirement has gradually evolved. Initially, athletic retirement was considered a singular event, similar to retirement from work or the 'dying process', with theorists making parallels between career transitions in sport and social gerontological models of aging and thanatological models of death and dying (Lavallee, 2000, p. 6). However, research has expanded the understanding of athletic retirement, revealing it to be a process that extends beyond the moment of retirement.

This contemporary research has identified various causes of athletic retirement and factors influencing the transition to post-sport life (Wylleman et al., 2016). Within the field of sport psychology, various models have been developed to describe and explain athletic career transitions. These include career stage descriptive models, explanatory career transition models (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007), and career transition intervention models (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2007). While the models are useful, they do not account for sudden and unexpected athletic retirement and the transition to a second career (Edwards, 2021), nor do they examine gender-specific characteristics, each of which has been identified as significant gaps in the literature (Wylleman et al., 2016).

Practically, the current research will make a unique contribution to the field of sport management, specifically NSO support for suddenly retired elite women athletes. The topic of athletic retirement and the transition to life beyond elite sport for women athletes has been studied in the sport psychology literature (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). However, studies are scarce on the organisational strategies that specifically aid suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career. Despite findings that organisational support, particularly from NSOs, is essential when elite athletes retire from their athletic careers, the literature remains unclear as to what optimal support should entail. To bridge this knowledge gap, this thesis moves beyond theoretical significance and provides practical insights and strategies (i.e., a list of recommendations) that NSOs can implement to enhance support for suddenly retired elite women athletes in their transition to a second career, thereby making a translational impact for the sport industry.

Structural Outline

The thesis is organised into nine chapters. Chapter One introduces the purpose of this research. Chapter Two provides a comprehensive review of existing literature, focusing on the increased opportunities for elite women athletes, the challenges of sudden athletic retirement for women, and the role of NSOs in supporting elite women athletes who retire suddenly. Chapter Two also presents the theoretical framework guiding this research. Chapter Three outlines the methodology, justifies using a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach, and discusses the strengths and limitations of the research design. Chapter Four presents the results of the initial research stage, which involved analysing 18 NSO documents. Chapters Five and Six present the results of the second research stage, which involved semi-structured interviews with two participant cohorts: 15 NSO participants and 13 athlete participants. Chapter Seven combines the results of the previous three chapters. Chapter Eight discusses new theoretical and practical insights, links the results to existing knowledge, and addresses research questions one, two, and three. Finally, Chapter Nine summarises the key findings, reinforcing the contribution this research makes to advancing

theoretical and practical knowledge. The concluding chapter also outlines the research limitations and makes recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Introduction

Elite athletes experience a variety of transitions throughout their athletic careers. The final transition, athletic retirement, is inevitable and will most likely be followed by the need to transition to a second career. Normative and non-normative factors can affect an athlete's retirement and significantly impact their transition experience.

Opportunities for women to pursue athletic careers are on the rise (Rowe, 2019). While NSOs have made progress in supporting women athletes during their athletic careers, there is a reported lack of support for women athletes at the time of retirement (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Young et al., 2006). This lack of support is particularly the case for women athletes who retire suddenly and are at a higher risk of facing challenges during their transition out of elite sport, which can significantly impact their post-sport life (Fairlie et al., 2020).

There are a number of theoretical models that describe athletic retirement, including career stage descriptive models, career transition explanatory models, and career transition intervention models (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). However, these models do not account for sudden and unexpected athletic retirement and the transition to a second career (Edwards, 2021) or examine gender-specific characteristics (Wylleman et al., 2016). Consequently, a bespoke conceptual framework combining the EIM and TT has been designed to guide this research.

The Australian High-Performance Sport System

It is important to consider the role of NSOs in the Australian high-performance sport system in order to understand and identify how they can better support elite women athletes through the transition from sudden athletic retirement to a second career. This system involves various key stakeholders with distinct roles and responsibilities, including NSOs, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), the National Institute Network (NIN), and Players' Associations.

NSOs are the governing bodies responsible for overseeing a specific sport at the national level. They play a crucial role in developing and promoting their respective sports within their country. Their duties may include identifying and nurturing athlete talent, providing expert coaching and scientific support, organising training camps and coaching sessions, arranging regional, national, and international competitions, and preparing teams for international competitions (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015).

In Australia, NSOs are recognised by the ASC and play a crucial role in achieving the Australian Government's sporting objectives. The ASC supports recognised NSOs through funding, guidance, and programs to enable them to achieve these sporting objectives. Such support not only validates the role of NSOs, it also provides them with the necessary resources to perform their duties effectively (Australian Sports Commission, 2023).

The NIN, a cornerstone of the Australian high-performance sport system, plays a unique and pivotal role in supporting athletes and promoting high-performance sport. It comprises the AIS and the eight State and Territory Institutes and Academies of Sport. As a representative of the State and Territory Institutes and Academies of Sport network, the NIN collaborates closely with NSOs and other high-performance sport system partners (Australian Sports Commission, 2019).

The AIS, a division of the ASC, is the national strategic high-performance sport agency responsible for leading and enabling a united high-performance sport system that supports Australian athletes in achieving podium success at international sport competitions. The AIS plays a significant role in providing NSOs with government funding for their high-performance sport programs. This funding, known as NSO Investment (High-Performance) (Australian Sports Commission, 2019), is allocated based on the performance and potential of the respective sports. Additionally, the AIS provides individual grants to elite athletes through dAIS Athlete grants. These individual grants aim to provide athletes with direct financial support to focus on training and competitions to achieve the strategy targets in Olympic, Paralympic and Commonwealth Games sports (Australian Institute of Sport, 2022).

While all NSOs in Australia are not-for-profit organisations, seven are members of a discrete coalition representing Australia's most prominent professional and participation sports called the Coalition of Major Professional and Participation Sports (COMPPS). These seven NSOs include the Australian Football League (AFL), Rugby Australia, Cricket Australia, Football Federation Australia, National Rugby League, Netball Australia and Tennis Australia (Coalition of Major Professional and Participation Sports Association Inc, n.d.-b). COMPPS unites the governing bodies of these seven Australian NSOs that conduct professional sport competitions or leagues. Each of these NSOs, except Tennis Australia, has a direct relationship with their respective Players' Association.

A Players' Association is the official representative body for current and retired athletes of a professional sport. Each one serves as the collective voice for players, advocating for their rights, negotiating contracts, and providing crucial support services. These support services include financial support, psychological support, and health screenings, particularly for retired elite athletes (Coalition of Major Professional and Participation Sports Association Inc, n.d.-a).

Elite Sport for Women

Elite sport opportunities for women have grown significantly in the past two decades. This trend is reflected in major international multi-sport events, including the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, which have significantly promoted gender equality among participating athletes. As opportunities for women to pursue athletic careers continue to rise, NSOs and organisations, such as the AIS, have invested in several targeted strategies to support these athletes during their athletic careers. These strategies include increased professionalisation and salaries, improved understanding to optimise training women athletes, and pregnancy/childcare policies to extend athletic careers.

Salaries for women athletes in Australia have increased in recent years. Players' Associations, for example, have negotiated collective bargaining agreements (CBA) for their athletes, setting minimum professional standards for women athletes across several sporting codes. These agreements often include standardised minimum wages, health insurance,

income protection insurance, and improved travel and professional services for contracted and development players. For instance, in 2023, the first CBA to cover both AFL and Australian Football League – Women (AFLW) players was finalised. Under the CBA, the average wage for AFLW players will increase 29 per cent from \$46,000 to \$60,000 in 2023 (Hislop, 2023). Similarly, after 41 years of the WNBL competition, a CBA was established in 2020, providing minimum standardised wages for rostered and development players, private health insurance, physiotherapy for interstate games, advanced scheduling, and improved travel conditions for contracted players (Hustwaite, 2020). These initiatives have helped raise the minimum and average wages for elite women athletes across several Australian sporting codes, as summarised in Table 1 (Mark, 2023).

Table 1

Minimum and average wages in women's domestic competitions

League (sport)	Approx. domestic minimum wage (2023 or nearest season)	Approx. domestic average wage (2023 or nearest season)
WNBL (basketball)	\$20,000	\$76,000
National Super Netball (netball)	\$43,000	\$74,000
A-League W (football)	\$25,000	-
WBBL & WNCL (cricket)	\$71,945	\$151,019
AFLW (Australian rules football)	\$50,547	\$59,701
NRLW (rugby league)	\$30,000	\$37,500
Super W (rugby union)	\$7,000	-

Note: From Women's sport in Australia is on a fast upward trajectory — but which leagues pay the most and is there any sort of equality?, by D. Mark, 2023.

The increased number of elite women athletes has led sporting organisations to increase their focus on developing initiatives specific to improving and prolonging women's athletic careers. One such initiative is the 'Female Performance and Health Initiative' established by the AIS. This initiative, developed through a collaborative effort, aims to improve knowledge and support systems for women athletes (Australian Institute of Sport, 2019). The aim is to improve the understanding and awareness of critical performance and health considerations for women athletes, including but not limited to the menstrual cycle and associated dysfunction, breast health, pregnancy and return to sport, pelvic health and incontinence, and medical conditions that impact women athletes (Australian Institute of Sport, 2019).

Several sporting organisations have taken a significant step toward extending the athletic careers of women by implementing pregnancy and childcare support. This support enables women athletes to effectively manage and continue their athletic careers while fulfilling their family commitments. Notably, Netball Australia was the pioneer among Australian NSOs, establishing a pregnancy and maternity leave policy for contracted players in 2016 (Gearin, 2016). This policy, which includes 12 months of paid maternity leave, travel support, health insurance, and income protection, set a benchmark for other NSOs (Maurice, 2019).

In 2018, the Australian Basketball Association and the WNBL demonstrated their commitment to supporting women athletes by establishing a Parental and Pregnancy Care Policy to ensure that women athletes can continue their careers without compromising their family responsibilities. Under this policy, contracted WNBL players have access to a qualified carer or player-elected support personnel for children up to four years of age for all away trips (The Women's Game, 2018).

In 2019, as a show of their unwavering commitment to women's sport, Cricket Australia and the Australian Cricketers Association implemented a comprehensive parental leave policy. This policy, designed to support players with state, national, or Big Bash contracts, includes 12 months of paid parental leave for players who give birth or adopt. The

policy also supports players who are primary carers after they return to playing by covering the costs associated with caring for their child, including accommodation and flights for the child and a carer until the child is four years old. Additionally, players who take maternity leave are guaranteed a contract extension the following year and can transition to non-playing roles while pregnant (Jolly, 2019).

While NSOs have made significant progress in improving support for elite women athletes during their athletic careers, it is important to note that this level of investment and support does not currently extend to support women athletes into their retirement. For elite women athletes to thrive and succeed, there needs to be a greater focus and investment in the strategic support women require to manage all aspects of their athletic careers, including sudden retirement and their transition to a second career.

Athletic Careers and Career Transitions

An athletic career is a sequence of phases and transitions in an individual's athletic development aimed at achieving peak athletic performance in one or several sport events (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014, p. 617). A transition is defined as '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 behaviour and relationships' (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). As with conventional professional or vocational careers, an athletic career is characterised by several career transitions. These career transitions are deliberate and gradual processes, reassuring individuals that change takes time and patience. Unlike conventional professional and/or vocational careers, elite athletes follow a non-linear career path: one that does not follow the traditional, predictable progression up the corporate ladder (Edwards, 2021).

Sport psychologists have developed models to describe and explain athletic career transitions, including career stage descriptive models, career transition explanatory models, and career transition intervention models. Career stage descriptive models divide athletic careers into stages and predict the order of an athlete's career transitions (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Career transition explanatory models focus on reasons for transition, coping processes, and outcomes (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Career transition

intervention models aim to help athletes prepare for and go through transitions, with preventative interventions focusing on preparing athletes for transitions and crisis-coping interventions aiming to support athletes through transition challenges (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2007). Career-related programs and services complement these models and play a significant role in helping athletes coordinate their athletic careers with other activities and prepare for athletic retirement. However, the successful implementation of these programs could be impacted by organisational factors such as funding, resources, and support or conflicting objectives within the sporting organisation (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

Two types of factors can facilitate athletic career transitions: normative and non-normative. Athletic career transitions that occur due to normative factors are expected and stem from an athlete's progression in sport and life, such as moving from recreational to competitive sport, junior to senior sport, amateur to professional sport, and eventually, to retirement from their athletic career and the transition to a second career (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). The predictability of these transitions allows athletes to plan for and adapt to them in advance, thereby providing a sense of reassurance and preparedness (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

Athletic career transitions that occur due to non-normative factors are unpredictable changes that can disrupt an athlete's planned trajectory and pose a significant challenge. Non-normative factors such as injury, overtraining, or changes in team dynamics can trigger athletic career transitions. Due to their unpredictability, transitions due to non-normative factors can be more challenging for athletes because they often have little time to prepare for them (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

Normative or non-normative factors can trigger athletic retirement. When normative factors cause athletic retirement, it may be considered voluntary or planned. Athletes may retire voluntarily due to advancing age, achieving sporting goals, or pursuing other occupational ambitions (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Importantly, research indicates that athletes who retire voluntarily usually have control over the timing of their retirement,

underscoring their control in the decision-making process (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2021).

When non-normative factors cause athletic retirement, it may be considered forced, involuntary, or unplanned. Non-normative factors that lead athletes to retire may include injury that permanently prevents them from continuing their athletic career, being unexpectedly deselected from a team or program, family reasons, problems with coaches or sporting organisations, or financial difficulties. The sudden and unexpected nature of these factors can significantly impact the retirement decision, creating a sudden impact and unpredictability. Cancelling or postponing an anticipated tournament may also be considered a non-normative factor (Wylleman et al., 2016).

The literature provides a variety of terms to describe athletic retirement that is due to normative or non-normative factors, including voluntary versus involuntary (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Tshube & Feltz, 2015), unforced versus forced (Brown et al., 2017; Eggleston et al., 2020; Holding et al., 2020), planned versus unplanned (Knights et al., 2019; Stambulova et al., 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2015), and by choice or by force (Edwards, 2021)

Athletic retirement is often portrayed as a choice made by the athlete or due to external circumstances. However, the reality is more complex. Retirement can be caused by a combination of normative and non-normative factors, and the determinant of whether the decision to retire was freely chosen or forced is subjective and deeply personal (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). For example, athletes may be compelled to retire because they find themselves in impossible situations, and retirement seems to be the only solution to a situation that is no longer tolerable (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). In a study of women gymnasts, three participants reported that their decision to retire was prompted by either conflict or dissatisfaction with the coach or by the high stress associated with elite gymnastics (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). A more recent study of professional men cricketers found that many participants were 'reluctant retirees' who retired due to contractual issues or lack of communication from their club, even though they were not physically or psychologically

ready to retire (Roberts et al., 2015, p. 4). More recently, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as event postponement and cancellations, have seen the unplanned retirement of some athletes (Taku & Arai, 2020). Therefore, it is evident that the decision to retire from elite sport is complex and multifaceted, requiring a nuanced understanding of the contributing factors. For this reason, the terms 'sudden athletic retirement' or 'retired suddenly' will be used throughout this thesis to refer to athletic retirement that occurred suddenly and unexpectedly due to non-normative factors. 'General retirement' or 'retired generally' will refer to athletic retirement that is considered voluntary and planned due to normative factors.

Athletic Retirement and the Transition to a Second Career

While athletic retirement signifies the end of an athlete's sport career, it is a concept that has evolved. Initially, athletic retirement was viewed as a single event similar to retiring from work or the 'dying process' (Lavalley, 2000, p. 6). Researchers have since broadened the understanding of athletic retirement to encompass a process that extends beyond the moment of retirement. Athletic retirement is now recognised as unfolding in three distinct stages—pre-retirement, retirement, and post-retirement—that each presents its own unique set of challenges and opportunities (Wylleman et al., 2016). Unlike standard career retirement, which occurs after many decades of work experience, a career as an elite athlete often concludes well before pensionable age, thereby necessitating the transition to a second career (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

The term 'second career' signifies the professional journey athletes embark on after retiring from their athletic career. This career transition is a significant departure from their previous profession as an elite athlete (Edwards, 2021, p. 156). For most elite athletes, this transition is not just a practical consideration but a profound life change (Dhurup et al., 2020; Edwards, 2021).

The transition to athletic retirement can be a challenging and emotional experience for many athletes, who may face psychological, occupational, and psychosocial difficulties

during the process (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Moreover, a transition to an academic-vocational career outside of sport can create additional challenges for athletes, including adapting to a new work environment, redefining their sense of identity, and coping with losing a significant part of their lives (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Esopenko et al., 2020).

Despite the prevalence of gender-specific challenges and psychosocial stressors for women athletes at retirement, a dearth of literature exists on the retirement experiences of these athletes. Only 10 studies have been found that explored the retirement transition for elite women athletes (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Chow, 2001; Clowes et al., 2015; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008; Young et al., 2006; Zhu, 2023). Of these studies, five investigated athletic retirement from a psychological perspective with recommendations suitable for sport psychology practitioners (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008), while the remaining five (Chow, 2001; Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Young et al., 2006; Zhu, 2023) were exploratory studies that investigated women athletes experiences of leaving high-performance sport, including the factors that assisted or hindered them with this career transition. Although psychological understanding and assistance is crucial, there has been little to no research addressing the ways in which sporting organisations can support retiring elite women athletes, over and above the provision of psychological assistance, particularly for those who retired suddenly.

Sudden Athletic Retirement

Research indicates that elite athletes who retire suddenly have more difficulty transitioning to life beyond elite sport than athletes who retire generally. Athletes who retire suddenly often experience shock and disbelief (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Holding et al., 2020; Wylleman et al., 2013), report lower satisfaction with their new career, grapple with more negative emotions, and take longer to adapt to their post-athletic retirement life (Alfermann

et al., 2004; Barriopedro et al., 2019; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Eggleston et al., 2020; Knights et al., 2019; Tshube et al., 2018).

Slovenian men and women athletes who retired due to non-normative factors encountered significantly more severe occupational and psychological difficulties than their counterparts who retired voluntarily (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004). A similar pattern was identified among Spanish men and women athletes, who reported moderate to severe difficulties in their professional careers outside of sport compared to those who retired voluntarily (Barriopedro et al., 2019). A study involving men and women elite athletes from South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe also revealed the profound challenges faced by athletes who retired involuntarily (Tshube & Feltz, 2015). A North American study found that athletes forced to retire experienced heightened grief and often struggled to use practical coping skills when compared to athletes who voluntarily retired (Eggleston et al., 2020). Similarly, elite men footballers in Australia who had not planned to retire reported being unprepared for life after elite sport, finding themselves in 'meaningless jobs', and experiencing a lack of purpose, regret, and a loss of identity (Knights et al., 2019, p. 524).

The abrupt and often uncontrollable nature of an elite athlete's retirement is a daunting challenge. Athletes who retire suddenly may not have considered retirement to any great extent and are subsequently left without the time or opportunity to plan and prepare for this life-altering event (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). This lack of control significantly increases the probability of athletes experiencing difficulties when transitioning out of elite sport (Knights et al., 2019; Stambulova et al., 2021). Researchers have suggested further research is needed into the support athletes need when athletic retirement occurs suddenly due to non-normative factors (Esopenko et al., 2020; Knights et al., 2016; Wylleman et al., 2016).

Sudden Athletic Retirement and Elite Women Athletes

Little research exists on women athletes' experiences of sudden retirement. Only four studies have included women athletes who retired suddenly, and these studies did not

provide any substantial insights into the challenges faced by these athletes nor the strategies to address such challenges (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Young et al., 2006). Within the four studies, the number of women athletes who retired suddenly was generally fewer than those who retired generally. In a study of seven gymnasts, one athlete retired suddenly due to injury, and three retired suddenly due to conflict or dissatisfaction with their coach or the high stress associated with elite gymnastics (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Two athletes in a study of eight gymnasts (Clowes et al., 2015) and four athletes in a study of 28 tennis players (Young et al., 2006) retired suddenly due to injury. Two athletes within the study of five netballers retired suddenly due to deselection (Fairlie et al., 2020).

The small number of elite women athletes who retired suddenly faced significant challenges. Women athletes who retired suddenly due to injury found it challenging to adjust to retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). They experienced distress upon disengagement from their sport, which was exacerbated by their lack of control over their decision to retire (Clowes et al., 2015). However, a study of Australian women tennis players (Young et al., 2006) found few differences in the experiences of women tennis players who retired suddenly due to injury than those who retired voluntarily. The study hypothesised that these athletes were insulated from experiencing a heightened level of distress due to the highly individual nature of the professional tennis tour, by contributory factors such as low comradery between players on tour, and by the fact that 'selection (by the NSO) to participate at the highest level does not exist' (Young et al., 2006, p. 481).

Similarly, women athletes who retired suddenly due to deselection (Fairlie et al., 2020) found it more challenging to adapt to retirement when compared with athletes who generally retired. Unprepared for their impending deselection, these women athletes experienced various negative emotions, such as anger and sadness, which significantly impacted their sense of self-worth. They felt they were forced to decide about their future earlier than planned, which added to the emotional burden they were already carrying as a result of their deselection (Fairlie et al., 2020).

Furthermore, women athletes who retired suddenly because of conflict or difficulties with the coach experienced longer, more complex transitions than athletes who retired generally (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). The lack of power and control these athletes experienced throughout their athletic careers negatively impacted their perceptions of control throughout the transition. The removal of external controls, such as the demands of the coaches, parents, and teachers, left these women athletes feeling lost and uncertain about their future (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

Excluding the study of tennis players (Young et al., 2006), the existing research in this field primarily identified that women athletes who retired suddenly (due to injury, deselection, or conflict with their coach) experienced higher levels of distress at retirement. These women faced significantly more challenging career transitions from elite sport than women athletes who retired generally (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

While the four extant studies provide valuable insights into the experiences of women athletes who suddenly retire, they do not explore specific support strategies that could assist these women in transitioning to a second career. Apart from the study involving Australian netballers (Fairlie et al., 2020) (wherein deselected athletes felt pressured to make decisions about their future earlier than planned), none of these studies explored the impact of sudden retirement on either the athletes' plans for a second career or their transition into that career. This research gap emphasises the need for more comprehensive and women-specific research. Understanding and addressing the unique challenges elite women athletes face is crucial for their wellbeing and their successful transition to a second career. It is evident throughout the literature that athletes, particularly women athletes, are frustrated with the lack of organisational support provided to them when they retire (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Young et al., 2006). This frustration underscores the urgent need for more comprehensive support systems for women athletes transitioning to a second career.

Support for the Transition to a Second Career

With many stakeholders involved in an athlete's career, it is important to clarify the nature of organisational responsibility for managing and supporting athletes during the transition from athletic retirement to a second career (Knights et al., 2019). Reflecting on calls from the research and sport communities regarding athlete welfare, sporting organisations, such as the IOC and International Federations, have begun to invest in program development to ensure that athletes are supported to make the transition to a second career (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015; Henry, 2013; Kohe & Purdy, 2020). These investments include educational programs, business mentorship schemes, industry network opportunities, and personal support services designed to provide opportunities, encourage skill development, and alleviate athletes' feelings of uncertainty (Kohe & Purdy, 2020). However, these initiatives are often generic, non-gendered, and targeted at athletes who have competed internationally.

In Australia, there is a clear delineation of which sporting organisation is responsible for supporting athletes at retirement. As a condition of funding from the AIS, Australian NSOs must demonstrate accountability and prioritise athlete development, wellbeing, and engagement, including supporting athletes transitioning out of (i.e., retiring from) elite sport (Australian Institute of Sport, 2021a).

The AIS plays a crucial role in supporting NSOs to assist athletes retiring from their athletic careers. The supportive role was evidenced by the establishment of the Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement (AW&E) team in 2018. The AW&E team supports NSOs, enabling them to help athletes their wellbeing, outside activities, and the demands of elite sport. Support includes career and education, community engagement, conduct and professionalism, personal development, and mental health to assist athletes feel secure in their transition out of elite sport (Australian Institute of Sport, 2020b).

In 2019, the AIS also established two referral networks to support current and alumni (retired) athletes: the AIS Mental Health Referral Network (MHRN), and the AIS Career Practitioner Referral Network (CPRN). The AIS MHRN offers free, confidential mental health

support to elite athletes, coaches, and support staff via a team of psychologists and other mental health clinicians who specialise in areas such as depression, anxiety, trauma, and disordered eating (Rice et al., 2020). The AIS CPRN is a national network of professional career practitioners servicing athletes in Australian states and territories, including those living regionally and internationally, and provides up-to-date knowledge about career development and the impact of the changing world of work (Australian Institute of Sport, n.d.-a).

Despite the AIS acknowledgement that Australian NSOs are responsible for supporting athletes at retirement, the transition process is not clearly defined, which has led to retired athletes reporting frustration and disappointment with the support they receive from their NSOs (Knights et al., 2019). A study of Australian women athletes (netballers) made similar findings (Fairlie et al., 2020). Most of the women athletes in this study believed that support from their state and national associations needed improvement both during their career and at retirement. These findings underscore the crucial organisational support role that NSOs can play in assisting athletes to prepare for their retirement and navigate the retirement process (Fairlie et al., 2020).

Furthermore, in June 2020, the AIS released the Executive Report of the Wellbeing Review of Australia's High-Performance Sport System (The Review). The undertakers of The Review consulted stakeholders, including elite athletes and managers from NSOs, State and Territory Institutes and Academies of Sport, and experts from other industries who provide athlete wellbeing services. The Review findings revealed a pressing need for improved athlete wellbeing services and programs at retirement. Throughout the four stages of their athletic career (i.e., induction, movement between levels and/or institutional bodies, the ongoing process of post-high-performance planning, and the experience of exiting high-performance sport), elite athletes indicated they were least satisfied with the assistance received when they were exiting high-performance sport, whether their exit was due to injury, non-selection, or retirement (Australian Institute of Sport, 2020a).

The Review made several recommendations for NSOs to enhance support for elite athletes at retirement, noting that a grieving process occurred for many athletes when leaving their athletic career. The Review recommended empathetic exit protocols and clear communication from NSOs to retiring athletes on the post-high-performance support they can expect to receive during the transition out of elite sport, including clear timeframes during which they can access support. The Review also recommended that NSOs and the NIN align their guidelines for exiting an athlete from the high-performance system and that athletes should be consulted in developing these guidelines (Australian Institute of Sport, 2020a). The Review's findings and recommendations are significant, highlighting the importance of enhancing the support provided to athletes at retirement. While recommendations from The Review are a substantial statement of intent, the practical nature of the support that should be offered to retiring athletes is vaguely defined.

Support Pre-Transition to a Second Career

The existing body of literature regarding the support of athletes in transitioning to a second career has predominantly focused on preparing them for this shift prior to their retirement. Related research on athletic career development focuses on the concept of a 'dual career', which involves athletes balancing high-performance sport with an academic or vocational career (Stambulova et al., 2015, p. 1). Research using this concept has identified three types of dual career pathways for athletes: linear, convergent, and parallel (Pallarés et al., 2011). The literature explores the psychosocial implications of these pathways, including the emotional and social challenges that athletes may face during their career transitions (Örencik et al., 2023; Pallarés et al., 2011; Torregrosa et al., 2015):

- Linear: Athletes prioritise their athletic career exclusively, which may pose challenges during career transitions, especially in cases of injuries or unforeseen circumstances.
- Convergent: Athletes balance sport with a secondary occupation, such as education or work, leading to broader personal development and better overall wellbeing.

- Parallel: Athletes simultaneously pursue sport and another career, effectively managing both domains. This pathway often provides financial stability and a sense of purpose beyond sport.

The strategy of a dual career is heavily promoted by sporting organisations and parents, both of whom play crucial roles in the development of athletes. While research finds that there are benefits to athletes in developing dual careers (Barriopedro et al., 2018; Barriopedro et al., 2019; Price et al., 2010; Stambulova et al., 2021), the focus of the strategy has been on athletes taking responsibility for their dual career and not what sporting organisations can do to assist athletes (Li & Sum, 2017). Moreover, athletes have reported significant barriers to developing dual careers, particularly the lack of support from the sport environment, their athletic career stage and lifestyle conflict (Ryan, 2015).

Key stakeholders within the elite sport environment, such as coaches and other NSO staff, can hinder athletes from undertaking dual careers. In Australia, The Review investigated elite athletes' satisfaction with the career and education development support they received (Australian Institute of Sport, 2020a). Sixty-nine per cent of responding elite athletes reported being encouraged to develop career and education interests alongside their athletic careers. However, only 35% reported being given time by their NSO or coach to pursue career and education opportunities. A similar study of New Zealand athletes found that staff within sport environments strongly influenced whether athletes could pursue career interests beyond their athletic pursuits. While some athletes were encouraged to develop lives outside their sport environment, many felt that NSOs and coaches were unsupportive of their attempts to pursue careers outside of elite sport (Ryan, 2015). A study of athletes from South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe made similar findings, with athletes indicating that a lack of organisational support negatively impacted their ability to balance their dual careers (Tshube & Feltz, 2015).

Lifestyle conflicts often impact athletes' abilities to undertake dual careers. Athletes often start their athletic careers at an early age, long before they reach elite levels. This early start means their lifestyle becomes deeply entwined with their sport, a connection that only

strengthens as they progress to the elite level. Despite the best efforts of athletes to establish or maintain dual careers, there are inevitably times when aspects of their lives are compromised, and sport takes priority (Ryan, 2015).

An athlete's career stage affects their perceived readiness to explore dual careers. A study with New Zealand athletes found that older, more experienced athletes were eventually confronted with the idea that a sport-only identity was unsustainable. Therefore, they were more open to exploring a dual career. In contrast, young athletes at the beginning of their athletic careers embraced the opportunity to focus solely on their sport (Ryan, 2015).

Despite these barriers to exploring and establishing dual careers, studies have shown that women athletes pursue dual careers and education opportunities and develop multi-layered self-narratives more often than men. One reason for these gender differences could be that women are paid less than men for a professional career in sport and need to establish a dual career for financial reasons (Pascoe et al., 2022). In contrast to women, men athletes more often prioritise sport over other life domains, and they receive more encouragement to do so via their social environment (Ekengren et al., 2020; Örencik et al., 2023; Ryba et al., 2021).

Support During Transition to a Second Career

While much of the focus for assisting athletes with the transition to a second career has been on preparation prior to retirement, primarily through the development of dual careers, some support exists to assist them at retirement. These support strategies include financial support, talent transfer, transition to coaching, and transition to other sport industry roles.

Financial Support. Eligible athletes can access AIS financial support at retirement. In 2021, the dAIS Athlete Grant was extended to provide financial support to retiring athletes via the dAIS Transition Support grant (Australian Institute of Sport, 2021b). The grant provides additional funding for athletes transitioning out of elite sport due to retirement or non-selection. This funding can be used for various purposes, including career transition, education, and mental health support. However, the AIS applies strict eligibility criteria when

administering this grant, and retiring athletes can only access these funds if nominated by their NSO (Australian Institute of Sport, 2022).

Talent Transfer. Some NSOs implement carefully planned talent transfer strategies to assist athletes transition out of their current sport. One common strategy is the fast-track talent identification and development pathway, which involves moving talented athletes from one sport to the elite level of another sport (Collins et al., 2014; Vaeyens et al., 2008). Such transfers offer a viable alternative to retirement for athletes who wish to remain competitive despite challenges such as injury or deselection/non-selection from their current sport (MacNamara & Collins, 2015). By strategically redirecting athletes to other sports in the elite sport system, talent transfer can maximise returns on the time and capital invested in developing athletes who might otherwise have been forced into retirement (Cury et al., 2024).

Transition to Coaching. Retired athletes are often 'fast-tracked' into careers as coaches of elite athletes in their sport. Due to their significant contributions to their sport, these athletes are often exempted from entry-level qualifications and given access to shortened, fast-track courses that recognise their skills and experience (Blackett et al., 2017). These fast-track courses are less rigorous than traditional accreditation courses and may not include sport-specific skill sessions. The relevant sporting organisations often subsidise these courses, thereby financially supporting retiring athletes (Rynne, 2014).

Transition to other Sport Industry Roles. Another researched career transition strategy is the transition into sport industry roles other than coaching or competing in a new sport. In a study involving Greek and Spanish athletes, nearly half of the participants pursued professional work in sport or engaged in sport-related occupations external to coaching (Dimoula et al., 2013). Participants pursued roles as managers, officials, media commentators, physical education teachers, sports medicine practitioners, and sport psychologists (Torregrosa et al., 2004). Similar percentages were reported for retiring French athletes (Stambulova et al., 2007), with lower percentages reported among retiring Swedish

athletes (24%) (Stambulova et al., 2007) and retiring German athletes (28%) (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003).

Similarly, research indicates that many women athletes want to stay involved in sport after retiring. One study tracking the vocational careers of 195 retired Swiss women soccer players found that one-third remained in the sport industry post-retirement. Another study of Australian women tennis players found that 88% maintained their connection with the sport through coaching, assistant coaching, management, or administration post-retirement (Young et al., 2006). In another study (Chow, 2001), all six retired elite women athletes from Hong Kong continued their involvement in sport after retirement. Maintaining strong links with their sporting organisation resulted in these suddenly retired elite women athletes reporting high satisfaction with their retirement as elite athletes. A further study on retired elite women gymnasts reached similar findings and recommended that NSOs develop practices to keep retired athletes in sporting roles, such as mentoring younger athletes (Clowes et al., 2015). Such practices enable the knowledge and expertise of retired athletes to be passed on and provide them with a sense of value and purpose in their post-athletic career (Clowes et al., 2015).

None of the strategies discussed above (dual career, financial support, talent transfer, transition to coaching and transition to other sport industry roles) have been specifically designed or implemented to support women athletes who retire suddenly to a second career. In fact, upon retirement, women athletes often have limited options to stay involved in sport, be it in high-performance coaching (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2018) or sport management roles (Burton, 2015; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Despite implementing various strategies, the literature consistently highlights the frustration that women athletes experience due to the lack of organisational support, particularly from their NSO, when they retire (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Young et al., 2006). This frustration underscores the urgent need for more comprehensive support systems for women athletes transitioning to a second career, especially after sudden and unexpected retirement from elite sport.

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, researchers have developed and applied several athletic career transition models, with a focus on their practical application. For example, the transtheoretical model was applied to analyse Korean elite tennis players' decision-making throughout the pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, preparation moratorium, and action phases of their retirement transition (Park et al., 2012). An empirical model that describes the transition journey from athlete to coach was recently developed. Three transition phases for retired athletes making the transition to coaching were identified: the career shift, re-identification, and professional development (Chroni et al., 2020). While these two models are comprehensive, they have limitations because they do not account for sudden and unexpected athletic retirement, nor do they examine gender-specific needs (Wylleman et al., 2016). While career change theories also exist, including the boundaryless career model (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) and Bridges' three-stage model (Bridges & Bridges, 2019), these theories do not account for transitions experienced when moving out of non-linear careers (i.e. a career path that does not follow the traditional, predictable progression up the corporate ladder) such as being an elite athlete (Edwards, 2021). A conceptual framework is needed to address these limitations by recognising sudden retirement, addressing gender-specific needs, and focusing on transitioning from a non-linear athletic career to a second career.

Ecological-Intersectional Model

The EIM (LaVoi, 2016) is derived from ecological systems theory (EST), a framework that examines how various interconnected environmental systems influence an individual's development. Proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979, EST was initially developed for human development research and used to explain how the inherent qualities of a child and the characteristics of their external environment interact and influence how the child grows and develops (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). More specifically, EST identified five levels that influence human development and behaviour:

1. Micro level: includes personal and psychological factors, such as an individual's thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and values.
2. Meso level: describes social influences, such as colleagues and peers.
3. Exo level: includes organisational policies, professional opportunities, practices, and job descriptions.
4. Macro level: comprises social norms and cultural systems.
5. Chronosystem: changes over time (personal events or external factors) that influence development through life.

Outside human development research, EST has been extensively applied in sport industry research. Its influence can be seen in diverse areas, including athlete development (Cobley et al., 2014), the dual career of student-athletes (Guidotti et al., 2015; Sum et al., 2017), and health and physical activity (Graber et al., 2012; King & Gonzalez, 2018). While ecological models have been used sparingly in the field of athletic retirement research, two studies used EST to compare cross-cultural experiences of athletic retirement. The first study compared French and Swedish elite athletes' retirement experiences, with the determination of factors at the macro level (i.e., social norms and cultural systems) being integral to the research (Stambulova et al., 2007). The second study compared Greek and Spanish athletes' retirement experiences (Dimoula et al., 2013).

After using EST to understand the barriers and supports that influence women's experiences in sport coaching (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012), LaVoi (2016) added the concept of intersectionality to the model, thereby creating the EIM. Intersectionality recognises the complex nature of individuals with multiple social identities, such as gender, age, class, sexual identity, disability, race, and parental status, and how these intersect to shape their experiences (LaVoi, 2016). The inclusion of intersectionality at the individual level plays a pivotal role in better understanding how various social identities interact within different ecological systems to influence individual experiences and outcomes (LaVoi, 2016). In addition to recognising the intersectionality at the individual level, the EIM now

recognises four ecological levels instead of five (i.e., removal of the chronosystem level), with these levels renamed as follows:

1. Individual level: the personal and psychological factors such as thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and values of an individual.
2. Interpersonal level: relationships that an individual has with non-sport connections, including family members, friends, and intimate partners, and with sport connections, including peers, coaches, sporting organisation staff, sport science professionals, and sport medicine staff.
3. Organisational level: support provided to individuals by the formal and informal structures of their NSO, including policies, professional practices, organisational culture, job descriptions, opportunities (or lack thereof), the quality of high-performance management systems, athletic infrastructure, and high-performance sport funding allocation.
4. Socio-cultural level: broader societal norms, stereotypes, and gender expectations that indirectly affect and influence Individuals.

Since the development of the EIM in 2016, researchers have applied the model to a broad range of research on women in sport. Examples include a study on women athletes transitioning into semi-professional team sport (Taylor et al., 2020), the experiences and perceptions of volunteer women Gaelic football coaches in Ireland (Hogan et al., 2022), and an assessment of the benefits of a coach mentorship program on women coaches' development (Banwell et al., 2021). These diverse applications underscore the versatility and wide-ranging impact of the EIM in researching women in sport as leaders and athletes.

Researchers have yet to apply the EIM to the athletic retirement experiences of elite women athletes, specifically those who have retired suddenly and need to transition to a second career. To contribute new knowledge and expand the potential applicability of the EIM across broader fields of women in sport, the EIM has been applied as a theoretical framework to guide the data analysis for this research. The attributes and challenges

associated with an elite woman athlete's sudden retirement and transition to a second career have been identified and sorted into respective ecological levels. This sorting process identifies the support strategies at the organisational level, thereby providing practical insights for NSOs.

Transition Theory

Transition theory is a framework that supports an understanding of how individuals experience and cope with change and transition. Developed by Nancy K. Schlossberg in 1981, TT recognises that transitions can be complex and multidimensional, and that people respond differently based on personal characteristics and situational factors. Transition theory is based on three premises (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 59):

1. Transitions are continuous, illustrating the ongoing and dynamic nature of the process as individuals move into, through, and out of transitions.
2. Reactions to transitions, whether they are events or non-events, are shaped by perception and context and significantly influence each individual's life.
3. Transitions are not one-time events but processes that unfold over time with no definite endpoint, conveying the complexity and depth of the topic.

Transition theory posits that transitions comprise three phases (Anderson et al., 2012). The first phase involves an individual 'moving into' a new situation or circumstances (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 56). The second phase is the 'moving through' phase, during which individuals seek to balance and integrate the implications and demands of the new situation with their existing life (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 57). Finally, there is the 'moving out' phase, during which individuals conclude a series of transitions and anticipate the next phase. The transition eventually becomes integrated with other aspects of the individual's life, leading to a period of stability (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 57).

The context of the transition refers to the individual's relationship to the transition, including their coping skills and support network. When an individual moves through a transition, their ability to cope with the transition is influenced by the interaction of four

factors: (1) situation, namely the event and how it is perceived; (2) self, namely personal characteristics that influence the individual's ability to cope with the transition); (3) support from family and peers; and (4) strategies, namely the direct or indirect actions of the individual, including seeking information or using problem-solving skills. Strategies that complement the first three factors will influence the ease of change that an individual may experience (Anderson et al., 2011; Goodman et al., 2006). The fourth factor, strategies, facilitates an individual's ability to cope with a transition and adapt to a new scenario (Schlossberg, 1981).

Transition theory has been the basis for developing several athletic retirement and career transition models used in sport psychology, including the athletic career termination model and the athletic career transition model (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). These two models view athletic retirement and career transition as a process of coping with a set of specific demands or challenges. These models are designed for athletes who are contemplating retirement, as they assist athletes to decide whether they have the appropriate coping resources to either successfully continue their athletic career or retire and adjust to post-sport life (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008; Stambulova et al., 2007).

Transition theory has also been applied in sport management research on women's athletic retirement. Two studies have previously used TT as the framework to identify the support and resources that assist elite women athletes in preparing for athletic retirement (Chow, 2001; Zhu, 2023). Both studies described three phases of athletic retirement: (1) pre-transition to competitive retirement phase, (2) transition to sport retirement phase, and (3) post-transition to sport retirement phase. Importantly, both studies compared the transition experience of retired athletes with that of current athletes who could only project their feelings about retirement, given that it had not yet occurred.

The wide use of TT to investigate athletic retirement and career transitions, along with its specific application to women's athletic retirement, justifies its suitability for this

research. The application of TT supports a richer understanding of the organisational support needs of elite women athletes during their transition to a second career.

Theory Integration

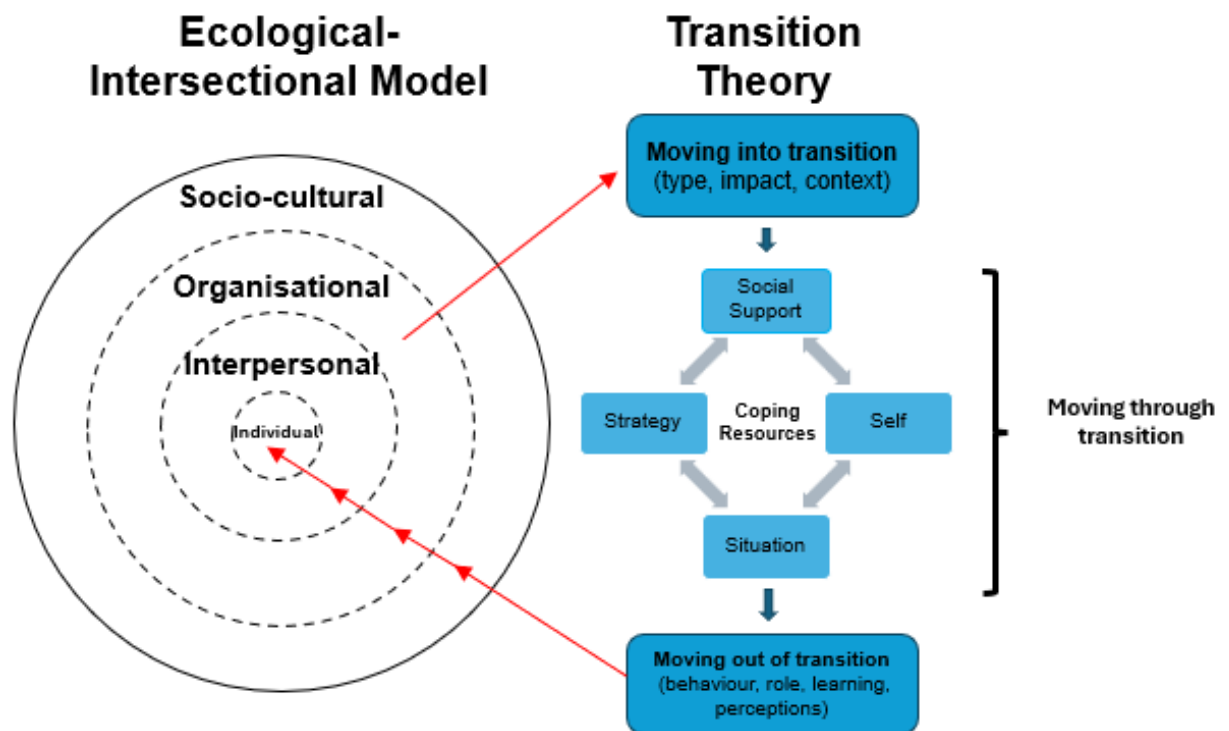
The literature reviewed revealed a lack of understanding of the organisational support that elite women athletes require during the transition to a second career, particularly those women who retire suddenly. Existing theoretical frameworks do not address the support needs of elite women athletes facing such a transition (Edwards, 2021; Wylleman et al., 2016). This lack of guidance reinforces the need to better understand the organisational support available to these athletes so they can successfully transition to a second career.

Accordingly, a bespoke conceptual framework has been developed to guide the current research. This framework considers sudden retirement and gender-specific considerations and focuses on the transition from sudden athletic retirement to a second career. This framework draws on the EIM to understand the support for women to thrive in sport and overcome the barriers that hinder women's involvement in sport (Banwell et al., 2021; Hogan et al., 2022; LaVoi, 2016; Taylor et al., 2020), and from TT (Chow, 2001; Zhu, 2023) to study the transition process for elite women athletes. The integrated conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

The EIM has been chosen for this research as the results from the data analysis will inform the support services that assist suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career. These support services will then be sorted at each ecological level, as demonstrated by the four red arrows at the bottom of Figure 1. This sorting process will specifically enable the identification of the support required at the organisational level for these athletes. Transition theory will also integrate with the EIM to (1) help identify the transition phases that women athletes who retired suddenly and need to transition to a second career will move through and (2) identify when (i.e. which transition phase) organisational support strategies identified using the EIM should be offered to these athletes, as demonstrated by the single red arrow at the top of Figure 1.

Figure 1

Integration of the EIM and TT frameworks

**Chapter Summation**

The increasing professionalisation of elite sport for women has resulted in more women becoming elite athletes and retiring from elite sport. Women athletes will either retire under general circumstances or suddenly due to non-normative factors such as career-ending injuries, deselection from teams, or issues with their coach or high-performance environment. While support for elite women athletes during their athletic career has significantly increased in recent years, this support needs to continue beyond being an athlete when transitioning to a second career, including specific support for sudden retirement.

There is a significant lack of research on the retirement experiences of elite women athletes. Only 10 studies were found (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Chow, 2001; Clowes et al., 2015; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008; Young et al., 2006; Zhu, 2023), and only four of

these studies identified the retirement circumstances of elite women athletes (sudden or general) (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Young et al., 2006). Other than a study of Australian women tennis players (Young et al., 2006), these studies found that athletes who retired suddenly due to injury, deselection, or issues with their coach or high-performance environment faced greater difficulties at retirement than women athletes who retired generally. Furthermore, these studies did not explore support strategies to assist these women athletes with their sudden retirement and need to transition to a second career. This lack of research underscores the need for more studies in this area. Additionally, it is crucial to understand that women athletes face unique challenges and report being deeply frustrated with the lack of support they receive at retirement (Fairlie et al., 2020). This frustration is a clear indication of the need for more effective support strategies.

Theoretically, a bespoke conceptual framework has been designed to guide the current research as existing frameworks are not fit for purpose. This framework merges two previously applied theories in sport management research: the EIM and TT. The EIM is a model that recognises an individual does not live in a single environment. It acknowledges that individuals are influenced by different values and messaging that are received from the broader sport and socio-cultural environment. Characterised by four ecological levels (individual, interpersonal, organisational, and socio-cultural), the EIM supports a richer understanding of how the values and messaging that an individual is immersed in influence their behaviour and experience (LaVoi, 2016).

Transition theory is based on the premise that individuals continuously move into, through, and out of transitions. Transition theory recognises that the type and context of the transition determine the impact of the transition on an individual and their reaction to it (Anderson et al., 2011). Transition theory is individual-centric and does not account for interactions the individual has with the broader sport and socio-cultural environments (i.e., the different ecological levels).

For the purpose of the current study, the EIM focuses on strategies and support resources at each ecological level (individual, interpersonal, organisational, and socio-cultural) for elite women athletes when they experience sudden retirement and must transition to a second career. Transition theory has been applied to determine the most effective phase for offering organisational strategies to assist with the transition to a second career. Transition theory has been applied to determine at which transition phase (from sudden athletic retirement to a second career) these organisational strategies should be offered to elite women athletes to assist with the sudden retirement and transition to a second career.

Next, Chapter Three, Methodology, explains and justifies the research design and the methods chosen for this research.

Chapter Three – Methodology

Introduction

To expand the knowledge on how NSOs can support elite women athletes with the transition to a second career after sudden athletic retirement, this chapter focuses on the approach and methods employed in this research. A constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm has been adopted to achieve the research aim. Constructivist researchers seek to understand how humans make sense of the world in which they live and work. The constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm lends itself to qualitative research because it emphasises the meaning individuals give to their experiences rather than the verification of a theory or phenomenon (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Narrative inquiry has been adopted to explore the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm through this research. To delve into the narrative inquiry, a two-stage data collection method was designed. Data collection entailed (1) organisational document analysis and (2) semi-structured interviews with two cohorts: NSO managers (NSO participants) and suddenly retired elite women athletes (athlete participants). Data analysis comprised concurrent deductive and inductive coding of the documents and the interview transcripts. Deductively, descriptive, structural, and interpretive codes were derived from two theories, the EIM and TT, to discover themes across the dataset.

Research Paradigm

A research paradigm informs the philosophical framework on which the research is based. It includes a set of ideas and beliefs that guide and influence the research. A research paradigm comprises different philosophical and theoretical levels, including ontology, epistemology, and methodology, each of which fundamentally affects the choice of research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ontology refers to the nature of reality. It seeks to understand the 'nature of reality' and whether social entities need to be perceived as subjective or objective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 8). At one end of the ontology spectrum is constructivism, also referred to as subjectivism, which asserts that reality is socially constructed and ever-changing

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). No single reality or truth exists; instead, multiple realities or different interpretations of a single event are possible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). At the other end of the spectrum is objectivism, also referred to as positivism, which states that reality is objective and can be measured and understood. The positivist approach to research tends to consider the existence of a relationship between two variables rather than the explanation for it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As such, positivism typically aligns with quantitative research methodology (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Sport, in the context of this thesis, is understood as a social phenomenon. For this reason, a constructivist approach has been adopted.

Epistemology, the theory of knowledge, is another critical component of the research paradigm. It seeks to understand how knowledge is gathered and from what sources. Constructivist research is grounded in interpretivist epistemology, which assumes social phenomena exist only because of the meanings that participants and researchers provide (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Interpretivist research aims to understand or interpret the meaning of human behaviour rather than generalise and predict causes and effects (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interpretivist research is interested in specific, contextualised environments and acknowledges that reality and knowledge are not objective but influenced by people within those environments.

Methodology is the study of research methods. Research methods are structured procedures to discover new knowledge or verify pre-existing knowledge claims. As interpretivist research is conducted from the participant's perspective, open-ended questions are used to elicit the individual's perception of their own experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In interpretivist research, the researcher is not a detached observer but an active participant interpreting the data. This approach values the richness and complexity of human behaviour and social phenomena rather than reducing them to a few categories or ideas (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Responses from the participants are extracted in a way that may create meaning or relevance in other contexts and lay the foundation for further

exploration (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, interpretivist research relies heavily on qualitative research approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative Research

When a social or human problem is identified, qualitative research uses assumptions and theoretical frameworks to inform the research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data is interpreted based on the meaning that individuals give their experiences rather than on verifying a theory or phenomenon (Li et al., 2008). Qualitative research is positioned from the point of view of the research participants (individuals or groups of people) being studied in their natural environment. Non-numerical data, such as text, is collected and analysed to gain in-depth insights from these participants regarding the problem being researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Qualitative research is conducted in naturalistic settings. Unlike quantitative research, it does not control variables, manipulate procedures, create research or comparison groups, or isolate a particular phenomenon (Li et al., 2008). The detailed descriptions and explanations of experiences, behaviours, and beliefs obtained from qualitative research enable further exploration of phenomena. In contrast, quantitative research can overlook the nuances and subtleties of human behaviour (Maxwell, 2004).

As with all research, qualitative research has its limitations, which are important to acknowledge. Logistically, the collection of data is labour and time-intensive (King & Horrocks, 2010). The data collected may also be ambiguous due to the use of words, their different meaning, synonyms and differing languages (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As qualitative research is used to explore little-known or ambiguous phenomena with small sample sizes, the results cannot be extrapolated to the general population, nor can the results usually be replicated due to the specific raw data collected and used for a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ruddell, 2011).

Qualitative research has the unique potential to explore and explain correlation or the association of causal relationships. The detailed descriptions and explanations of experiences, behaviours, and beliefs obtained from qualitative research enable a deeper

exploration of social phenomena, a task that quantitative research can sometimes overlook due to its focus on the what, when, and where of phenomena and their characteristics (Maxwell, 2004). While quantitative research contributes to understanding the what, when, and where of phenomena and their characteristics, qualitative research is more holistic. Qualitative research aims to explore phenomena further by asking research questions that begin with why and how (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Several studies that utilised quantitative research methods have recognised a link between sudden athletic retirement and challenges with transitioning to a second (non-athletic) career (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007). Qualitative research contributes to a richer understanding of why elite athletes, in particular women, struggle with the sudden retirement and transition to a second career and how NSOs can support and offer strategies to assist suddenly retired elite women athletes with this transition.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach supported by the philosophical assumptions of interpretivism. The focus of narrative inquiry is the organisation of human knowledge (Riessman, 2008). Field texts, such as stories, autobiographies, journals, field notes, letters, interviews and lived experiences, are used as the units of analysis to research and understand how people create meaning in their lives through narratives (Clandinin, 2013).

Narrative inquiry provides an overarching explanation of a story. It is important to note that the terms 'narrative' and 'story,' while often used interchangeably, have distinct meanings in the context of narrative inquiry. A narrative is the factual reconstruction of an event, regardless of how exciting or dull the event is (Riessman, 2008), and it can provide a framework or template people rely on to tell their stories (Skinner et al., 2014). On the other hand, a story is a tale that people tell. Unlike narratives, stories can be entirely fictional and sensationalised to excite the audience (Riessman, 2008). Understanding this distinction is crucial in narrative inquiry because it helps researchers accurately interpret and analyse the stories and narratives they encounter.

While narrative inquiry has been used sparingly in sport management research, the benefits are clear. An individual's story reveals aspects of their personal life and provides insights into the broader context in which they live and work (Stride et al., 2017). Individual experiences are subject to and formed through broader social power dynamics and social structures. The stories of individuals can provide an effective means of reflecting on how decisions made at the organisational or societal level can influence or play out at the individual level (Stride et al., 2017). By exploring the personal narratives of elite women athletes, narrative inquiry allows researchers to understand the context in which these women live and to empathise with them.

An essential element of narrative research is the researcher's collaboration with the participants, ensuring their active involvement in the research (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). This collaborative approach respects the participants' perspectives and enriches the research process. To conduct narrative research, the researcher needs to spend a considerable amount of time gathering the stories of individuals through several types of information, such as documents, newspaper articles, and interviews (Merriam, 2009). While narrative inquiry is guided by the researcher, with data generated using a pre-planned series of questions on a particular topic, the collected information must be in the context of the story or phenomenon being studied (Riessman, 2008). Narrative researchers focus on capturing the stories of participants, situating them within their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and historical context. This approach allows researchers to understand how individuals make sense of their lives and experiences (Skinner et al., 2014).

When individuals recount their stories, they often do not present them chronologically. Re-storying is a critical process in narrative inquiry, involving collating and reorganising participant stories in chronological order to provide a causal link among emerging and identified ideas. The narrative then describes the story and the emerging themes (Clandinin, 2013). This process allows for a coherent narrative to be constructed from the participants' stories, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the research topic. Narrative inquiry is also a powerful tool that amplifies the voices of those who have not

been heard before (McQueen & Zimmerman, 2006). It has been used in the field of sport psychology to understand various aspects of athlete retirement and transition out of elite sport, including dual careers (Ryba et al., 2015), gender and pre-retirement (Noora J. Ronkainen et al., 2016), athletic retirement and mental health (Jewett et al., 2019), transition and identity (Cosh et al., 2013; N J. Ronkainen et al., 2016), women athletes' adjustment to retirement (Cavallerio et al., 2017), forced retirement (Demetriou et al., 2020), and athletic retirement and aging (Silver, 2021). However, minimal literature exists that demonstrates the use of narrative inquiry to understand the phenomenon of sudden athletic retirement and career transition. To understand this phenomenon, narrative inquiry will be applied to the current study to capture and amplify the critical voices with whom this research is primarily concerned.

Researcher Positionality Statement

The current research was motivated by a tragic road crash that resulted in the death of an elite Australian woman athlete and caused severe injuries to five of her teammates. Most of these athletes could not continue their sport careers and received inadequate support for recovery and transition to life after elite sport.

The researcher identifies as a woman with over 15 years of experience in Australia's sport industry. She has worked with various sport organisations, including a federal agency for sport, national and state sporting organisations, schools, clubs, and private sport providers. While many of these organisations claim to be dedicated to enhancing the environment for athletes and their members, they often fail to consider the experiences and opinions of the athletes they serve.

Although the researcher does not consider herself an elite athlete, she has personally experienced the sudden and unexpected end of employment in the sport industry on three occasions. This experience has fuelled her interest in understanding the support that can be provided to athletes who experience unexpected retirement from their careers.

Research Design

To address this knowledge gap, this research aims to expand the knowledge on how NSOs can support elite women athletes with the transition to a second career after sudden athletic retirement. To achieve the aim, the following research questions were posed:

1. What policies and/or practices do NSOs implement to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?
2. How can these policies and/or practices be enhanced to meet the needs of elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?
3. How can the EIM and TT assist NSOs to target policies and/or practices to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?

A two-stage research design has been developed to answer these three research questions.

Stage 1 of this research comprised a document analysis of publicly available NSO documents that included information about the support provided to women athletes for the transition to a second career. The document analysis provides an understanding of the current environment and support that NSOs provide to elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career beyond elite sport and provides guidance on who to invite to participate in stage 2 of this research.

Stage 2 comprised semi-structured interviews with participants from two cohorts: NSO managers (NSO participants) and suddenly retired elite women athletes (athlete participants). The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to:

1. Gain an understanding of the support elite women athletes require when faced with sudden retirement and the need to transition to a second career beyond elite sport.
2. Build on the knowledge gained from the document analysis by consulting with NSO managers about the organisational support provided to elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career beyond elite sport.

Stage 1 - Document Analysis

Document analysis is a proven qualitative research method used within sport research. It involves extracting empirical data from written documents and evaluating and interpreting it to grasp the underlying meaning (Bowen, 2009). This method has been effectively used to understand the athlete talent development environment and support systems within a sporting organisation (Henriksen et al., 2010; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009; Sotiriadou et al., 2017). However, hardly any researchers have used document analysis to understand organisational support for athlete retirement and career transition.

The benefits of using document analysis as a research method are numerous and promising. It is a low-cost, quick, and efficient data collection method. Documents, such as public policy papers, organisational reports, and historical records, are relatively easy to obtain, especially if publicly available (Bowen, 2009). Data collection can commence quickly, with data being analysed early in the research process (Silverman, 2011). Document analysis is unobtrusive and non-reactive because it does not involve human participants. The researcher cannot disturb the environment, nor can participants' behaviours be reactive or altered (Bowen, 2009; Jones, 2015). Consequently, document analysis results are easily repeatable (Jones, 2015).

Document analysis also has limitations. The retrievability of documents can limit the research process because organisations may withhold specific documents related to the research topic. Such withholding can introduce bias into the collected data because the absence of certain documents can skew the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). On the other hand, time can become an issue if many documents are to be analysed (Yin, 2014). These limitations can affect the comprehensiveness and accuracy of research findings. To address these limitations when undertaking this research, only publicly available documents were collected, and a criterion for including documents was developed.

Document Collection. Publicly available NSO documents that contained content related to any of the following three criteria were collected for the document analysis:

1. Organisational support for athletes transitioning out of elite sport and into a second career.
2. Criterion one plus support for sudden athletic retirement.
3. Criterion one plus support specifically for women athletes.

A comprehensive search was conducted on the official websites of 43 Australian NSOs to find publicly available documents that met the above criteria. The websites included 39 NSOs that received high-performance funding from the AIS in the 2021-22 financial year (see Appendix K). These NSOs are accountable for the outcomes of their sport and prioritise podium potential campaigns and the overall development, wellbeing, and engagement of athletes (Australian Institute of Sport, 2021a). Four other NSOs were included: the AFL, Cricket Australia, the National Rugby League, and Tennis Australia. Although these four NSOs are responsible for their sports' long-term development and sustainability, they do not receive high-performance investment from the AIS. Instead, they are recognised as COMPPS members.

The collected documents included NSO policy and documented practices that aligned with the three criteria. Policies refer to the rules or frameworks that govern how certain situations within an organisation should be handled (Cohen, 2012). An example of an NSO policy that relates to this research is athlete categorisation guidelines or transition guidelines. In contrast, practices, which refer to the steps or actions that organisation employees follow, are often developed over time; however, they may not be formally documented (Cohen, 2012).

Document Analysis. Once documents were collected, the researcher reviewed each one to familiarise herself with the data before the analysis took place. Data analysis is the process of making sense of data in a way that allows the research questions to be answered (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). Due to the exploratory nature of this research, thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns of meaning or themes that arose across the documents (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is

used when conducting interpretivist research; it examines how events, realities, meanings and experiences affect a range of discourses operating in a society (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To facilitate the conceptualisation of topic summaries and themes, the researcher engaged in multiple rounds of coding. Coding, the process of assigning a label to a piece of text to identify and summarise the main points and common meanings across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), was approached with flexibility. Two coding approaches, deductive and inductive, were adopted and applied concurrently for the document analysis.

The initial deductive coding of documents was undertaken using a descriptive coding framework. Descriptive codes are an appropriate method for coding non-interview data such as documents, and they use a label, often a noun, to summarise the topic of the data in a word or phrase (King & Horrocks, 2010; Saldana, 2021). The result of descriptive coding is a categorised inventory of data that can be used for further analysis and interpretation in further rounds of coding and thematic analysis (Saldana, 2021).

Codes can be derived from research questions or theoretical frameworks (Saldana, 2021). The descriptive coding framework devised for this stage of data analysis was guided by the conceptual framework developed specifically for this research. The conceptual framework was developed from two theories that have been used in sport research: the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) and TT (Anderson et al., 2011; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011). Each theory comprises four descriptive codes. Three of the descriptive codes from TT aligned directly with descriptive codes from the EIM, and subsequently, these codes were merged. The descriptive codes used for the deductive coding of the documents are identified in Table 2.

Table 2*Descriptive and structural codes*

TT	EIM	Descriptive/structural codes
Situation	<i>No equivalent</i>	Situation
Self	Individual	Individual characteristics
Support	Interpersonal	Interpersonal support
Strategies	Organisational	Organisational strategies
<i>No equivalent</i>	Socio-cultural	Socio-cultural

For this research, inductive coding was undertaken concurrently with deductive coding. Inductive coding is a method of creating codes based on the data presented, instead of allocating data with pre-defined (deductive) codes (Saldana, 2021). While inductive coding can take longer than deductive coding, the two methods are complementary and thereby provide richer perspectives on the possible themes across the dataset when compared to the use of a single coding approach (Blackstone, 2012).

Once the deductive and inductive coding processes were complete, topic summaries and themes were defined based on reviewing and clustering the codes. Topic summaries are summaries of topics or categories, while themes capture a core idea or meaning and tell an interpretive story about it (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Themes are broader than codes and topic summaries because they include the researcher's interpretation and construction of the ideas and patterns that emerged from the data (Saldana, 2021). Themes enable the research questions to be answered and the aim of the research to be achieved (Gibbs, 2007). Themes were identified when a code was identified at least twice across the documents (King & Horrocks, 2010).

The topic summaries derived from the document analysis were further explored in stage two of the research, the semi-structured interviews. This use of multiple research methods allowed for the further analysis of themes arising from data sources (Gibbs, 2007).

Stage 2 - Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were undertaken as the second research method for exploring and building on the document analysis findings. Interviews are one of the most frequently used methods when generating data for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews involve a planned question-and-answer discussion with an individual that allows the researcher to collect information (Li et al., 2008). The primary objective of interviews is to gain unrestricted comments and opinions from participants regarding their views, stories, and accounts of the overall purpose of the research (Dittimore, 2011). Data obtained from interviews contributed to a richer understanding of the underlying reasons for these views, stories, and accounts (Dittimore, 2011; Li et al., 2008). Interviews have been commonly used as a research method to investigate various aspects of athlete retirement (Roberts et al., 2015; Noora J. Ronkainen et al., 2016; Silver, 2021; Torregrosa et al., 2015) and career transition (Edwards, 2021; Harry & Weight, 2021; Vilanova & Puig, 2016).

The adaptability of the semi-structured interview format was a key factor in the decision to use the method in this research. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to explore their experiences and share insights they consider most relevant to the overall line of inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This flexibility allows researchers to adjust the sequence of questions or delve more deeply into a participant's response.

As with all research methods, limitations exist to using interviews for data generation. Interviews can be time-consuming and may use extensive financial resources (Curtis & Curtis, 2011; Li et al., 2008). To alleviate these potential limitations, interviews for this research were between 45 and 80 minutes in length and were conducted using Zoom online teleconference software to avoid the need for travel. Sample size is another consideration when conducting interviews as a research method. Data saturation, a process via which no new information or themes emerge from the interviews, is a crucial aspect of interview-based research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, a sample size large enough for data saturation to occur needs to be obtained. Data saturation ensures that valid and reliable conclusions can be drawn and can be achieved via approximately 12 interviews (Guest et

al., 2006). Further, code saturation, the point when no additional issues are identified and the codebook begins to stabilise, can occur at nine interviews (Hennink et al., 2017). It is at this point when we fully understand issues, and when no further dimensions, nuances, or insights of issues can be found, however occurs between 16-24 interviews (Hennink et al., 2017).

Participant sample. Sampling in qualitative research refers to identifying a group of participants relevant to the research study. Since this research seeks to explore a particular phenomenon, a purposive sampling technique was used to attract suitable interview participants. Purposive sampling seeks participants with considerable experience or knowledge of the topic (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Participants are selected based on inclusion criteria and the researcher's judgement (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). Additionally, purposive sampling is often used in narrative inquiry research (Kim, 2016). To align with the aim of this research, participants were recruited from two distinct cohorts: NSO managers and suddenly retired elite women athletes. The inclusion criteria for these two sample cohorts varied. The inclusion criteria for the cohort of athlete participants were:

- Previously were an elite athlete who had competed at the national level of their sport or higher.
- Participated in the women's category of their sport.
- Retired from elite sport between 2014-2022.
- Retired from elite sport suddenly, but not due to a code of conduct breach, such as a doping violation.

The year of retirement is a significant criterion because it aligns with the shift in the perceived needs of athletes, including supporting greater athlete wellbeing than the previous focus on career and education. In 2014, the AIS created the Personal Excellence (PE) Program, replacing the Athlete Career and Education Program. The PE Program aimed to provide athletes with guidance, resources, and educational opportunities to make informed decisions regarding performance in sport and everyday life (Chambers et al., 2019). In 2018,

the AIS relaunched the PE program as the AW&E network, which aims to support elite athletes' mental, physical and emotional health so they can excel in their athletic careers and all other major aspects of life (Australian Institute of Sport, 2020b). The AW&E network now boasts a team of almost 60 dedicated AW&E managers, providing a comprehensive range of support. These managers work closely with NSOs and State Institutes of Sport, directly supporting athletes (Australian Institute of Sport, 2024). Support services AW&E managers offer elite athletes include personal and professional development opportunities, community engagement opportunities, and access to the AIS's MHRN and CPRN (Australian Institute of Sport, 2020b).

The inclusion criteria for the NSO participants cohort included being a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), high-performance manager, or AW&E manager from the NSOs identified in Stage 1 - document analysis.

Participant Recruitment. The strategies employed to attract the suddenly retired elite women athlete cohort were particularly extensive, including social media distribution of articles about the research, inclusion in NSO athlete alumna distribution lists, and direct emails by NSOs to potential participants. Specific examples of how the information about the research and recruitment were advertised included:

- Distribution by the researcher and her supervisors via social media channels, including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (see Appendix A).
- News articles were placed on The Amy Gillett Foundation website and LinkedIn page.
- Distribution to various sporting organisations outlining the research and a request to distribute the information through their athlete alumna networks (see Appendix B).
- News articles were placed in the Clearinghouse for Sport's '*Daily Sport News*' newsletter.
- Targeted email invitations by NSOs to potential participants.

- Information was shared in numerous sport-focused social media groups.

Interested participants determined their eligibility to participate in the research by completing an online screening survey hosted by Qualtrics software. The screening survey comprised four 'yes/no' questions regarding the eligibility criteria for the elite women athlete participant cohort (noted in the prior section and Appendix C). The contact details of eligible participants were requested at the completion of the survey, and these details were recorded separately to maintain survey anonymity. The researcher then contacted eligible participants by phone and/or email to arrange a convenient interview time and provided potential participants with the 'Information to Participants' (see Appendix D) and 'Consent' forms (see Appendix E). These forms explained the nature of the research, the estimated duration of the interview, and participants' rights, including their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Contact details for Lifeline and Beyond Blue counselling services were provided to all participants in case they experienced any distress or discomfort resulting from participation in the research. Additionally, the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee complaint number and the researcher's contact details were supplied to participants. Interviews were conducted using the online telecommunication software Zoom and were audio recorded.

Recruitment for the NSO manager cohort was targeted. Based on the document analysis results, the researcher emailed an invitation to the CEOs of NSOs with publicly available documents that included content related to the three prescribed document selection criteria to participate. The invitation to CEOs (n=17) detailed the purpose of the research, the rationale for why their NSO was invited to participate, and an invitation for a representative from their NSO (e.g., CEO, High-Performance Manager, and/or AW&E manager) to participate in a semi-structured interview (see Appendix F). The email included the 'Information to Participants' (see Appendix G) and the 'Consent' forms (see Appendix H). These forms explained the nature of the research, the estimated duration of the interview, and participant rights, including the right to withdraw from the research at any time. As with the athlete participants, NSO participants were provided with contact details for Lifeline and

Beyond Blue counselling services, the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee complaint number, and the researcher's contact details.

The NSO CEOs who expressed interest in having a representative from their organisation participate were asked to respond to the researcher with the name and contact details of the nominated participant. The researcher then organised a time to conduct the interview that was convenient for the participant. After completing this process, only 11 NSOs had participated in the research (one NSO had two participants attend the interview); therefore, there were insufficient participants (less than 12). As a result, a secondary recruitment strategy was developed. As participant recruitment for the suddenly retired elite women athlete cohort was being undertaken simultaneously, several eligible women athletes were from sports that were not represented by the NSO cohort (documents or NSO participant interviews). The CEOs of the NSOs from the sports these athletes represented were then invited to participate in the research. The CEOs of these NSOs (n=3) were contacted via email with the same information that the previous group of NSO CEOs were provided and issued an invitation to participate. The second recruitment strategy generated interest from an additional three NSOs. Overall, 15 managers from 16 NSOs participated in semi-structured interviews.

Interview Guides. Two interview guides were developed: one for each of the two cohorts participating in semi-structured interviews. These guides were developed using key themes derived from the literature reviewed and topic summaries identified from the document analysis.

The interview guide for the athlete participant cohort explored the circumstances that led them to retire suddenly from elite sport, the support their NSO offered them, and their reflections on the support their NSO should have provided (see Appendix I). The interview guide for the NSO participant cohort explored the NSO's current policy and practices for supporting suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career (see Appendix J).

The phrasing of questions in each interview guide was designed to minimise bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The Victoria University Human Ethics Committee reviewed and approved both interview guides. The interviews were not conducted in any specific order, as the findings from each cohort did not influence the subsequent interviews or the development of the other interview guide.

Interview Process. Regardless of participant cohort, once the participant logged into the interview using the Zoom meeting link, the researcher introduced herself and thanked the participant for their time and involvement. The researcher outlined the purpose of the research and explained how the data would be used. The researcher confirmed that the participant's answers would remain confidential, that participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. They were informed that if a question made them uncomfortable, they could skip or not answer it.

Participants were advised that the interview would be audio-recorded and were asked to reconfirm that they consented to be interviewed for the research. They were also informed of the Beyond Blue and Lifeline support services they could access if the interview caused distress. The participants were provided the opportunity to ask any questions.

Semi-Structured Interview Analysis. The data analysis process was crucial in uncovering the meaning of the information gathered from the interviews. It involved systematically arranging and presenting information to unearth ideas (Minichello et al., 2008). This process was divided into three key stages: (1) coding data, discovering themes, and developing propositions; (2) refining the themes and propositions; and (3) reporting the findings (Minichello et al., 2008).

The rich, in-depth interview data became the reference point in the construction of the participants' stories. To begin analysing the semi-structured interview data, the interviews from both participant cohorts were transcribed verbatim using online transcription services, REV.com or Otter.com. The researcher then read the interview transcripts thoroughly, highlighting relevant material and attaching brief comments.

The interview transcripts were then ready to be coded. As with the document analysis, a deductive approach to coding was applied to the interview transcripts. This coding occurred concurrently with the inductive approach. A structural coding method was applied for the first round of interview transcript coding. The structural coding, a method used to identify the core topics and contextual influence of data, differed from the descriptive coding used in the document analysis in that it did not require the exact term or phrase from the coding framework to be used. Instead, a similar wording or term aligned with the code's definition was used. This approach can be particularly useful when coding interview transcripts because participants may use varying terms, words, or phrases to refer to the same thing (Saldana, 2021). The approach enables the researcher to take a large set of semi-structured data and structure it into smaller pieces for further analysis. It also supports an exploration of how well the data fits within pre-defined concepts (Saldana, 2021). To enable deductive coding, a structural coding framework was developed that was again guided by TT (Anderson et al., 2011; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011) and the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) theories. The structural coding framework was similar to the descriptive coding framework, as outlined in Table 2. These structural codes helped to organise the data (King & Horrocks, 2010). While completing the deductive coding of the interview transcripts, potential new codes were identified. To support the discovery of inductive codes, the researcher highlighted information pertinent to the research findings but not yet allocated to any pre-defined codes.

Once structural codes were applied to the dataset and inductive codes were discovered, interpretive codes were created to add a detailed layer of meaning to the data. To determine the interpretive codes, the structural codes that shared common meanings were clustered or grouped based on their similarities (Saldana, 2021). This process of clustering helped to identify patterns and relationships in the data (King & Horrocks, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Topic summaries were then defined from the interpretive codes. Similar to the document analysis, topic summaries were identified when they were applied to at least two

cases (King & Horrocks, 2010). Themes were then defined based on these topic summaries, as themes are interpretive stories built around uniting meaning, and cannot be developed in advance of data analysis unlike topic summaries (Braun & Clarke, 2023). NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool, was used to assist in the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. This software aids in organising, analysing, and visualising data, making the thematic analysis more efficient and systematic (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research is crucial in establishing the credibility and authenticity of the findings. Key elements of trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). In the current study, several strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, such as reflexivity and data triangulation to ensure credibility, comprehensive descriptions and appropriate sampling strategies for transferability, thorough methodological documentation for dependability, and peer debriefing to support confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy of findings in reflecting the reality experienced by participants, which is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research. Researchers build credibility by engaging with participants over extended periods, conducting persistent observations, and employing triangulation (Ahmed, 2024). In this study, credibility was assured through reflexivity and employing data triangulation.

Reflexivity involves recognising and acknowledging personal biases and preconceptions throughout the research process. By being aware of their biases, researchers can set them aside and adopt a more objective perspective during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This self-awareness helps to minimise potential distortions in the findings (Ahmed, 2024). Reflexivity in the current research has been ensured by the inclusion of a researcher positionality statement (included earlier in Chapter Three).

Data triangulation is a comprehensive process that employs multiple data sources to explore a research problem (King & Horrocks, 2010). This thesis used two qualitative research methods to triangulate the data: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. These methods were applied sequentially, with document analysis first followed by semi-structured interviews. The information gathered from the NSO documents informed the development of the interview guides and assisted in determining whom to invite to participate in the semi-structured interviews.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the research findings can be applied to different contexts or situations. Qualitative researchers strive to deliver thorough and detailed representations of the study's environment, participants, and procedures to enhance the potential for transferability. By offering rich and comprehensive explanations, researchers allow readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar circumstances, ultimately enhancing the study's transferability (Ahmed, 2024). In this research, comprehensive descriptions and sampling strategies assured the transferability of the findings. Detailed contextual information was provided to help readers assess how the results may apply to different scenarios. Additionally, the sampling process and the prescribed inclusion criteria were clearly outlined to justify the potential transferability of the research findings.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistent and stable nature of research findings over time. Researchers meticulously document their methodologies, data collection techniques, and analysis procedures to ensure dependability (Ahmed, 2024). In this research, dependability was upheld through comprehensive documentation of the research methods. This detailed account allowed for greater transparency and enables other researchers to replicate the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the impartiality and objectivity of research findings, ensuring that they are free from any biases or preferences of the researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To check the confirmability of the research, peer debriefing sessions were conducted. The research team, which consisted of the researcher and her two supervisors, met regularly to discuss the inductive codes and emerging themes, collaborating on the interpretation of the data and its findings. As a result, the codes, topic summaries and themes were cross-checked to confirm their independent derivation.

Ethical Considerations

The Human Research Ethics Committee at Victoria University approved the conduct of this research (HRE21-152). Due to the exploratory nature of this research, confidentiality of participant involvement and removal of identifiable information was of utmost importance (Kaiser, 2009). Participant information was de-identified, and pseudonyms were used instead of actual names. Care was taken not to include information that could lead to participant identification.

Chapter Summation

The qualitative approach and research design applied to this research were described and justified in this chapter. A constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm was adopted to achieve the research aim. Quantitative research methods have previously been used to identify that athletes who retire suddenly have heightened levels of distress (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007). The research supporting this thesis adopts qualitative methods to explore this topic further and determine what NSOs can do to better support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career. A two-stage qualitative research design was developed, comprising a document analysis followed by semi-structured interviews with two distinct participant cohorts. Coding was applied to identify topic summaries and themes across the dataset, with both deductive and inductive coding used for the documents and interview transcripts. Data

and investigator triangulation were employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the data analysis.

Next, Chapter Four, Document Analysis Results, presents the data and results collected from the first research stage: document analysis.

Chapter Four – Document Analysis Results

Introduction

The purpose of the document analysis was to gain insight into the support offered and provided by Australian NSOs to elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career. An online search of 43 eligible NSO websites was conducted between December 2021 and January 2022 to understand the strategies that NSOs implement to support elite women athletes with the transition from athletic retirement to a second career, particularly when athletic retirement occurred suddenly. The 43 NSOs included 39 NSOs that received AIS high-performance funding (2021-22) and four members of COMPPS. The online search found that seven NSOs had publicly available organisational documents on their official websites that adhered to at least one of the prescribed criteria (see Chapter Three).

Due to the low number of documents sourced during the initial collection, a second search was undertaken using a broader transition approach. The websites of the same 43 NSOs (minus the seven NSOs included in the initial document collection) were searched between September and November 2022 to determine an NSO's commitment to support athletes with the transition from elite sport to a second career. An additional 10 NSOs were found to have documents that outlined this commitment. As a result, 18 documents from 17 NSOs were included in the document analysis. These resources included NSO policies and practice documents that outlined support provided to athletes with the transition out of elite sport. The 18 NSO documents, the document type, and the inclusion criteria they met (#1. Organisational support for athletes transitioning out of elite sport and into a second career, #2. Criterion 1 plus support for sudden athletic retirement or #3. Criterion 1 plus support specifically for women athletes) are summarised in Table 3. The most common document types were categorisation guidelines followed by position descriptions.

Table 3*18 NSO documents collected*

NSO	Document name	Document type	Criteria #1	Criteria #2	Criteria #3
Artistic Swimming Australia	dAIS Associated Policies	Categorisation Guidelines	x	x	x
Australian Taekwondo	Athlete Categorisation Guidelines (2021 – 2024)	Categorisation Guidelines	x	x	
Gymnastics Australia	Transition Guidelines	Transition Guidelines	x		
Judo Australia	Athlete Categorisation Guidelines (September 2021)	Categorisation Guidelines	x	x	
Squash Australia	Athlete Categorisation	Categorisation Guidelines	x		
Triathlon Australia	Athlete Categorisation Guidelines 2021-2024	Categorisation Guidelines	x	x	
Boxing Australia	Athlete Categorisation Guidelines (2021 – 2024)	Categorisation Guidelines	x	x	
Auscycling	Position Description Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement-Able & Para	Position Description	x		
Rowing Australia	Position Description High-Performance Unit Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement Manager	Position Description	x		

NSO	Document name	Document type	Criteria #1	Criteria #2	Criteria #3
Bowls Australia	Position Description Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement Manager	Position Description	x		
Surfing Australia	Position Description SA Wellbeing and Engagement Manager	Position Description	x		
Football Australia	National Female Wellbeing Manager	Position Description	x		x
Australian Football League	AFLW Collective Bargaining Agreement 2019 - 2022	Collective Bargaining Agreement	x	x	x
Australian Football League	AFLW Player Development Principles of Best Practice	Guidance Document	x		x
Swimming Australia	Athlete Resources: Health and Wellbeing	Program Description	x		
Athletics Australia	Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement	Program Description	x		
Diving Australia	Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement	Program Description	x		
Snow Australia	Athlete Transition – Retirement, non-selection, and deselection support guidelines	Transition Guidelines	x	x	

Following a comprehensive review, the content of each document was coded using the five pre-determined deductive codes described in Chapter Three: (1) situation, (2) individual characteristics, (3) interpersonal support, (4) organisational strategies, and (5) socio-cultural. Due to the small number of documents, coding was conducted manually. No additional codes were discovered through the inductive coding of the documents, which occurred concurrently with the deductive coding of the documents.

Three of the five deductive codes were identified across the 18 documents. Two codes, situation and organisational strategies, appeared across two or more of the documents and were consequently deemed topic summaries (King et al., 2018). Given that the third deductive code, interpersonal support, appeared in only one document, it was not deemed a topic summary or theme and was subsequently removed from further analysis. The two remaining deductive codes, individual characteristics and socio-cultural, were not identified in any documents and were removed from further analysis.

Situation was the most prevalent topic summary identified. It appeared across all 18 NSO documents and comprised two identified sub-topics: general retirement and sudden retirement. The remaining topic summary, organisational strategies, was identified in 16 NSO documents and comprised three identified sub-topics: external service support during transition, internal service support during transition, and internal service support pre-transition.

Situation

The situation topic summary described the circumstances surrounding an athlete's retirement from elite sport and the type of support the NSO may offer. Two sub-topics were identified under this topic: general retirement and sudden retirement. These sub-topics and the number of NSO documents citing each sub-topic are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4*Situation sub-topics*

Sub-topic	Number of NSO documents citing sub-topic
General retirement	18
Sudden retirement	7

General retirement, when athletic retirement is planned and voluntary, was the most prevalent sub-topic that emerged from the NSO documents. This sub-topic refers to an athlete leaving the high-performance pathway of their sport (i.e., retires), regardless of the circumstances. All 18 NSO documents contained at least one reference to retirement, such as retirement or transition out of a high-performance pathway, hence their inclusion in the document analysis. The Auscycling Position Description, for example, mentions retirement when it explains that the AW&E manager will: 'work collaboratively as part of the broader Performance Health & Wellbeing team, operations and coaching team and communicate clearly around critical times, including but not limited to transitions, selection processes, injury, retirement' (Auscycling, n.d., p. 3).

Sudden retirement, when athletic retirement is forced, unplanned or involuntary, was the second most prevalent sub-topic that emerged from the NSO documents. Four circumstances that lead to sudden retirement were identified: non-selection resulting in non-categorisation, deselection, medical retirement, and delisting. These circumstances were identified in seven NSO documents.

Non-selection resulting in non-categorisation was identified in six NSO documents. The Judo Australia Athlete Categorisation Guidelines, for example, state:

The National Categorisation Panel (NCP) recognises athletes who are identified as contributing to the performance outcomes of the sport at the next pinnacle event (Olympic & Paralympic Games) where one of the following may apply.... An athlete is transitioning out of competitive sport (retirement or non-selection resulting in non-categorisation). (Judo Australia, 2021, p. 6)

Deselection was identified in one NSO document. The Snow Australia Transition Guidelines, for example, state: 'Deselection refers to when an athlete has been deselected from a team/high-performance program or has had their contract level reduced based on Snow Australia's Athlete Categorisation Framework' (Snow Australia, n.d., p. 2).

Medical retirement was identified in one NSO document. The Snow Australia Transition Guidelines, for example, state: 'in the event an athlete has to medically retire from the sport, provision of medical and physiotherapy services will be offered on a case-by-case basis' (Snow Australia, n.d., p. 4).

Delisting and support provided for women athletes who are delisted was identified in one NSO document. The AFLW CBA, for example, states:

Upon a player's retirement or delisting, the Club must complete a full medical examination in accordance with the Medical Examination Guidelines and shall provide, within 4 weeks of the examination, a full report to the player of her medical condition, any indications of issues that may arise in the future and an ongoing rehabilitation plan if clinically indicated. (Australian Football League & Australian Football League Players' Association Incorporated, n.d., p. 55)

In summary, all 18 NSO documents referenced general retirement, with seven documents further delineating the circumstances of support offered to athletes who retire suddenly from their athletic career. Only four of these documents outlined the NSO policies and documented practices specifically for women athletes: the Artistic Swimming Australia dAIS Associated Policies Categorisation Guidelines, the AFLW CBA, the AFLW Player Development Principles of Best Practice, and the Football Australia National Female Wellbeing Manager Position Description. While the Artistic Swimming document did not describe the policy and practices as specifically for women athletes, the high-performance program for this sport was only for women athletes at the time of the document collection.

Organisational Strategies

The organisational strategies topic summary identified the practices that NSOs offer suddenly retired elite women athletes and at what phase they are offered after sudden

retirement and during the transition to a second career. Unless explicitly stated, these practices are offered to women athletes regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. Three sub-topics were identified under this topic summary: external service support during transition, internal service support pre-transition, and internal service support during transition. These sub-topics, the number of NSO documents citing the sub-topic, and the number of citations across the NSO documents are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5

Organisational strategies sub-topics

Sub-topic	Number of NSO documents citing sub-topic	Number of citations across NSO documents
External service support during transition	16	44
Internal service support pre-transition	9	18
Internal service support during transition	6	29

External Service Support During Transition

External service support during transition was the most prevalent sub-topic that emerged from the document analysis. This sub-topic refers to the services not delivered by the NSO but instead by organisations to which NSOs refer athletes for support at the time of their sudden retirement. This sub-topic was identified in 16 NSO documents. The AIS was the organisation that most NSOs refer athletes to when they required support at retirement, followed by Players' Associations.

The AIS was reported in 15 NSO documents. Support services offered by the AIS include the AIS MHRN, the AIS CPRN and financial support via the dAIS Transition Support grant. The AIS MHRN, for instance, was referenced across 10 NSO documents. The Swimming Australia program description, for example, outlines that categorised athletes can

access this service: 'for athletes categorised 1-5 (all podium levels, developing and emerging), HP coaches, and HP staff, the Mental Health Referral Network services are available at no cost.' (Swimming Australia, n.d.). Similarly, the Rowing Australia position description outlines that the NSO AW&E manager ensures that: 'all RA athletes are aware of and accessing (if required) the AIS Mental Health, AIS Career and Education Referral Networks as well as the Elite Athlete Friendly University Network and national networking/community engagement events' (Rowing Australia, n.d., p. 2). The dAIS Transition Support grant was identified in six NSO documents. The Boxing Australia Athlete Categorisation Guidelines, for example, state: 'Athletes ... with a history of contributing to sport outcomes, may be eligible for half an allocation of dAIS on the recommendation of the NCP' (Boxing Australia, n.d., p. 5). Similarly, the Triathlon Australia Athlete Categorisation Guidelines state: 'The dAIS scheme – Where eligible, athletes may be provided with up to half (0.5) dAIS allocation based on their most recent categorisation level' (Triathlon Australia, n.d., p. 11).

Referral of athletes to Players' Associations for support at retirement was identified in one NSO document. The AFL provides a booklet to players outlining the transition support services they can access from the AFL Players' Association (AFLPA): 'AFLPA shall provide each Club with an information booklet which outlines the transition services available to Players through the AFLPA and the Club shall pass this information onto the Player' (Australian Football League & Australian Football League Players' Association Incorporated, n.d., p. 24).

Internal Service Support Pre-Transition

Internal service support pre-transition was the second most prevalent sub-topic that emerged from the document analysis. This sub-topic refers to the practices that NSOs offer athletes to prepare for the transition to a second career. This sub-topic was identified in nine NSO documents. Three practices were identified: community engagement opportunities, work experience opportunities, and career counselling.

Community engagement opportunities foster connections and promote positive outcomes within communities. This practice was identified in seven NSO documents. The Athletics Australia program description, for example, explains that they organise various community engagement opportunities for current athletes: 'Community Engagement - Opportunities for athletes to engage with their local communities, grassroots sport and national charities' (Athletics Australia, n.d.).

Work experience opportunities aim to assist current athletes in preparing for their second career. This practice was identified in six NSO documents. Bowls Australia, for example, facilitates work experience placements for current athletes and encourages them to: 'liaise with the AW&E branch about existing pathways for athletes to engage with the Australian community and facilitate work experience programs for placements for athletes' (Bowls Australia, n.d., p. 2).

Career counselling assists current athletes in planning or mapping their athletic careers and potential second careers. This practice was identified in three NSO documents. The Athletics Australia program description, for example, explains that this support is provided through: 'access to information, advice and face-to-face or online learning related to education, career mapping, professional development, and work experience opportunities' (Athletics Australia, n.d.).

Internal Service Support During Transition

Internal service support during transition was the third most prevalent sub-topic that emerged from the document analysis. This sub-topic refers to the support practices that NSOs provide directly to suddenly retired elite women athletes to assist them when they retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career. This sub-topic was identified in six NSO documents. Seven practices were identified: professional network services, athlete check-ins, alumni or athlete support groups, mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors), transfer of high-performance sport experience, recognition, and alternative AW&E programming. Only two of these practices are offered specifically to athletes who retire

suddenly: professional network services and alternative AW&E programming. The five other practices are offered to athletes regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. Additionally, five NSO documents included information on the length of time certain transition support services would be available for athletes. The seven practices and length of time will now be discussed.

Professional network services include medical support and injury rehabilitation support that NSOs offer athletes at retirement. This practice was identified in four NSO documents. Snow Australia, for example, provides support for athletes who retire suddenly due to medical reasons: 'in the event an athlete has to medically retire from the sport, provision of medical and physiotherapy services will be offered on a case-by-case basis' (Snow Australia, n.d., p. 4).

Athlete check-ins are when an NSO employee (usually the AW&E manager) contacts retired athletes to discuss their wellbeing and support requirements. This practice was identified in two NSO documents and is provided to all athletes regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. Gymnastics Australia, for example, formally checks in with retired athletes three times during the first 12 months after the athlete's retirement: 'check in with athlete either via phone or email – Discuss ongoing challenges in the transition process and support required. Discuss how transition plans/goals are going and if any extra support is required' (Gymnastics Australia, n.d., pp. 1-2). Similarly, Snow Australia conducts check-ins with retired athletes, although this practice may occur in conjunction with other network partners, such as a State Institute of Sport: 'AW&E Manager to arrange time with athlete to seek out best ways in which they would like to be supported through this time. This may include a transition plan or a rostered check-in with athlete driven contacts in the Snow Australia/NIN network' (Snow Australia, n.d., p. 1).

Alumni or athlete support groups consist of retired athletes from a particular sport who support recently retired athletes with the transition to life after elite sport. Alumni group activities include retired athletes being invited to NSO Award Ceremonies and networking events, receiving communication from the NSO, and potentially being involved in mentoring

roles. This practice was identified in two NSO documents and is provided to all athletes regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. Snow Australia, for example, has developed an alumni group: 'athletes to be included in Snow Australia's alumni network for ongoing opportunities and engagements such as Snow Australia awards, mentoring within the pathway or networking events and relevant communication' (Snow Australia, n.d., p. 5).

Mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors) involve retired athletes mentoring younger developing athletes within the same sport. This practice was identified in two NSO documents and is provided to athletes regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. Diving Australia, for example, has developed a mentor program: 'a mentor program [that] links retired athletes with developing HP divers in the interests of knowledge-sharing and legacy-building' (Diving Australia, 2019, p. 1).

Transfer of high-performance sport experience relates to the support NSOs provide retired athletes to transition into sport industry roles, such as coaching, officiating, or talent transfer to a new sport. This practice was identified in one NSO document and is provided to athletes regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. Gymnastics Australia, for example, assists retired athletes who want to transition to a sport industry role such as coaching or officiating or to another sport: 'connect athlete with other sports if interested in Transitioning to another sport and/or Elite Coaching Manager if athlete is interested in coaching/judging' (Gymnastics Australia, n.d., p. 1).

Recognition of an athlete's service to their sport was identified in one NSO document. This practice is provided to athletes regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. Gymnastics Australia, for example, sends athletes a letter of congratulations: 'a letter of congratulations and appreciation for their contribution to the sport if the athlete competed at a benchmark event, such as the Olympic Games, World Championships, or Commonwealth Games' (Gymnastics Australia, n.d., p. 1). Additionally, 'A framed picture is presented to retired athletes at the National Championships following their retirement' (Gymnastics Australia, n.d., p. 2).

Alternative AW&E programming involves NSOs organising a program or activity for non-selected athletes to undertake while the competition they were not selected for is taking place, was identified in one NSO document. This practice is provided to women and men athletes who retire suddenly due to non-selection/deselection. Snow Australia, for example, supports athletes who retire suddenly due to non-selection/deselection by organising alternative programming: 'athlete is to be supported through what would have been the competition period and offered either alternative programming (if [possible] in consultation with program staff, coaching etc.) or alternatively AW&E activity if available' (Snow Australia, n.d., p. 2).

The length of time that transition support services are available to athletes was addressed in five NSO documents. The duration of formal transition support ranged from six months (Squash Australia, 2021, p. 8) to 12 months (Gymnastics Australia, n.d., p. 2). The duration for which the support is made available is also dependent on certain NSO-determined criteria. Squash Australia, for example, provides support to athletes based on their categorisation level: 'athletes who are transitioning out of competitive squash will be eligible to continue to receive non-financial support from Squash Australia's support services. The level of this support is dependent on the athlete's category' (Squash Australia, 2021, p. 8).

Chapter Summation

The document analysis aimed to gain insight into the support offered by Australian NSOs to elite women athletes who retired suddenly to assist with the transition to a second career. The websites of 43 Australian NSOs were searched, and 18 documents from 17 NSOs that met the inclusion criteria were discovered. These NSO documents were then coded to assist with the discovery of topic summaries. Two topic summaries were identified during the deductive coding process of the NSO documents: situation and organisational strategies.

Situation was the most prevalent topic summary, as it was identified in all 18 NSO documents. Two sub-topics were identified under this topic summary: general retirement and sudden retirement. General retirement was the most prevalent sub-topic, as it was identified

in all 18 NSO documents. This sub-topic referred to the support offered and provided to elite women athletes by their NSO who retired generally. Sudden retirement was the second most prevalent sub-topic, as it was identified across seven NSO documents. This sub-topic referred to the support the NSO offered and provided to suddenly retired elite women athletes. Four situations that lead to sudden retirement were identified within the NSO documents: non-selection resulting in non-categorisation, medical retirement, deselection, or delisting. Notably, only two NSO documents (Australian Football League & Australian Football League Players' Association Incorporated, n.d.; Snow Australia, n.d.) outlined additional or different support for women athletes who retired suddenly than those who retired generally. This support included alternative AW&E programming for what would have been the competition period (Snow Australia, n.d., p. 2) as well as medical and physiotherapy services (Australian Football League & Australian Football League Players' Association Incorporated, n.d., p. 40). Furthermore, the only document that outlined support for women athletes experiencing sudden retirement was the AFLW CBA (Australian Football League & Australian Football League Players' Association Incorporated, n.d.).

Organisational strategies was the second most prevalent topic summary that emerged from the document analysis, as it was identified across 16 NSO documents. This topic summary identified the practices that NSOs offer athletes, particularly women athletes, to assist with sudden retirement and the transition to a second career. Three sub-topics were identified under this topic summary: external service support during transition, internal service support pre-transition, and internal service support during transition. These sub-topics helped determine the transition stage sudden retirement support practices NSOs offer to elite women athletes. The external service support during transition sub-topic identified two external agencies to which NSOs refer athletes (men and women) when they suddenly retire: the AIS and Players' Associations. The internal service support pre-transition sub-topic identified three practices that NSOs offer and provide elite athletes prior to retirement to assist them in preparing for the transition to a second career. These practices included community engagement opportunities, work experience opportunities, and career

counselling. The internal service support during transition sub-topic identified seven practices that NSOs offer and provide to elite athletes when they retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career. These seven practices included professional network services, athlete check-ins, alumni or athlete support groups, mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors), transfer of high-performance sport experience, recognition, and alternative AW&E programming. Only two of these practices were offered to athletes who retire suddenly: professional network services and alternative AW&E programming. The five other practices were offered to athletes regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement.

Next, Chapter Five, NSO Participants Interview Results, presents the results from the second research stage: semi-structured interviews with NSO managers (NSO participants).

Chapter Five – NSO Participants Interview Results

Introduction

The results of the semi-structured interviews with NSO participants are presented in this chapter. These interviews were undertaken with the aim of gaining insight into the support that Australian NSOs offer suddenly retired elite women athletes to assist with the transition to a second career. CEOs from the 17 NSOs with publicly available documents included in the document analysis (Chapter Four) were invited to participate in the research. Eleven NSO CEOs accepted the invitation. An additional three NSO CEOs were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews based on suddenly retired elite women athletes from their sport participating in the research (see Chapter Six). Overall, 15 NSO participants from 16 sports participated in the semi-structured interviews (one NSO had multiple representatives at the interview, while one NSO participant worked across multiple NSOs). Interviews with this cohort reached both code saturation, the point when no additional issues are identified, and meaning saturation, the point when issues are fully understood (Hennink et al., 2017).

The demographics of the NSO participants, including their age, gender, position at the NSO, the years employed by the NSO, the full-time equivalency (FTE) of their role, and the gender of the athletes with whom they work, are outlined in Table 6. Ten women and five men were interviewed, the majority of whom were employed as AW&E managers (n=13), with an average of three years employed in their position. Ten NSO participants were employed on a full-time basis, while a further five were employed in a part-time capacity. Participant ages ranged from 30-35 to 50-54 years. To protect the identity of the interview participants, the NSO where they are employed has been removed, pseudonyms have been used to report quotes, and any reference to a specific sport or NSO has been anonymised.

Table 6*Interview sample of NSO participants*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Position at NSO	Years in role	FTE equivalent	Gender of Athletes Responsible For
Declan	40-44	Man	High-Performance Pathway Director	2	1	Women only
Jonathan	45-49	Man	National Wellbeing Manager	6	1	Women & Men
Robert	50-54	Man	High-Performance Manager	9	1	Women only
Maria	45-49	Woman	AW&E Manager	1	1	Women & Men
Sylvia	35-39	Woman	AW&E Manager	3	1	Women & Men
Josie	-	Woman	AW&E Manager	0.5	1	Women only
Keith	30-34	Man	AW&E Manager	1.5	0.4 (job share)	Women & Men
Rachel	-	Woman	AW&E Manager	4	0.6 (job share)	Women & Men
Hillary	30-35	Woman	AW&E Manager	3	1	Women & Men
Wendy	35-39	Woman	AW&E Manager	1	0.8	Women & Men
Bruce	40-44	Man	AW&E Manager	3	1	Women & Men
Barbara	40-44	Woman	AW&E Manager	2	1	Women & Men
Natasha	50-54	Woman	AW&E Manager	4	1	Women & Men
Yvette	45-49	Woman	AW&E Manager	2	0.6	Women & Men
Georgina	30-34	Woman	AW&E Manager	1	0.4	Women only

Situation

The situation topic summary describes the circumstances that could lead an NSO to define an athlete's retirement as sudden. Seven NSO participants identified three reasons athletes (men and women) might retire suddenly from their sport: non-selection, injury, and classification out of parasport. These sub-topics and the number of NSO participants citing each sub-topic are outlined in Table 7. A further two NSO participants stated that while the circumstances that led to an athlete retiring may differ, the support athletes receive is the same.

Table 7

Situation sub-topics

Sub-topic	Number of NSO participants citing sub-topic
Non-selection	4
Injury/Medical advice	2
Classification out of parasport	1

Non-selection

Deselection was identified by four NSO participants as a reason that may trigger sudden retirement. Josie, for example, has witnessed athletes retire suddenly due to non-selection: 'I've only been there six months. In that time, we've had athletes who have retired post-World Championships, and then we've had athletes who didn't get selected. They didn't get reselected [to the squad].'

Injury/Medical Advice

Injury was identified by two NSO participants as a cause of sudden retirement. Robert explains that the NSO where he was employed supports athletes who retire suddenly due to injury for six months post-retirement: 'if it's an injury then we'll continue to support the player for that six-month period.'

Classification Out of Parasport

Classification, where the classification of a para-athlete changes, can lead to sudden retirement if the athlete is classified out of the sport. One NSO participant, Natasha, is aware of this occurring to athletes from her sport:

They can be classified; they can change. Or they can be classified out. Their classification can go up or down and differ from where they're currently at, which can cause a great deal of stress. And they might not be then [competing] in the event that they've always [competed] in before.

Individual Characteristics

The individual characteristics topic summary concerns intrinsic aspects and qualities that an elite woman athlete may possess, which may influence their experience of sudden retirement transition. Two sub-topics were identified under this topic summary. One sub-topic, athlete identity, was identified as a challenge, while the other sub-topic, dual career, was identified as an attribute. These sub-topics, the number of NSO participants citing each sub-topic, and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 8.

Table 8

Individual characteristics sub-topics

Attribute or challenge	Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Challenge	Athlete Identity	5	5
Attribute	Dual career	5	5

Athlete Identity

Athlete identity was a challenge that five NSO participants believed hindered suddenly retired elite women athletes' ability to transition to a second career. Jonathan, an NSO

participant, noted that he had witnessed many athletes continue in the sport because they do not know anything else: 'sometimes they're their own worst enemy. They don't leave the [sport] when they probably should or could, but they've known nothing else.'

Dual Career

Dual career development was an attribute that five NSO participants identified as assisting elite women athletes. All of the athletes (men and women) with whom Wendy works with are employed in conjunction with their athletic career:

So when you talk about retirement and transitioning into a role, it's a massive sort of big change, whereas in [sport], our athletes already have to have jobs. So it's not that they retire, transition, and then I guess, begin a secondary career. They already have that career now. So I guess retirement isn't such a big step in terms in terms of finding a job or workforce kind of thing.

Interpersonal Support

The interpersonal support topic summary details the supportive behaviours that occur within an elite athlete's relationships (Slomp et al., 2024). Support at this level was recognised by eight NSO participants as integral to assisting elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career. Two sub-topics were identified under this topic summary. Both sub-topics were identified as attributes: coaches and family. These sub-topics, the number of NSO participants citing each sub-topic, and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 9.

Table 9*Interpersonal support sub-topics*

Attribute or challenge	Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Attribute	Coaches	6	11
	Family	2	2

Coaches

Coaches play a pivotal role in an athlete's transition to a second career. Eight NSO participants acknowledged the significance of coaches in athletes' lives, especially as providers of support at retirement. NSO participants hold a unique position that allows them to offer vital support and guidance to coaches during an athlete's retirement from elite sport. When an athlete retires, a chapter in the coach's career also ends. Understanding this, NSO participants like Maria indicated that they demonstrate empathy and provide the necessary time and support to help coaches through this phase. Maria's approach involved asking, 'What do I need to do to support you? You've worked with this athlete for 12 years. This is going to be quite hard for you, too.' Such support benefits the coaches and underscores their significance in the transition process.

While coaches can be a source of support, they may also hinder an athlete's transition to a second career. For instance, Barbara has observed instances where coaches prioritise athletic performance over other essential aspects of an athlete's life, such as education or career planning. This approach can potentially hinder the athlete's preparation for life after elite sport because they may not possess the necessary skills or resources for a successful transition. Barbara explains:

I think of some athletes who don't engage. Sometimes, it permeates down through their coaches, a lack of engagement in the space or actually no engagement. They

don't see it as credible or as needed. So, they're like, you just focus on performance; you don't need to think about setting up for post-[sport].

Family

Family plays a crucial role in an athlete's successful transition to a second career. Two NSO participants acknowledged the significance of fostering a strong relationship with the family members of athletes during their careers. Bruce explains that when the NSO offers family support at the conclusion of an athlete's career, it feels genuine and meaningful rather than merely transactional. It can profoundly influence the athlete's career transition, underscoring the vital role of family in this process.

Even checking in with the family and building a relationship with the family. So that it's not transactional, and it doesn't feel transactional like, 'Oh, you're injured, so therefore, in your agreement, that says you get the support. So, there's the support.' I actually care about how those people want to progress; I just happen to do it as a career. And I happen to get paid for it. So, for me, it was really easy to go right. Well, who's impacted by this? It's not just the person; it's the family, and it makes the family aware of what they might go through in this transition period. And also, if these things do happen, we have support available for you. So, through the AIS, we have a mental health referral network for friends and family. The support here in Australia is phenomenal. It really is, in comparison to other countries that I've worked in.

Organisational Strategies

The organisational strategies topic summary provides an understanding of the support NSOs offer suddenly retired elite women athletes, including support with the transition to a second career. Seven sub-topics were identified under this topic summary. Three sub-topics were identified as attributes: external service support during transition, internal service support during transition and internal service support pre-transition. The remaining four sub-topics were identified as challenges: athlete engagement, resources, organisational culture, and no

support provided. These sub-topics, the number of NSO participants citing each sub-topic and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 10.

Table 10

Organisational strategies sub-topics

Attribute or challenge	Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Attribute	External service support during transition	13	62
	Internal service support during transition	10	56
	Internal service support pre-transition	7	21
Challenge	Athlete engagement	8	13
	Resources	6	11
	Organisational culture	5	5
	No support provided	2	3

External Service Support During Transition

External service support during transition was the most prevalent sub-topic reported as an attribute by the NSO participants. This sub-topic recognises the support offered and provided to elite women athletes when they retire suddenly by agencies external to the NSO. The NSO participants identified three external agencies to which they refer athletes for support when they retire. These agencies include the AIS, State Institutes of Sport, and Players' Associations.

The AIS was the most prevalent external agency identified by the NSO participants. Eleven NSO participants refer retiring athletes to the AIS for support upon retirement, regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. The AIS offers four respective

support services, including the AIS MHRN, the AIS CPRN, the dAIS Transition Support grant, and career transition and leadership programs.

The AIS MHRN was referred to by nine NSO participants. Yvette, for example, has a conversation with retiring athletes to ensure they are aware that mental health support is available to them via the AIS MHRN:

There's also the Mental Health Referral Network, which they can access any time as an athlete or as a past athlete. So that's definitely available. That's always made up front to our athletes, but for transitioning athletes and certainly a sudden transition, then that would be a conversation that we would be having upfront. I can help, but you can [also] connect with the Mental Health Referral Network and get some mental health support around this difficult time that you're going through.

The AIS CPRN was referred to by eight NSO participants. Sylvia, for example, refers retiring athletes to the AIS CPRN, particularly when she believes athletes are unaware of the transferable skills they have acquired from their athletic careers:

I just don't think that athletes are aware of the transferable skill set that they possess. That's where the career practitioners from the AIS come in. I've referred many athletes to the network. The AIS provides a fantastic resource that the athletes have, and it is free of charge for them.

The dAIS Transition Support grant was acknowledged by four NSO participants as a means of financial support for athletes in retirement. Keith explains how the grant scheme was recently introduced: 'So just recently, the AIS allocated [dAIS] transition funding to athletes.'

Career transition and leadership programs offered by the ASC/AIS were reported by one NSO participant. Barbara explains that she encourages retired elite women athletes to apply for the Accelerate Program, which aims to develop leadership skills for retired elite women athletes:

The AIS has the Accelerate program, where elite athletes can, if they want to be working in sport, they can do this program, and you get linked to a career practitioner

and all of this. So it's a great program. That was specifically for female athletes as well. So they really enjoyed that. And that kind of gave them some more skills and ideas for what next.

State Institutes of Sport was the second most prevalent external agency acknowledged by the NSO participants. Seven NSO participants work directly in partnership with several State Institutes of Sport to support athletes with the transition to a second career. Keith, for example, contacts the State Institute of Sport to which a retiring athlete is aligned to understand the support that the athlete may be able to receive elsewhere:

In the transition support that we do offer, we also touch base with the athletes' National Institute Network partner, so for instance, with NSWIS or VIS, and we work with any service providers that they may be receiving from there, because obviously NINs also have their own transition policies that they overlay additionally with the sport transition policy that we provide.

Players' Associations was the third most prevalent external agency acknowledged by the NSO participants. Three NSO participants refer retiring athletes to their Players' Association immediately upon their retirement for support. Robert, for example, refers all athletes to the Players' Association for any support not related to the actual sport: 'The [Players' Association] is tasked with assisting players with any off-field issues. Are they looking to work? Are they looking to study? Study grants and everything like that comes through the [Players' Association].'

Internal Service Support During Transition

Internal service support during transition was the second most prevalent sub-topic reported as an attribute by the NSO participants. This sub-topic recognises the support offered and provided directly by NSOs to elite women athletes at the time of their sudden retirement. Ten internal practices are offered and include athlete check-ins, professional network services, transfer of high-performance sport experience, recognition, alumni or athlete support groups,

psychological support, body image education, mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors), financial support, and a letter of support.

Regular and ongoing athlete check-ins with suddenly retired elite women athletes are scheduled by seven NSO participants. Check-ins are conducted to gauge the individual support that the suddenly retired elite women athletes may need with the transition out of high-performance sport. They occur immediately at retirement and then at regular intervals from six to 24 months post-retirement, depending on the athlete's needs. Check-ins are informal and can be via phone, email, or text message. Barbara checks in on athletes, at incremental times, for two years post-retirement:

I'll touch base with them every month after that for three months, six months, and 12 months. And then at that 12-month mark, we'll just turn around and say, how's it going? I'll just do a check-in every six months and then see how you're going. So, it's a formal structure for about two years. But that can be increased or decreased at the will of an athlete. So those check-ins might be a phone call. And sometimes I'll do an hour's phone call for some athletes who might just be telling me what they've been up to. Sometimes, it's a text message or an email, just checking in on how you are doing.

Professional network services, which include the services of the NSO professional network staff and medical exit screenings, are designed to cater to the individual needs of retiring athletes. Five NSO participants confirmed that these services remain available to athletes even when they retire suddenly. Athletes can access a range of services, including sports medicine, strength and conditioning, psychology, nutrition, and massage, to assist with their lifestyle changes following retirement. Keith, for example, engages the NSO nutritionist to work with retiring athletes, ensuring that personalised nutrition information is provided based on their specific circumstances: 'The nutritionist might provide a consult over that 12-month period to have an adequate diet put in place to support the athlete as they may not be training as much and changing their lifestyle.'

Transfer of high-performance sport experience is a support practice that five NSO participants employ to assist all athletes with the transition to a second career, regardless of the circumstances surrounding their retirement. The NSO, where Maria is employed, has devised an athlete-to-coach mentorship program so that retired athletes can transition into coaching immediately: 'There's an athlete-to-coach mentorship program that we have within [sport]. So, if they're wanting to go into coaching, they could probably step into that straightaway.'

Recognition of an athlete's service to sport is a practice acknowledged by four NSO participants. Recognition ranges from a thank you and acknowledgment letter from the NSO's CEO to an invitation to the NSO's annual awards dinner, a tribute to retiring athletes at national championships, and social media tributes. The NSO, where Sylvia is employed, organises a celebration of retiring athletes at the National Championships and a social media tribute: 'for championships, they always do a celebration of those who have retired. And then [sport] always do a really nice social media tribute to anyone that's retired.'

Alumni or athlete support groups are a support practice acknowledged by two NSO participants. The NSO where Sylvia is employed has developed an Alumni program through which retired athletes are invited to participate in other programs and other roles in the sport:

We have an alumni program as well. We want to stay in touch with our people, we want to have them coming back in and interacting with the sport as much as possible, we want them to have a positive spirit experience in the sport and a positive experience post-sport. I know several of our alumni athletes will come back in. Some of them are judges for the sport. Some of them just pop in to say 'Hi.' Some are mentors.

Psychological support is provided by two NSOs to athletes who retire suddenly. Natasha explains that she (NSO AW&E manager) and a psychologist are in attendance when para-athletes go for classification because it can be a traumatic experience, especially when athletes are classified out of their sport:

They go for international classification, and then they become not eligible. That's probably one of the toughest ones that we see, and I attend where possible, unless it's international, their para classifications, so I'm there and also a psychologist is there for support.

Body image education is a support practice offered by two NSOs to all retiring elite women athletes, with the intention of assisting them to understand the changes in their bodies once they retire. Maria comments on the body image education program her NSO was about to introduce: 'I think there's some things that we are doing, that will assist the transition...our body care culture, which comes out in three months' time.'

Mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors) involving retired athletes mentoring current athletes within the same sport is a practice one NSO participant implements. The NSO where Sylvia is employed engages retired athletes to mentor current national-level athletes:

The mentor program has different levels or tiers. So the alumni athletes will mentor the national athletes ... It goes through a screening process with myself and the high-performance director ... to pair people up... Then we also give the opportunity for our national athletes to not only be mentored, but to be mentors, so they can sign up to mentor the younger generations coming through.

Financial support for athletes who are deselected is provided by one NSO, albeit for a short amount of time. Athletes contracted to the NSO where Josie is employed, continue to receive weekly funding for two weeks post-retirement: 'They are on a weekly funding program. They only have two weeks of funding when they retire.' The same NSO also pays the relocation expenses of women athletes who are deselected from the national squad: 'their airfares are paid for to go back. And also the travel of their gear. So we had one woman from Tasmania. So her car was shipped back with the belongings that were in there...that's all paid for.'

A letter of support for athletes to gain employment after retirement is a practice acknowledged by one NSO participant. The NSO where Sylvia is employed provides these

letters for retired athletes: 'they'll get letters of support from the sport if they need for employment or anything like that.'

The length of time that transition support services are available to all athletes was addressed by six NSO participants. The duration of the support provided by NSOs ranges from three months post-sudden retirement to having no time limit. Sylvia, for example, recognises that all athletes are different and may require support for different lengths of time:

I've had an athlete say I'm good, thank you. I don't need anything. Thanks for checking in with me. And I'll just keep checking in to see how they're going. We don't put a time limit on it either. We see the first 12 months are essential just to ensure they're doing okay.

Internal Service Support Pre-Transition

Internal service support pre-transition was the third most prevalent sub-topic reported as an attribute by the NSO participants. This sub-topic recognises the support offered and provided directly by the NSO to elite women athletes prior to their sudden retirement. Five internal practices are offered including career counselling, community engagement opportunities, development of life plans, dual career support, and mentoring programs (current athletes as mentees).

Career counselling for suddenly retired elite women athletes is provided by five NSO participants. Yvette, for example, works directly with athletes nearing the end of their athletic career to explore their potential next career:

I've worked with a couple of female athletes coming towards the end of their career and spent quite a lot of time going through a lot of career development, career counselling type stuff. Career exploration, looking at what they want to do and how they can start to develop skills around a new career path whilst they're still involved as a professional athlete.

Community engagement opportunities are offered to athletes by three NSOs. To build athlete education and gain work experience in their chosen field, the NSO where

Yvette is employed helps to connect athletes with organisations. She explains that the NSO generally facilitates these opportunities through community engagement activities:

We've got a few athletes, for example, which are doing some work with the Black Dog Institute at the moment. And that all helps to just build their package as an individual so they're not just an athlete. Two of my athletes have a really keen interest in mental health and supporting positive messages about mental health in the community. They've taken up this opportunity with Black Dog Institute and it's building on what they've done at university.

Development of a life plan, a strategic framework that outlines an individual's long-term goals and the steps needed to achieve each goal, is a practice that three NSO participants complete with current athletes. Hilary, for example, works with current athletes to define their values and goals across all life domains:

I'm rolling out right now a life plans. But essentially, we look at their values, we look at a vision that they've created around who they are, how they want to be remembered how they impact others. We talk about defining their values. So what does it mean to be whatever those values are? Because that really, I do a lot of decision-making support with them. So are you making decisions that move you towards this person you're trying to be? Or are you making decisions that move you away? Let's make decisions that move you towards that person you're working toward working on being. And this life plan has all different life domains like career, education, sport, family, relationships, personal development, wellbeing health, spirituality.

Dual career support, where NSOs support athletes to continue their dual career once they retire, is provided by three NSO participants. Keith, for example, supports retiring athletes from his sport to continue to develop their dual careers:

Athletes tend to have a dual career...it's not a sport or a discipline that you're going to be making endless of money, like a professional footy player, to make ends meet when you retire. So, for us, it's continuing that dual career, whether it's providing

some additional support around careers and getting them some education or some support around CVs, interviewing skills, and career exploration if they're looking at maybe changing things around.

Mentoring programs (current athletes as mentees), which involve NSOs finding suitable mentors with specific expertise in sectors that the athlete wishes to enter for a second career, is a practice that one NSO participant facilitates to assist women athletes prepare for the transition to a second career. Declan, for example, organises mentors for current elite women athletes, based on the career field they want to enter:

We've got an athlete transition program...where we would, for example, pay for qualifications or provide a mentor, based on what they wanted to do. So, it doesn't have to be [sport]. If they want to do finance, or whatever area they want to do, we will try and find a mentor for them within our stakeholder group.

Athlete Engagement

Lack of engagement from athletes was the most prevalent sub-topic identified as a challenge by the NSO participants. Eight NSO participants spoke about the difficulties in supporting athletes who do not engage with the support offered to them. Keith highlights the difficulty in offering and providing support to athletes who do not engage with the practices offered to them by their NSO:

There is a level of engagement that doesn't happen with every athlete. We give athletes that opportunity and some athletes tend not to engage. From there, that's where it gets challenging in terms of the support that you can do, as much as you can, providing things on a plate, and whatever. If they don't take it, it's their prerogative; we're not going to be chasing them down because we're all about ensuring that athletes are self-regulated when they're in the sport. And when they're out of sport, they should be self-regulating.

Resources

Lack of resources, including time and finances, was the second most prevalent sub-topic identified as a challenge by the NSO participants. Six NSO managers reported a lack of resources as a challenge to supporting athletes at retirement. Yvette, for example, is employed part-time, three days per week, and has to service current and retired men and women athletes from her sport. This case-load leaves her with little time to develop support programs for athletes: 'The role that I'm in should probably be full-time. We could do some bigger stuff in the background to build a better program that could deliver on certain areas instead.'

Declan acknowledges that the NSO where he is employed does not have the financial resources to support many athletes at retirement. He emphasised the limited capacity of his NSO: 'Our budget is \$10,000 for a lot of this... we've only got two or three athletes engaged, but if we had ten, we can't fund it.'

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture was the third most prevalent sub-topic reported as a challenge by the NSO participants. Five NSO participants reported that the structure of high-performance sport, a system that prioritises elite athletic performance, is a challenge for supporting athletes at retirement. Josie, for example, explains that the time demands required of athletes do not make it easy for them to work or study in conjunction with their athletic careers:

It's a really time demanding sport. So they're at the centre from seven o'clock to four o'clock, five days a week, and another day there from seven till two sort of things. So it's pretty full-time daily training environment...some of the feedback I've had from women is that it's not been easy to juggle education, or work, or promotion activities with [sport] and it hasn't been strongly encouraged.

Focusing on supporting current athletes, as opposed to retired athletes (suddenly retired and generally retired), was a challenge reported by three NSO participants. Robert,

for example, explains that there is always something needing to be addressed with current athletes, as opposed to supporting retired athletes, particularly those who have retired suddenly:

It's a tough time with high-performance sport because for the players [who are] deselected...unfortunately, the reality is, there's another game or another series that is coming up, and you need to start focusing on those [current] players.

No Support Provided at Retirement

No support provided at retirement was the fourth most prevalent sub-topic identified as a challenge by the NSO participants. Two NSO participants work at NSOs that do not support athletes at retirement; instead, they provide support at different times during an athlete's career. The NSO where Jonathan is employed, for example, provides support to athletes at the start of their athletic career:

The theory with [sport] is that we front-end your development. So, the development around you as a person and a player is front-ended through your adolescence and junior opportunities. Currently, our funding model goes through to about 23. If you're hitting the criteria, you'll get support. Then after that, 20, let's round it off, say 24, 25 years old, you're pretty much on your own.

Socio-cultural

The socio-cultural topic summary explored the norms and cultural systems that NSO participants identified as indirectly affecting elite women athletes in their sudden retirement and transition to a second career. Amateur status was the only sub-topic identified, and it was identified as a challenge. This sub-topic, the number of NSO participants citing the sub-topic, and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 11.

Table 11*Socio-cultural sub-topic*

Attribute or challenge	Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Challenge	Amateur status	3	6

Amateur Status

The current amateur or semi-professional status of women's sport was identified as a challenge by three NSO participants for women athletes and the transition to a second career. Jonathan offered an example of how the increasing professionalisation of women's sport will lead to women athletes no longer having to work, which may impact their transition to a second career:

AFL, the women's league, rugby are doing really well. But they're caught in transition between getting paid a full-time wage to become a professional athlete. And no, I still need to go to work full-time to make ends meet. They're in that transition stage. It might take another few years. But yeah, there's enough money in the top tier, top echelon of players. Especially in team sports, you've got probably 80% of it especially on there. But hopefully, they get that. But then again, that then becomes issues of, well, you're a full-time athlete, and they don't do anything else. But it's a bit of a cycle.

Chapter Summation

The semi-structured interviews with NSO participants provided insights into the support offered by Australian NSOs to elite women athletes to assist with sudden retirement and their transition to a second career. Fifteen NSO participants from 16 NSOs participated in the interviews, which were conducted over Zoom teleconference software and were transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were then coded to assist with the discovery of topic summaries and associated sub-topics.

Five topic summaries were identified during the deductive coding process of the interview transcripts: situation, individual characteristics, interpersonal support, organisational strategies and socio-cultural. Organisational strategies was the most prevalent topic summary discussed by NSO participants. This topic summary identified the practices that NSOs offered athletes, particularly women athletes who retired suddenly, to assist with the transition to a second career. Seven sub-topics were identified under the organisational strategies topic summary. Three sub-topics (under the organisational strategies topic summary), external service support during transition, internal service support pre-transition, and internal service support during transition, were all identified as temporal strategies that can support elite women athletes with sudden retirement and their transition to a second career.

The external service support during transition sub-topic identified three external agencies to which NSOs refer athletes (men and women) when they retire suddenly: the AIS, Players' Associations, and State Institutes of Sport. The internal service support pre-transition sub-topic identified five practices that NSOs offered and provided elite women athletes prior to retirement to assist them in preparing for the transition to a second career. These practices included career counselling, community engagement opportunities, development of life plans, dual career support, and mentoring programs (current athletes as mentees).

The internal service support during transition sub-topic identified 10 practices that NSOs offered and provided to elite athletes when they retired suddenly and needed to transition to a second career. These practices included athlete check-ins, professional network services, transfer of high-performance sport experience, recognition, financial support, alumni or athlete support groups, psychological support, body image education, mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors), and a letter of support.

The four remaining sub-topics under the organisational strategies topic summary, lack of athlete engagement, lack of resources, organisational culture, and no support

provided at retirement, were all considered challenges for NSOs in providing support for elite women athletes who retired suddenly and with the transition to a second career.

Next, Chapter Six, Suddenly Retired Elite Women Athletes Interview Results, will present the results of the semi-structured interviews with suddenly retired elite women athletes (athlete participants).

Chapter Six – Suddenly Retired Elite Women Athletes Interview Results

Introduction

The results of the semi-structured interviews with the suddenly retired elite women athletes are presented in this chapter. These interviews were undertaken with the aim of gaining insight into the support that assisted or would have assisted these athlete participants with their sudden retirement and transition to a second career. Thirteen women who retired suddenly from their athletic careers were interviewed. They were aged between 25 – 49 at the time of the interview. Each had a unique story. These athlete participants had competed across nine sports, including artistic swimming, athletics, cricket, cycling, gymnastics, netball, rowing, tennis, and triathlon. Twelve athlete participants reached the highest level of their sport (i.e., Olympic Games, Paralympic Games, Commonwealth Games, Australian Representative Teams, or the Professional Tour). One athlete participant, who was on a projected pathway to reach the highest level of their sport, had their athletic career cut short. Interviews with this cohort reached code saturation, the point when no additional issues are identified (Hennink et al., 2017). Meaning saturation however, the point when issues are fully understood, may not have been achieved with this cohort due to the unique and individual experiences of the athlete participants, such as various reasons for sudden retirement or experiences with their associated NSO, it was difficult to determine when meaning saturation may occur. Due to time constraints in completing this research (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024), sampling for this cohort stopped at 13 eligible athlete participants.

Information on the athlete participants' demographics, including their number of years retired, education level at retirement, dual career trajectory, reason for sudden retirement, occupation during the transition phase to a second career, second career or plans for a second career, and the duration of time their transition to a second career took, is provided in Table 12. To protect the identity of these athletes, pseudonyms have been used, and any references to a specific sport or NSO have been anonymised.

Table 12

Interview sample of suddenly retired elite women athlete participants

Pseudonym	Years retired at interview	Education level at retirement	Dual career trajectory	Education started and completed after retirement	Reason for sudden retirement	Job during career transition phase	Second career or plan for second career	Duration of transition to Second Career (Years)
Penny	1	Bachelor's degree	Convergent	N/A	Lack of support from NSO in athletic career	Completed final year of bachelor's degree & coaching	Engineer	<1
Riley	2	Bachelor's degree	Convergent	Graduate Diploma	Lack of support from NSO in athletic career	Receptionist & coaching	Business Consultant	1.5
Kate	2	Bachelor's degree	Convergent	N/A	Injury due to athletic career	None (injured)	Teaching/Sport marketing	ongoing
Jasmine	4	Bachelor's degree	Convergent	Second bachelor's degree	Deselection	None	Head of Sport (School)	0.5
Amanda	7	Bachelor's degree & graduate diploma	Convergent	N/A	Lack of support from NSO in athletic career	Coaching	Executive Sport Leader	2
Toni	8	high school certificate	Linear	N/A	Injury external to athletic career	Coaching & retail	Sport Administration	3
Catherine	2	Bachelor's degree	Convergent	Second bachelor's degree (continuing)	Caring duties due to family member illness/Impact of COVID on sport	Completed bachelor's degree, coaching & sport administration (part-time)	Sports Law (studying)	ongoing

Pseudonym	Years retired at interview	Education level at retirement	Dual career trajectory	Education started and completed after retirement	Reason for sudden retirement	Job during career transition phase	Second career or plan for second career	Duration of transition to Second Career (Years)
Donna	8	Bachelor's degree	Parallel	PhD	Injury due to athletic career	Completed PhD & continued dual career part-time	Outdoor Education; Safety and Risk	1
Layla	8	high school certificate (Started and withdrew from bachelor's degree program)	Linear	Bachelor's degree	Injury due to athletic career	Completed bachelor's degree & coaching	Sport Psychology	ongoing
Anna	7	high school certificate (Started and withdrew from bachelor's degree program)	Linear	Bachelor's degree	Deselection	Coaching	Sport Media	4
Shannon	6	bachelor's degree x 2	Parallel	N/A	Deselection	Continued dual career (sport law)	Sports Law	<1
Natalie	8	Bachelor's degree	Convergent	MBA	Deselection	Athlete wellbeing role	Athlete Wellbeing & Sport Integrity	<1
Emma	4	Bachelor's degree	Convergent	N/A	Injury due to athletic career	None (injured)/Reception	Unknown	ongoing

Situation

The situation topic summary concerns the circumstances of the athlete participants' sudden retirement from elite sport. Five sub-topics emerged under this topic summary: injury, deselection, lack of support from NSO or high-performance program, carer duties, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five athlete participants gave multiple reasons for their sudden retirement (i.e., injury was the reason for their deselection, or the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with another life event such as increased family caring duties). These sub-topics and the number of athlete participants citing each sub-topic are outlined in Table 13.

Table 13

Reasons for sudden retirement

Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic
Injury/Medical advice	8
Deselection	4
Lack of support from NSO or high-performance program	4
Carer duties	1
Impact of COVID-19 pandemic	1

Injury

Injury or medical advice was the most prevalent reason the athlete participants retired suddenly. Eight athlete participants retired suddenly due to injury. Emma, for example, retired suddenly due to a hip injury. She had several hip surgeries throughout her athletic career and was unable to compete after the fourth surgery when she had a total hip replacement:

While I was competing, I had four hip surgeries. I haven't competed again since the last one. It was supposed to fix me, and it just made me worse. I haven't competed

again since then, which was in 2018 and last year, I actually had a hip replacement.

There'll be no chance of making a comeback.

Deselection

Deselection from their team or squad, or being told to retire, was the second most prevalent reason for the athlete participants to retire suddenly. Four athlete participants retired suddenly due to this reason. Anna, for example, was making a comeback after injury when she was told to retire: 'I was four weeks away from competing when I was essentially told to retire.' Similarly, after competing in the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games, Shannon reapplied for her twelfth annual Institute of Sport scholarship and discovered it was not endorsed by her NSO, prompting her retirement from that sport:

I didn't want to retire. I was ready to keep going, but it just would have been on a year-by-year basis. I'd been a State Institute of Sport scholarship holder for 12 years with [name]. After [event], I applied as I always had done for my annual State Institute of Sport scholarship, and they said to me [NSO] hadn't endorsed my scholarship. And I was like, that was the first time I've had an NSO not endorse my scholarship in those 12 years. And it was disheartening. It wasn't done right, considering I'd been such a historical athlete kind of thing.

Lack of Support from NSO or High-Performance Program

Lack of support from their NSO, or the perceived disorganisation of the NSO high-performance program, was the third most prevalent reason for the athlete participants to retire suddenly. Four athlete participants retired due to this reason. Riley, for example, explains that the lack of support she received from her NSO to train and compete at the highest level led her to retire suddenly:

I was getting very, very frustrated with the lack of support that I was getting to pursue going to the Olympics and trying to win a medal, not just go and participate. I was also a very injury-prone athlete, and I didn't have the support around me that I needed to be able to deal with being injured all the time in terms of physio.

In Penny's case, a perceived disorganised high-performance program, with no head coach and no plan for selection trials, left her confused as to what she was training and aiming for, triggering her sudden retirement:

I felt like I was just in limbo, and so does everyone. And to be honest, they still do because there still isn't a coach. And it's still not a plan for trials that are supposed to be in two months' time.

Carer Duties

Family member illness and associated caring duties led to one athlete participant having to retire suddenly from their athletic career. Catherine's father became severely unwell and required full-time care. She decided to retire from her athletic career to become his carer:

I don't have any siblings, and my mum passed away when I was really young. So it's just me and him. So it was either he goes into aged care, or I try and help him out. And that was the only two options I had.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted one athlete participant's career due to travel restrictions and the cancellation of events and tournaments. Catherine was one athlete participant impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, although she was already planning to take a six-month break from her athletic career due to the reason stated above:

Then, obviously, COVID happened. So, I guess, to me at the time, it was a blessing in disguise because I was going to take six months off anyway. So that was semi-forced, and I had to stop and take a break.

Individual Characteristics

The individual characteristics topic summary concerns the personal, biological, and psychological factors that either assisted or challenged the athlete participants' transitions to their second careers. Individual factors, such as cognition, emotions, beliefs, values, sport expertise, and personality, influenced how athlete participants experienced and managed their sudden retirement and transition to a second career. Nine sub-topics were identified

under this topic summary. Four of these sub-topics were identified as attributes: new role within sport, tertiary study, help-seeking strategies, and relocation. The remaining five sub-topics were identified as challenges when transitioning to a second career: negative feelings associated with sudden retirement, athlete identity and mindset, financial impact, lack of work experience, and ongoing injuries. These sub-topics, the number of athlete participants citing each sub-topic, and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 14.

Table 14

Individual characteristics sub-topics

Attribute or Challenge	Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Attribute	New role within sport	9	22
	Tertiary study	6	21
	Help seeking	4	4
	Relocation	2	6
Challenge	Negative feelings associated with sudden retirement	10	22
	Athlete identity and mindset	10	17
	Financial Impact	7	13
	Lack of work experience	6	11
	Ongoing injuries	6	9

New Role Within Sport

The transition to a new role within sport was a strategy that assisted nine athlete participants in coping with their sudden retirement. These new roles included coaching, athlete

wellbeing, and sport administration (see Table 12). Seven of the 13 athlete participants entered into coaching roles within their sport after they retired. Catherine, for example, began coaching her sport immediately after her sudden retirement. She began coaching because she did not have much else to do, and it allowed her the time to think about what was next in her career: 'Kids just started to ask me to coach...I started doing that because I had nothing much else to do. Then that slowly started the process of thinking about what I wanted to do next.'

Despite the positive aspects of these new roles in sport, working in the same sport that the athlete participants had just retired from presented challenges. Natalie, for example, found herself in a position where she had to work with and support staff from her NSO, who she felt had not supported her when she retired suddenly:

I moved to Melbourne to start a full-time role with the [sporting organisation] ... which...looking back on it was trying at times because I'd gone through probably a bit of a traumatic retirement process. I then had to support current female [athletes] and improve their environment, which was great. That was essentially the first job I went straight into, which was great, and it obviously had a good opportunity to influence the space and improve it for future female [athletes]. But it did have its mental challenges at times. I had to support people that I didn't feel had supported me as well at the end of my journey, so I had to try and put that aside for the greater good of the game.

Tertiary Study

Completing or returning to tertiary education assisted the majority of athlete participants in coping with their sudden retirement. Six athlete participants indicated that they commenced post-graduate study, embarked on a new area of tertiary study, or completed tertiary study that they had already started (see Table 12).

Commencing post-graduate study assisted three athlete participants in coping with their sudden retirement. Donna, for example, used the time she was recovering from the

injury that ended her athletic career to reflect on her future. She decided to further her tertiary education and enrolled in a PhD program, a decision that was supported with a full-stipend scholarship:

Because I was lying on the couch, it gave me a lot of time to look at the ceiling and think, 'Well, what are you going to do now?' And so, I knew. So, it really pushed me to do that. I applied for an APA scholarship, got it. I ended up, maybe, a year later, starting my PhD full-time and then continued to work part-time.

Embarking on a new area of tertiary education assisted four athlete participants in coping with their sudden retirement. The decision to return to university after her sudden retirement allowed Catherine to study for the degree that she had always wanted:

I ended up going back to uni. I always wanted to do law, but I was traveling too much. So, I thought when I finished my career, I'd go back and do law. So that kind of just worked out.

Completing the tertiary courses they had enrolled in prior to their athletic retirement assisted two athlete participants in coping with their sudden retirement. Retirement from her athletic career allowed Riley the time to complete her undergraduate degree and then progress to a postgraduate degree: 'Straight after the semester after I stopped [sport], I completed that degree, and then I did a postgrad in health service management.'

Help-Seeking

Help-seeking refers to how individuals seek assistance when facing challenges or emotional distress. Four athlete participants sought the services of sport psychologists or counsellors when they retired. Sport psychologists, in particular, played a pivotal role in helping these athletes reframe their thoughts about their athletic identity and careers. For example, Riley's experience with a sport psychologist was transformative, helping to shift her perspective and realise that her worth was not solely tied to athletic performance:

It just got to the point where I was like, 'I don't want to go and feel like this every day. I would prefer to be happy than just be going to the Olympics. I've already gone to

the Olympics. I'd love to go and win a medal, but I'm not getting enough support to go and win a medal. So why am I doing this?' And one of the things that the psych said to me is, 'You don't have to do something just because you're really good at it.' And I'd never ever thought about that before.

For Amanda, her athletic career was her sole identity. When she retired suddenly, she was confronted with a profound sense of loss and grief. She was unsure of who she was or what would define her moving forward. Her sport psychologist played a crucial role in guiding her transition from being an athlete to discovering a new identity and purpose in life:

So that was the only identity I'd ever formed or been confronted with. Without that, there was a real sense of loss and grief and not knowing who I was or what was going to define me moving forward. So yeah, there was a big piece of work that we did around that.

Sport psychologists and counsellors were instrumental in helping the athlete participants manage their immediate emotional distress and develop the necessary skills and mindset to succeed in their post-athletic life. Toni, for example, continues to benefit from her sessions with a counsellor, who helps her navigate her perfectionist tendencies and high-performance mindset, providing a steady source of support and guidance:

I go to counselling still. I'm a perfectionist, and I also struggle to receive critical feedback at times and, or I feel like I'm never quite doing enough or good enough. And that very much has stemmed from a career of being a high-performance athlete because your coaches are always telling you what you need to do better. And it's just ingrained in you from a very young age.

Relocation

Relocation from their athlete-training base assisted two athlete participants in coping with their sudden retirement. Anna's immediate move overseas helped: 'When my retirement did happen and the [transition to alternative sport] stuff just never eventuated, I was pretty dead set on getting out of here, and hence why I went and worked in America.'

Negative Feelings Associated with Sudden Retirement

The emotional state of the 13 athlete participants was complex and underpinned by a variety of negative feelings and experiences. These feelings included shock, isolation, a sense of being disposable, loss, disappointment, and a belief that they deserved more support.

Shock was felt by two athlete participants who both thought they were prepared for retirement and life beyond their athletic career. When their retirements occurred suddenly, they did not know what to do. Amanda thought she was the model athlete preparing for retirement: 'So, I was killing it. I was the one that had it together. And I'd put all the building blocks in place, used my networks, and done all of the things. But inside was really starting to crumble.'

Feeling alone and unsupported was a prevalent emotion among the athlete participants at the time of their sudden retirement. Even those who thought they were prepared, like Kate, felt a deep sense of isolation: 'I felt completely alone and left in the dark. I had everything planned, and then suddenly, everything changed. And even when it did, I was left wondering, who's going to help me? The answer was no one.' Layla reported that she believed no one had prepared her for retirement and found it a traumatic experience:

Retiring was really traumatic. It was probably one of the most traumatic things. And no one really prepared me for it; there was no one that said make sure you do these things, make sure you get these things in place. Make sure you have someone to talk to who can understand and empathise; there kind of wasn't any of those things.

Most athlete participants felt disposable to their sport at the time of sudden retirement. When Emma retired suddenly, she felt like no one at the NSO cared anymore: 'It just feels like as soon as you stop being valuable to them, you no longer exist.' Layla focused her whole life on her athletic career and echoed Emma's statement. When Layla's athletic career suddenly came to an end, she felt that the NSO just moved on: 'You put every part of your life into this, and then all of a sudden, it finishes, and [NSO] kind of just move on with whoever else is there still, and you're just kind of over here suffering.' Similarly, Toni felt

that as soon as she was no longer able to perform at the elite level due to injury, her NSO no longer cared about her:

It was very much like you're a machine; they see dollar signs in your eyes. We were viewed as their prodigies. And if we were unable to live up to their expectations of what they needed, then they didn't care anymore. That was very much what it was.

Every athlete participant interviewed believed they deserved more support from their NSO than they were provided at the time of sudden retirement. During their athletic careers, these athletes were tasked with performing at the elite level of their sport and promoting and marketing their sport to gain sponsors and recruit new participants and members. Donna, for example, felt her NSO used athletes to grow the sport and promote an active lifestyle:

[NSO] got their pound of flesh out of me and my teammates. We showed up, we raced, we helped grow the sport. We helped put it out there about these women having fun, and being healthy, and fit, and active. They got a good return on investment on us. So therefore, there's a social, and moral, and a corporate responsibility for them to repay that when it's needed. To me, it's as simple as that.

Disappointment was felt by most athlete participants. NSOs often ask athletes to help promote and market their sport with the aim of growing membership, increasing participation, and attracting sponsorship. At the end of her 15-year athletic career, Kate was deeply disappointed in the lack of support she received to assist with her transition to a second career, especially as she felt she had done so much to promote her sport:

I was pretty disappointed in our sport. We ask so much of our athletes when we're in it.... We're such good role models. 'You've [the athletes] got to drive the sport, we've got to get more sponsorship, you know, ask, ask, ask, more, more, and more of athletes. And then once they're done, it's like, okay, you're no longer serviceable to us. See you later.

Athlete Identity and Mindset

Athlete identity and a high-performance mindset were identified by most athlete participants as significant emotional barriers in their transition to a second career. Ten athlete participants struggled to move on from identifying themselves as 'athletes' when they retired. Similarly, the high-performance mindset, a key aspect of an athlete's life, had a profound emotional impact. Ten athlete participants shared their struggle of being unable to simply 'switch off' from being an elite athlete when they retired suddenly.

The athlete participants spoke about how this mindset, once a strength, became a barrier in their transition to a second career. Donna did not know how to 'turn off' the mindset of being an elite athlete: 'An elite athlete, it's a mindset, but it's also a career. It's like, how the hell do you turn that off? And your hopes, dreams, and everything that comes with it, everything you're filled with.' Anna always thought of herself as an athlete and received no help to consolidate or redirect her strong sense of self, which had previously been associated with her athletic identity:

It's like you were this person; you were this athlete. And as athletes, we say it all the time, that's our identity. And you were often that sport as a kid. 'I'm Anna and I'm a [athlete].' From when I was eight until I retired at 21. So that's your identity and you shouldn't tie yourself to that, but you do. And so, I think that when you retire and you lose that part, you're now, 'I'm just Anna.' Well, not just, but 'I'm Anna.' It's like, you've lost such a part of yourselves and want to move on to the next phase in life, but there's no help. Well, at least back then, it didn't feel like there was any.

Penny experienced a significant struggle during her transition out of elite sport. She found it particularly difficult to cope without striving for a major goal, like the Olympic Games: 'Emotionally I found that really hard without having a massive goal, like the Olympics. Without having this structured purpose was really hard. And being part of this sort of, elite group.'

Among these 10 athletes, two referred to the difficulties experienced regarding the changes in their bodies when they retired suddenly. Riley explains how she struggled with the changes in her body after suddenly retiring from her athletic career:

I think the other thing that I still struggle with a little bit now is just that change in your body when you stop [sport] or any sport. Especially the fact that I was pretty much an athlete for my whole life. Like I've always been an athlete, I swam competitively, played netball, and then I [sport]. I have never not been an athlete, and now I am not an athlete, and it's quite hard to come to terms with the changes in your body.

Financial Impact

A lack of earnings from their athletic career was perceived as a challenge for seven athlete participants. Additionally, their athletic careers had further financial implications on their lives once they retired. These financial implications included the inability to repay Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt, the inability to obtain income protection insurance, and ongoing medical costs.

Lack of income from their athletic careers hindered the athlete participants' ability to transition to a new career. Natalie, for example, did not make any money during her athletic career: 'I mean, of course, I made a choice to follow the [sport] journey, and that's probably another challenge. I came out and haven't really earned an income from [sport].'

Income protection insurance is now unobtainable for some athlete participants due to injuries they sustained during their athletic careers. Natalie, for example, is now unable to obtain income protection insurance:

A couple of injuries have prevented me from getting income protection insurance. I can't get that now because, obviously, if I apply, and you have to disclose, you've got a bit of neck arthritis. Anytime you mention neck or back, the income protectors don't like you.

The accumulation of a HECS debt impacted one athlete participant for many years after they retired from elite sport. Shannon, for example, only earned a part-time wage

during her athletic career, meaning she was not required to make mandatory payments, and her debt continued to accumulate. She believes that if she had earned a full-time income while an athlete, her HECS debt would have been paid off by the time she retired suddenly:

I ended up with this horrendous HECS debt, which I'm still paying off because I had historically worked only part-time for so long. That then delayed the whole process of paying off your HECS debt because you weren't a full-time athlete. I'm still paying for things like that, even today, which really should have just been over and done with if you hadn't had sport involved or had worked the full-time job.

Medical costs of injuries sustained during athletic careers impacted the athlete participants after their sudden retirement. They were left with no income and no support for managing their injuries. Riley sustained injuries as an athlete that still needed to be managed when she retired. She was now responsible for the cost of managing her injuries and had no income to pay that cost.

I probably needed some support in terms of injury management after I left as well because my injuries didn't just vanish. Pretty much as soon as I stopped, I didn't have coverage to have my injuries managed, and I had to pay for that myself, and I didn't have a job. I think I might have had support for a month, and then my funding stopped, and I wasn't technically covered under any of the sporting bodies anymore. But I still was managing a lot of injuries, and I was used to having physio almost every day. I went from having it readily available to having nothing, and that was quite hard.

Lack of Work Experience

A lack of non-athlete work experience and employment skills was a significant challenge for the athlete participants with the transition to a second career. The challenge included athlete participants having a lack of work experience, and a lack of (perceived) transferable skills.

A lack of work experience (other than being an elite athlete) was a challenge for several athlete participants at the time of their sudden retirement. These athletes were

unable to fit in work with their athletic careers, which hindered their ability to gain employment when it was required suddenly. Emma, for example, had no work experience as she spent all her time training and then found it difficult to gain employment: 'I had no experience because I'd spent all of my time training. I didn't have time for a job...No one wants to employ a 25-year-old who's never had a job before, so it took a long time.' She eventually found a job after using her connections: 'I applied for 120 jobs before I got the one that I got, and I only got the one that I got because I knew the operations manager of the company I [now] work for.'

The actual or perceived lack of transferable skills was a significant challenge for the athlete participants when transitioning to a second career. They struggled to recognise the skills acquired during their athletic careers and how to apply these when seeking employment. After a 15-year playing career, Jasmine felt she had no qualifications or work experience to include in her resume:

I just finished a 15-year career. I've represented my country. I achieved so much, and I learned so much, yet none of it matters on my resume. Nothing really counts. So, I guess I felt that was a bit of a barrier, that lack of experience, lack of qualification to move on into another job.

Ongoing Injuries

The chronic effects of injuries sustained during their athletic career represented a barrier for six athlete participants' transition to a second career. The effects of injuries include ongoing management, an inability to undertake other career opportunities, and chronic pain.

The ongoing management of injuries after retirement affected four athlete participants. As in Riley's case (noted above), when her NSO funding stopped after her sudden retirement, she was then responsible for the management of her injuries. Riley found this difficult physically, as she went from having physiotherapy every day to none at all.

Injuries prevented three athlete participants from being able to physically transition to their planned second career. Kate was prepared for her second career, but the knee injury she sustained meant she was physically unable to undertake her planned role as a teacher:

With this third surgery, I couldn't actually go back to teaching because I couldn't put weight on it for 12 weeks, so three months. I couldn't do any of my jobs so as much as I was planned or may be prepared for the next phase, I was very much left in the dark because when I did finish with [club] and finished with [sport], I technically had a plan but then that plan changed I was like here I am trying to figure it out on my own, and I have zero support like nothing, no funding.

Similarly, the chronic pain Emma experienced from injuries sustained during her athletic career inhibited her ability to undertake duties as a medical receptionist:

It's [the pain] quite significant. Sometimes, when I'm sitting at my desk, it gets so bad I can't actually sit at my desk. I end up kneeling on the floor, which isn't a good look. I can't do that if there's patients coming in to see the doctor. I can't think straight sometimes.

Chronic pain not only affects Emma's ability to undertake her medical receptionist role but also limits her career options. Standing or sitting for too long caused her pain and limited her mobility, Emma reflects:

I'm happy with what I'm doing now, but there are a number of things that I wouldn't be able to do if I wanted to. I couldn't be a nurse because they have to be on their feet too long. When I was looking for a job or trying to decide what I was going to do, one of my friends was like, oh, you'd be an awesome police officer. And I'm like, yeah, sure, they're going to recruit someone who can't run, can't walk, can't sit. I'm fine with what I'm doing, but I am also limited. If I did want to change, I'd have to think very carefully about the work environment.

Interpersonal Support

The interpersonal support topic summary categorises and explores the support these athlete participants required and/or received from their family and friends when they retired

suddenly and needed to transition to a second career. Three sub-topics were identified under this topic summary. Two sub-topics were identified as attributes, family, and friendships, while the remaining sub-topic, loss of interpersonal support network, was identified as a challenge. These sub-topics, the number of athlete participants citing each sub-topic and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 15.

Table 15

Interpersonal support sub-topics

Attribute or challenge	Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Attribute	Family	7	10
	Friendships	4	14
Challenge	Loss of interpersonal support	4	4

Family

Family, particularly parents and intimate partners, emerged as the primary source of interpersonal support for the athlete participants grappling with the emotional upheaval of sudden retirement. In addition to tangible support, such as providing a place to stay, parents played a crucial role in offering emotional support. For instance, when Kate retired suddenly from her sport, she had no steady income and had to move in with her parents. She shared, 'I had to live with my parents for 12 months. I can't even afford to live out on my own because I'm not getting any money.'

Intimate partners also provided tangible support. When Riley's athletic career ended suddenly, she was able to relocate and move in with her partner: 'I was lucky I went in with a

strong relationship, and then I was lucky to have him when I came out to be able to go and live with him when I finished.'

Friendships

Friendships, within and outside the sport industry, supported the athlete participants when they retired suddenly. Similar to support from family members, friends provided tangible and emotional support. Donna could not continue living in her house while recovering from the injury that led to her sudden retirement. Friends from outside her sport network offered their place to stay while she recovered:

It became personal friendships and peer relationships that helped me move to the next phase... I had to move out of my house because it had a step into the bath. I couldn't get over the step. I had to go stay with good friends... It was my own friendships that existed long before I became a [athlete] that helped me transition. It wasn't the sport.

Retired and current athletes, united by their shared experiences, provided a unique form of emotional support to the athlete participants at the time of their sudden retirement. Donna found comfort in connecting with athletes who had been in similar situations. Three retired athletes, who had also experienced similar injuries, reached out to Donna when they heard about her situation. Their shared experiences and the emotional support they provided were invaluable: 'When we talk about what saved me after, or what helped, I had three athletes get in touch, who'd broken hips.'

Loss of Interpersonal Support

The loss of interpersonal support had a profound emotional impact on the athlete participants at the time of their sudden retirement. They had either 'lost' their community (due to no longer playing) or were yet to build one outside of sport, leaving them feeling isolated and uncertain.

Toni's interpersonal support network was deeply intertwined with her sport, as she was surrounded by people from her sport daily. When she could no longer participate in her

sport, she was abruptly cut off from this network, which significantly hindered her ability to adapt to a life without sport:

There was no support to maintain that sense of community and, you know, like psychological help after finishing so suddenly, so that really challenged me and was a barrier to just move forward in life outside of [sport], because all my people were gone.

Similarly, the athlete participants who relocated for their sport (i.e., moved to a training base or facility) lacked interpersonal support because they had moved away from their family and friends. Jasmine, for example, had recently relocated interstate for her sport when she retired suddenly, and she did not have family or friends close by:

Not having the support networks here in Melbourne, where I ended up. I guess it was a barrier in terms of people I could reach out to or connections, or someone might have known someone who could have given me a job. I just didn't know anyone. So that was a barrier as well.

Organisational Strategies

The organisational strategies topic summary identified the support NSOs made available to the athlete participants when they retired suddenly from their athletic career. Five sub-topics were identified under this topic summary. Three sub-topics were identified as attributes: internal service support during transition, external service support during transition and internal service support pre-transition. The two remaining sub-topics were identified as challenges: no offer of support and organisational culture. These sub-topics, the number of athlete participants citing each sub-topic, and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 16.

Table 16*Organisational strategies sub-topics*

Attribute or challenge	Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Attribute	Internal service support during transition	9	16
	External service support during transition	8	21
	Internal service support pre-transition	2	4
Challenge	No offer of support	9	14
	Organisational culture	8	11

Internal Service Support During Transition

Internal service support during transition was the most prevalent sub-topic reported as an attribute by the athlete participants. This sub-topic refers to the support offered and delivered directly by NSOs to the athlete participants during their transition from sudden athletic retirement to a second career. Five practices within this sub-topic were identified: athlete check-ins, financial support, support for the transfer of high-performance sport experience, professional network services, and recognition.

Athlete check-ins from NSO AW&E managers were received by four athlete participants when they retired suddenly. Only one athlete participant, Catherine, found this practice to be beneficial. When a member of her family became unwell, the AW&E manager from her NSO reached out:

There is a wellbeing manager. When my dad got sick, [they] helped a lot in the fact that [they] hooked me up with psychologists in [city] and paid for some sessions for me to see that person because it was obviously a very traumatic experience.

The three remaining athlete participants who received athlete check-ins were dissatisfied with this practice. Kate found the support offered during the athlete check-in was convoluted, and she did not have the energy to apply for any of the programs that were offered:

She was like, look at this program, have a look at this program, have a look at this program. But there were so many hoops to jump through to be considered for those programs. I was like, I can't be fucked. I don't have the energy to even bother about it.

Riley and Amanda were both approached by their NSO AW&E manager at the time of their sudden retirement. However, they had no previous relationship with their NSO AW&E manager, so they did not see any value in engaging with them when they retired suddenly. Riley's NSO AW&E manager tried to contact her, even though they had only been employed for a short time: 'They had just hired a wellbeing person at [NSO]. I think she'd been there for three weeks. I had no relationship with her, and she contacted me a couple of times, but that was it.'

Amanda had a similar experience to Riley. Her NSO had employed an AW&E manager, but she had little engagement with them: 'They did have a Wellbeing and Engagement Manager. I don't know when she started, but there wasn't a lot of engagement with me...there wasn't much at the time.' Amanda felt that she had prepared sufficiently for retirement and the transition to a second career, and therefore, felt she was not an athlete that an AW&E manager would have looked to assist:

I'd done all the right things. And for a practitioner working in that space, at the time they go, 'Oh, she's done two degrees, and she's commentating, and she's got a part-time job helping to support herself. So, it looks like she's killing it.' And they've probably got far bigger problems, kids sitting down, playing video games between training sessions or whatever. So, I guess for someone in that space, I was in pretty good shape, pretty motivated and doing the right things.

Financial support was provided to three athlete participants. Two athlete participants were provided with a financial payment from their NSO insurance provider, while the third

received funding directly from her NSO to cover the cost of her injury rehabilitation. Donna received \$5,000 from her NSO insurance provider; however, it was insufficient to cover the medical costs associated with her injury: 'I didn't question the insurance. I didn't question it one bit. And it turns out my insurance only covered me for \$5,000. Nothing. It was gone within days.'

Support for the transfer of high-performance experience was offered to two athlete participants. Both Catherine and Penny were offered the opportunity to undertake fast-track coaching programs. Catherine relished the opportunity and had wanted to be offered this opportunity offer for some time, while Penny did not accept the opportunity:

They wanted me to be involved in the coaching side as an athlete transition role coach, but I'm more qualified than some of the coaches who are full-time coaches on teams. I didn't take it because I was a bit insulted.

Professional network services were offered to one athlete participant. Jasmine received a medical exit screening when she retired suddenly, although she experienced difficulty in obtaining it:

My body was starting to deteriorate with my knees and stuff like that. I did ask the club...I wanted to get an MRI on my knees just to check the damage. And you know, it was all a battle. The doctor was like, 'Oh, you don't need one.' So, I was pissed off about that, too.

Recognition for their service to their sport was received by one athlete participant. Layla was presented with a certificate from her NSO the year after she retired suddenly: 'At national championships the following year, I got a certificate.'

External Service Support During Transition

External service support during transition was the second most prevalent sub-topic reported as an attribute by the athlete participants. This sub-topic recognises the support offered and provided to elite women athletes when they retire suddenly by agencies external to the NSO. Three external organisations that provided support for the athlete participants were identified, including State Institutes of Sport, the AIS, and Players' Associations. While these

support services were anticipated to be enablers, the athlete participants also faced barriers to accessing them or did not find the support valuable when transitioning to their second career.

State Institutes of Sport were a source of support for four athlete participants at the time of their sudden retirement. All four of these athlete participants held scholarships with their State Institute of Sport and were therefore eligible to access the support services offered. Penny, for example, continued to receive support from her State Institute of Sport after she retired:

They were just there for me, and so was the gym coach. I can still use the gym now. They have psychologists and dietitians to help through difficult times, and also, the program coordinator for the scholarship holders was very understanding of everything. And they were trying to find out; she was trying to push the NSO for as much information as possible, so it was easier for athletes to make decisions. I just felt really supported from them. They were checking in with me.

The services of the AIS were offered to four athlete participants. The AIS MHRN was recognised by two athlete participants. However, both participants identified barriers to accessing the AIS MHRN post-retirement. Emma felt that the lack of practitioners in the state where she lived meant it was not worth her pursuing this support:

In Hobart, or I think in Tasmania, there's only one practitioner who's eligible. So, I did reach out to them [the AIS], and they're like, 'There's this one person who we can refer you to,' but I was already seeing someone else. So, I was like, I'm not going to switch just for this. And then they were like, okay. And that was that.

Natalie did not think she could access the AIS MHRN service because she was no longer a current athlete: 'They've got obviously the AIS mental health referral network, which I do believe that's more for current athletes, though.'

Career transition and leadership programs offered by the ASC/AIS, including the Women Leaders in Sport (WLIS) program and the Accelerate program, were acknowledged by two athlete participants. Toni participated in the WLIS program after her athletic

retirement and found the opportunity to network beneficial to her second career, which is in the sport industry:

I'm doing the Sport Australia Women Leaders in Sport program at the moment. I'm finding that really beneficial because it's given me the opportunity to build my network with like-minded people, and looking back as an athlete, I would have loved to be able to build my network ... I didn't really have that network; I would have loved if some sports could come together and connect their female athletes in those later teenage years or early twenties, where we see a lot of that drop out from that professional space. Being able to connect them with other people in a similar stage would have been amazing.

Players' Associations offered financial support to two athlete participants when they retired suddenly. While both participants were grateful for the support, they noted that the amount offered was insignificant. Kate was provided with \$500 from her Players' Association at the time of her retirement. She expressed that she was disheartened with this level of support given that she had been an Australian representative: 'Here's \$500 for retirement. I was like, thanks. I mean, it's better than nothing...but I've represented my country, for crying out loud.' Natalie echoed Kate's statement about the amount of financial support that is offered:

The Players' Association, at times, do offer a couple of small things. Current or past male and female elite [athletes] do get some support. Each year, you can apply for a grant. I think it's about \$200. I'm grateful. Take this right away. I'm grateful, but it's like \$200 bucks a year. So, it might be you could get \$200 bucks towards a gym membership or \$200 bucks towards helping with physio.

In addition to financial support, Players' Associations offer psychological support to all retired athletes. Natalie, for example, was aware that she could access psychological support through her Players' Association: 'I know they've made available psychological support for past players as well.'

Internal Service Support Pre-Transition

Internal service support pre-transition was the third most prevalent sub-topic reported as an attribute by the athlete participants. The internal service support pre-transition sub-topic acknowledged the support offered and delivered by the NSO to women athletes during their athletic career (i.e., pre-sudden retirement) to assist with the inevitable transition to a second career. Two internal service support practices were offered to athlete participants during this phase of their athletic career: education sessions on planning for retirement and community engagement opportunities.

Education sessions delivered by NSOs to current athletes about planning for retirement was reported by one athlete participant. Catherine's NSO organised for a successful and well-known athlete (from a different sport) to present to current athletes about her journey in sport and her transition out:

She came and chatted with us about her journey as an athlete, what she's doing now, and things like that. It was awesome. She was great to listen to, but I couldn't relate to her; she won gold at the Olympics. And I never reached that high level; she already has a name salvaged for herself. And then again, [sport] is very different. You don't have to travel week in and week out; you only have these major events, and you can still work generally because she was working with EY while she was doing the Olympics, training, or something like that.

Community engagement opportunities were offered to one athlete participant during her athletic career. Natalie, for example, participated in community engagement opportunities as part of her leadership role: 'A part of the Australian captaincy role [I] had a few ambassador sort of roles. Promoting it in schools and that sort of thing.'

Insufficient or No Offer of Support

Insufficient or no offer of support from their NSO at retirement was the most prevalent sub-topic reported as a challenge by the athlete participants. Overall, nine athlete participants acknowledged this sub-topic. Six athlete participants reported that they were not offered any support from their NSO when they retired suddenly. Amanda, for example, was not offered

any support from her NSO when she retired suddenly: 'There was nothing that existed as far as I knew, and nothing was offered.' Anna echoed these statements: 'In terms of [NSO], I just remember having very little information, very little support and no knowledge of the steps to take beyond my athletic career.' Even after a devastating career-ending injury, Toni indicated her NSO offered her no support: 'There was no support post-accident and even pre-accident, there was never any education around what we wanted to do after being a [athlete] or life after [sport].'

The other three athlete participants were offered support by their NSO when they retired suddenly. However, they did not perceive this support to be suitable. While all three received check-ins from their NSO AW&E manager, none found these beneficial, as examined earlier in this chapter, due to their not having an established relationship with the NSO AW&E manager or their difficulty in accessing the support that the AW&E manager offered.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture was the second most prevalent sub-topic reported as a challenge by the athlete participants. Barriers to receiving required support from their NSO included competition and training demands, as well as the perceived disorganised operating structure of NSOs (especially the high-performance program).

Competition and training demands hindered five athlete participants' ability to transition to a new career because they could not undertake work experience during their athletic career. The women spent most of their time training and had little time to pursue other interests. Riley, for example, was unable to undertake work experience during her athletic career due to the training commitment's for her sport: 'because when you're training six hours a day, every day there's no way you can try and get any experience to be able to plan for what you might do when you finish.'

The perceived disorganised operating structure of their NSO negatively affected three athlete participants' ability to seek help when they retired suddenly. Penny, for

example, did not know who at her NSO to approach for support and believed her NSO would be incapable of assisting her anyway:

At [sport] people are always changing, and if any person has questions, they don't know who to write to because there's just too many fingers in the pie. There are too many people wearing the same hat. There's no chain of command, and people underneath don't understand what's going on at both levels. So, it's very hard to know who to contact. And because they are so disorganised, I don't think anyone feels comfortable going to them asking for help because they don't seem like an organisation that has the capability to help.

Socio-cultural

Socio-cultural was the final topic summary identified. This topic summary explored the norms and cultural systems that indirectly affect elite women athletes' sudden retirement and transition to a second career. One sub-topic, valuing women in sport, was identified as a challenge. The sub-topic, the number of athlete participants citing the sub-topic, and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 17.

Table 17

Socio-cultural sub-topic

Attribute or challenge	Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Challenge	Valuing women in sport	3	8

Valuing Women in Sport

Women athletes not being valued by their NSO was a challenge identified by three athlete participants. These athletes felt that they were not valued as athletes by their NSO because they were women. Kate expressed her frustration, saying:

I'm not saying we should be getting the same financial support as [a male-dominated sport] ...but I've represented my country for crying out loud. And yet, you're representing a frickin suburb, and you're taken care of for 10 years, or however long after.

Recommendations for NSOs

During the inductive coding of the interview transcripts, one additional topic summary was identified: recommendations for NSOs. The athlete participants offered several recommendations for NSOs to enhance transition support for athletes. These recommendations, when implemented, could significantly aid other elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career. The eight recommendations (sub-topics) are recognition, psychological support, increased visibility of women in sport leadership positions, support for transfer of high-performance experience, check-ins with retired athletes, development of an alumni or athlete support group, support for injury rehabilitation, and opportunity to undertake work experience. These sub-topics, the number of athlete participants citing each sub-topic, and the number of citations across the interview transcripts are outlined in Table 18.

Table 18*Recommendations for NSOs*

Sub-topic	Number of participants citing sub-topic	Number of citations across interviews
Recognition	4	5
Psychological support	4	5
Support for transfer of high- performance experience	3	5
Visibility of women in leadership positions	3	5
Athlete check-ins	3	5
Athlete support group	2	4
Support for injury rehabilitation	2	3
Opportunity to undertake work experience	1	2

Recognition

Recognition for service to their sport was a recommendation made by four athlete participants. Layla, for example, competed at the highest level of her sport and actively contributed to her sport community. She believes that if her service had been acknowledged, it would have eased her negative emotions when she retired suddenly:

Recognising the years of commitment and service that I've given to the sport would be beneficial because I've given back a lot. I've volunteered a lot. I've gone to [sport] clubs, to comps, signed autographs, presented medals, and taken hundreds of photos with kids. And it's fine; it's not a chore. But it's nice to be acknowledged for the service that I have done for the sport.

Psychological Support

Psychological or mental health support was a recommendation made by four athlete participants. Layla, in particular, feels that athletes should have access to a sport psychologist when they retire:

If you go to the Olympic Games, you should probably be allowed free access to some sort of sports psych for the retirement process because you put every part of your life into this. And then all of a sudden, it finishes, and [NSO] kind of just move on with whoever else is there still, and you're just kind of over here suffering.

Support for Transfer of High-Performance Experience

Support for athletes to be able to transfer their knowledge and experience about high-performance sport was a recommendation made by three athlete participants. Catherine, Toni, and Layla all recommended that NSOs provide opportunities for athletes to gain coaching qualifications and experience while still training and competing. Catherine highlighted the significant benefits of this opportunity. She explains how she was offered (along with other current athletes) the opportunity to complete coaching qualifications during the COVID-19 pandemic, which halted international travel and sporting competitions around the world. Catherine, for example, found that the opportunity to complete coaching qualifications allowed her to explore coaching as a career option when she retired suddenly:

Athletes were bored out of their brains [during COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns]. And so, [NSO] was like, if you're not doing anything, you might as well do a coaching course. To be honest, I was trying to get them to do this a lot earlier. Because I thought, given my own experiences, if we were supported better while we were playing to say, coaching is a potential avenue for you after your career, you can shadow some of these coaches, don't have to pay for your coaching course, because generally, you do have to pay. You don't have to pay for these coaching courses; they kind of mentor you a little while you're still playing. That would have given me a

bit of a better experience to maybe think about going into coaching. Whereas before, the mentality was, well, if you're coaching, that's it, you're not playing anymore.

Toni transitioned to work in the sport industry and explains how many of the coaches in her sport come from an elite playing background. The sporting organisation where she now works has identified retired athletes as potential coaches:

We look at the athletes who were in the program and what percentage of them go on to become coaches; it sits around 70-75%. So that's been a key thing: not waiting until they quit to actually start working with them when they're still playing. And we know that the majority of athletes, more than three-quarters of athletes in [state], want to continue working in the sporting sector once they finish playing.

Layla indicated that she would like to see elite athletes have the opportunity to be 'fast-tracked' through the coaching pathway. By 'fast-tracked', she meant that athletes should be able to use their existing knowledge and experience to bypass certain entry-level courses and move directly into more advanced coaching courses. Layla felt that the knowledge and experience that athletes gain from their careers are not valued when it comes to coaching in Australia.

There also needs to be some fast-track ability. It's almost like you've done several master's degrees in [sport], but you can't use it for anything. And then you're expected to go back to a beginner's coaching course. It's almost a little bit insulting.

Additionally, Toni and Layla saw the potential for athletes to transition into various roles within the sport industry beyond coaching. Layla particularly emphasised the need for a range of career options. She envisioned a system in which elite athletes could gain work experience in different areas of sporting organisations, such as officiating, marketing, and sport management. She believed these experiences would not only provide athletes with valuable work experience but would also help them to maintain a sense of importance and usefulness within their sport, a crucial aspect of their post-athletic career transition:

I just think there's a lot of areas within the [State Institute of Sport] and the AIS and [NSO], [SSO], where you can, you can get experience in different areas, to kind of

learn what you can do with the knowledge that you have, whether it be coaching, whether it be judging, whether it's marketing, whether it's managing...there's lots of areas where elite athletes can be useful. And it gets them kind of moving, so they're still involved in [sport]. They still feel useful, they still feel important, because you kind of go from being really, really important to not mattering at all.

Similar to Layla's suggestion above, Toni explains how her sporting organisation employer offers opportunities for athletes across the organisation:

We want to provide them with as many different opportunities as possible. We know that a lot of them go into coaching, but we know that they don't stay in coaching for a long period of time. Coaching for them is typically a part-time job they go into after playing, whilst they then go to uni. It's more of that bridging job/bridging career for them. We really want to have a focus on actually opening up all the opportunities in sport for them. So coaching is just one aspect of it but having them move in and getting an education as an official in [sport] because you can go really far in that. We educate them on what the roles in our state sporting organisation actually are and all the different types of opportunities you can have as a sports administrator, as well.

Visibility of Women in Leadership Positions

Increasing the visibility of women in leadership positions was a recommendation made by three athlete participants. They would like to see retired women athletes retained in sport, especially as coaches, and that women do not seem to stay in sport once their athletic careers have ended. Catherine felt that supporting women to remain in sport via alternative roles such as coaching or sport marketing it would not only help athletes work out what they want to do upon their retirement, it would help encourage women to remain in sport:

Why don't you just provide some kind of support on the side for any female that's played at a decent level? These are the options that you could do: you can work in marketing, you can work in legal, you can be a coach, you can do all these things, and you keep them in the sport. And then you wouldn't have a problem where you don't have enough females working in sport.

Amanda echoed Catherine's sentiment that women do not stay in sport once their athletic careers end.

I think everyone can see that there is an issue in terms of women in sport and remaining engaged in sport, whether it's as an athlete, or as a coach, or as an administrator and trying to problem solve that.

Layla, who transitioned into coaching after she retired suddenly, feels that more women coaches are needed: 'female coaches are needed. And it's not something that is pushed.' Layla further explains that the best coaches in her sport tend to be men and there has never really been a push for women coaches to progress through the pathway. A push that is required:

I guess in coaching, which is what I'm doing now, the best coaches tend to be male.

It seems there hasn't really been the push for female education, to kind of rise up the ranks sort of thing. I feel like that would have been a beneficial thing.

Athlete Check-ins

Athlete check-ins were a recommendation made by four athlete participants. Penny, for example, understands that it may be difficult for an NSO to check-in with all athletes due to resources, but she feels that this should at least occur after a major event:

They should have a policy to touch base every certain amount of time, like [State Institute of Sport] does, and I know they don't have a lot of people involved in the organisation. And that can make things quite difficult when you have a lot of jobs to do. But they should every six months, or every three months for the first year, check-in and it doesn't have to be when every single person retires. But maybe just when people retire after a major event.

Alumni or Athlete Support Groups

Alumni or athlete support groups comprise retired athletes who share similar experiences would have been a great benefit, according to two athlete participants. These two women suggested that such a group could have assisted with their transition out of elite sport.

Donna, for instance, believed that a formal mentoring or support group would have been a

lifeline at the time of her sudden retirement. She indicated that being able to speak with other athletes who retired due to acute injuries would have reassured her that the situation would improve over time:

A formal mentoring or a formal support group, 100%, would've been amazing; it would've been really helpful. Just to help you understand that you're not crazy and that it will get better even though it's really crap at the time.

Support for Injury Rehabilitation

Support for the management and rehabilitation of injuries sustained due to their athletic careers was a recommendation made by two athlete participants. Jasmine's knees had deteriorated due to her athletic career, and she battled with her NSO to obtain a medical exit screening:

I felt like the second that I wasn't playing, it's like, oh, well, wipe your hands like you go deal with your body now. Well, hang on a second; my body is like this because of the sport, so a little bit of support would be nice.

Additionally, while Natalie did not explicitly recommend that NSOs extend the duration of how long NSOs support athletes with the treatment and rehabilitation of injuries, she noted that the current coverage of six months is inadequate to cover the extent of their injuries:

So how it works in [sport] is you've got six months post your contract medical cover. And after that time, that was it. So, obviously, injuries don't just fade away in six months. Over the years, I get arthritis in my neck and my shoulders. You need continual physio and that sort of thing to help you stay healthy. But from a career that you've put a fair bit into... your body's gone through a fair bit.

Natalie reiterated that an athlete needs support for their injuries, especially after they retire:

It's when people finish their sport is often when people need help, and that's when it's not there. That's when other things start to pop up and you're going to have to fix it yourself and pay for it.

Opportunity to Undertake Work Experience

The opportunity to undertake work experience during their athletic careers was a recommendation made by one athlete participant. Riley believed her training schedule was too rigid to gain work experience during her athletic career. She advocated strongly for more flexibility around training to be provided to athletes so they can undertake work experience:

In terms of what they [the NSO] can do to help with job support, for me in [sport], it's that people need the opportunity to get work experience so that they can actually get a job when they finish. And providing the opportunity to find some more time to have a little bit more flexibility and to be able to work, which, at the moment, in the system, there really isn't.

Chapter Summation

The semi-structured interviews with athlete participants provided insights into the support that was offered by their NSO when they retired suddenly and the support that would have assisted with their sudden retirement and transition to a second career. Thirteen suddenly retired elite women athletes, who competed across nine sports at the national or international level, participated in the interviews.

Five topic summaries were identified during the deductive coding of the interview transcripts: situation, individual characteristics, interpersonal support, organisational strategies and socio-cultural. During the inductive coding process, one topic summary was identified: recommendations for NSOs.

Individual characteristics and organisational strategies were the most prevalent topic summaries that emerged from the interviews. The individual characteristics sub-topic identified the individual coping sources that athlete participants relied on at the time of sudden athletic retirement. Nine sub-topics were identified under this topic summary. Four sub-topics were identified as attributes that helped the athlete participants cope with their sudden athletic retirement: new role within sport, tertiary study, help-seeking strategies, and relocation. The remaining five topic summaries were identified as individual challenges for

the athlete participants: negative feelings associated with sudden retirement, athlete identity and mindset, financial impact, lack of work experience, and ongoing injuries.

The organisational strategies sub-topic identified the practices that athlete participants were offered by their NSO to assist with the transition to a second career when they retired suddenly. Five sub-topics were identified under this topic summary. Three sub-topics were identified as attributes that supported the athlete participants when they retired suddenly: internal service support during transition, external service support during transition, and internal service support pre-transition.

The internal services support during transition sub-topic, refers to the support offered directly by NSOs to athlete participants during their transition from sudden athletic retirement to a second career. Five practices within this sub-topic were identified: athlete check-ins, support for the transfer of high-performance sport experience, financial support, professional network services, and recognition. The external service support during the transition sub-topic identified three external agencies to which the NSOs referred the women for support when they retired suddenly: State Institutes of Sport, the AIS, and Players' Associations. The internal service support pre-transition sub-topic refers to the support the NSOs offered and provided to the athlete participants before retirement to assist them in preparing for the transition to a second career. Two practices were identified: education sessions on planning for retirement and community engagement opportunities.

The two remaining sub-topics under the organisational strategies topic summary were considered challenges for the athlete participants in accessing support from their NSO. These challenges were insufficient or no offer of support and organisational culture.

During the inductive coding process, one topic summary was identified: recommendations for NSOs. The athlete participants offered several recommendations for NSOs to enhance support for athletes like themselves. These eight recommendations (sub-topics) include recognition, psychological support, increased visibility of women in sport leadership positions, support for transfer of high-performance experience, check-ins with

retired athletes, development of alumni or athlete support groups, support for injury rehabilitation, and opportunities to undertake work experience.

Next, Chapter Seven combines the results from this chapter, Chapter Four, and Chapter Five (the results of the document analysis, the semi-structured interviews with NSO participants and athlete participants).

Chapter Seven – Combined Results

Introduction

The findings from the previous three results chapters will be integrated in this chapter to identify similarities and differences between the organisational strategies reported by NSO participants and those reported by the athlete participants. To address the aim of this research, the content in this chapter focuses on the practices identified as attributes at the organisational level across the three data sources (NSO documents and interviews with NSO participants and athlete participants). These organisational strategies were the sub-topics identified from the analysis of documents (Chapter Four) and interview transcripts (Chapters Five and Six), and they included external service support during transition, internal service support pre-transition, and internal services support during transition.

Organisational Strategies

Three organisational strategies that support and assist elite women athletes with sudden retirement and their transition to a second career were identified across the three data sources. These organisational strategies include external service support during transition, internal service support pre-transition, and internal service support during transition.

Challenges at the organisational level were also identified across two data sources (NSO participants and athlete participants). NSO participants identified four challenges at the organisational level: athlete engagement, resources, organisational culture, and no support provided at retirement (see Chapter Five), while the athlete participants identified two challenges at the organisational level: insufficient or no offer of support and organisational culture (see Chapter Six). Only two of these challenges were identified across two data sources: insufficient or no offer of support and organisational culture, affirming the overall need for this research. As the research aims to identify the NSO policies and practices that support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career, only the three support services that were identified as attributes will be compared in this chapter.

The organisational strategies and the corresponding number of citations from the NSO documents, the NSO participants, and the athlete participants, respectively, are outlined in Table 19. External service support during transition was the most frequently reported organisational strategy across the NSO documents, the NSO participants, and the athlete participants. Reference to the other two organisational strategies varied between what was recognised/documentated by the NSO (documents and managers) and the athlete participants.

Table 19

Organisational strategies referenced across all data sources

Organisational Strategies	Document analysis (n)	NSO interviews (n)	Athlete interviews (n)	TOTAL (n)
External service support during transition	16	13	8	37
Internal service support pre-transition	9	7	3	19
Internal service support during transition	6	10	9	25

External Service Support During Transition

Referral of athletes to external agencies during the phase from sudden athletic retirement to a second career was the most prevalent organisational support strategy reported across the three data sources. Three external agencies were identified: the AIS, State Institutes of Sport, and Player's Associations. The external agencies and the corresponding number of citations in the NSO documents, by the NSO participants and by the athlete participants, respectively, are outlined in Table 20.

Table 20*External agencies referenced across all data sources*

External agency	Document analysis (n)	NSO interviews (n)	Athlete interviews (n)	TOTAL (n)
AIS	15	11	4	30
State Institute of Sport	0	7	4	11
Players' Association	1	3	2	6

The AIS emerged as the most frequently acknowledged external agency across all data sources, underscoring its significant role in athlete support services. The AIS offers four support services to eligible athletes (men and women): the AIS MHRN, the AIS CPRN, the dAIS Transition Support grant, and career transition and leadership programs. The AIS MHRN, in particular, was acknowledged in 10 NSO documents, by nine NSO participants, and by two athlete participants. Although neither of these athlete participants used the service, as one was under the mistaken belief that the AIS MHRN was only accessible to current athletes, while the other considered it ineffective due to a lack of practitioners in her local area.

The AIS CPRN, which was added to AIS support services in 2019, was acknowledged in seven NSO documents and by eight NSO participants. However, none of the athlete participants referred to the AIS CPRN. This underutilisation could indicate a lack of awareness or timing, given that the service was established after the retirement dates of many of the women participating in this research.

The dAIS Transition Support grant, established in 2021, was acknowledged in five NSO documents and by four NSO participants. However, none of the athlete participants referred to the dAIS Transition Support grant. This absence could be due to the grant being established after the retirement dates of many women participating in this research,

suggesting a lack of awareness or a timing difference. Additionally, given that the grant has prescribed eligibility criteria and requires NSOs to nominate retired athletes to receive it, the athlete participants may not have been eligible or nominated by their NSO.

Career transition and leadership programs offered by the ASC/AIS, including the WLIS program and the Accelerate program, were acknowledged by one NSO participant and two athlete participants. Both women who were offered the opportunity to participate in these programs found them beneficial for their transition to a second career.

State Institutes of Sport were acknowledged by seven NSO participants and four athlete participants. In particular, services offered included access to sport psychologists and career planning.

Players' Associations were acknowledged by three NSO participants and two athlete participants. The NSO participants explained how support for retired athletes (men and women) is transferred to the Players' Association. Both athlete participants who reported receiving financial support from their Players' Association were grateful for the support but believed it could be improved.

Internal Service Support Pre-Transition

Internal service support pre-transition was the second most prevalent organisational support strategy reported across the three data sources. Seven practices were identified: community engagement opportunities, career counselling, work experience placements, development of life plans, dual career support, mentoring programs (current athletes as mentees), and education sessions. The practices and the corresponding number of citations in the NSO documents, by the NSO participants, and by the athlete participants, respectively, are outlined in Table 21.

Table 21*Internal service support pre-transition practices referenced across all data sources*

Practices	Document analysis (n)	NSO interviews (n)	Athlete interviews (n)	TOTAL (n)
Community engagement opportunities	7	3	1	11
Career counselling	3	5	0	8
Work experience placements	6	0	0	6
Development of life plan	0	3	0	3
Dual career support	0	3	0	3
Mentoring programs (current athletes as mentees)	0	1	0	1
Education sessions	0	0	1	1

Community engagement opportunities was the only practice acknowledged across all three data sources: seven NSO documents, by three NSO participants and one athlete participant. The only athlete participant who participated in community engagement opportunities during her athletic career did so due to her leadership role.

Career counselling was acknowledged in three NSO documents and by five NSO participants. None of the athlete participants, however, spoke of being offered the service by their NSO.

Work experience placements for current athletes was acknowledged in six NSO documents. However, these placements were not acknowledged by the NSO participants or the athlete participants. In fact, six athlete participants reported that a lack of opportunities to undertake work experience was a barrier to their transition to a second career (see Table 14, Chapter Six).

Dual career support was acknowledged by three NSO participants. None of the athlete participants however spoke about receiving support from their NSO to develop a dual career. Despite the lack of acknowledgment by the athlete participants, 10 of them had established dual careers, with eight having followed a convergent career path, and two having followed a parallel career path (see Table 12, Chapter Six).

Development of a life plan was acknowledged by three NSO participants. None of the athlete participants however spoke about developing a life plan in conjunction with their NSO. Nevertheless, it was clear from their interviews and the athlete demographic information (see Table 12, Chapter Six) that the majority of the athlete participants had planned their second career by completing tertiary education.

Mentoring programs (current athletes as mentees) was acknowledged by one NSO participant. None of the athlete participants, however, spoke of being offered the service by their NSO.

Education sessions on planning for retirement was acknowledged by one athlete participant. While this athlete participant found the session interesting due to an invited retired athlete's presentation and life story, she did not find the session beneficial due to the difficulty of relating to the presenter.

Internal Service Support During Transition

Internal service support during the transition to a second career was the third most prevalent organisational support strategy reported across the three data sources. Eleven practices that the NSOs offer and provide to elite women athletes during the transition from sudden retirement to a second career were identified across at least one of the data sources. These practices included athlete check-ins, professional network services, recognition, financial support, alumni or athlete support groups, mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors), psychological support, body image education, a letter of support, and alternative AW&E programming. While 11 practices were reported across the NSOs (documents and/or NSO participant interviews), only four were reported across all three data sources. The practices

and the corresponding number of citations in the NSO documents, by the NSO participants, and by the athlete participants, respectively, are outlined in Table 22.

Table 22

Internal service support during transition practices referenced across data sources

Practices	Document analysis (n)	NSO interviews (n)	Athlete interviews (n)	Total (n)
Athlete check-ins	2	7	4	13
Professional network services	4	5	1	10
Support for the transfer of high-performance sport experience	1	5	2	8
Recognition	1	4	1	6
Financial support	0	1	3	4
Alumni or athlete support groups	2	2	0	4
Mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors)	2	1	0	3
Psychological support	0	2	0	2
Body image education	0	2	0	2
Letter of support	0	1	0	1
Alternative AW&E programming	1	0	0	1

Athlete check-ins was acknowledged across all three data sources: two NSO documents, seven NSO participants, and four athlete participants. Of the four athlete

participants who reported receiving check-ins from their NSO, only one found this practice beneficial. A further three athlete participants who did not receive check-ins from their NSO recommended that they occur (see Table 18, Chapter Six).

Professional network services was acknowledged across all three data sources: four NSO documents, five NSO participants and one athlete participants. The only athlete participant who reported receiving this service faced difficulties when accessing it. A further two athlete participants, who retired due to injury, recommended that athletes be provided with injury and rehabilitation support at retirement (see Table 18, Chapter Six).

Support for the transfer of athletes' high-performance sport experience was acknowledged across all three data sources: one NSO document, five NSO participants, and two athlete participants. NSOs identified two key practices to assist athletes in transitioning out of elite sport competition while remaining within their sport: transition to coaching and officiating.

Transition to coaching was acknowledged by three NSO participants and two athlete participants. The NSO participants spoke about the athlete-to-coach transition programs they implemented in their sports and emphasised the need for tailored support. Athlete participants were offered the opportunity to join a coach transition program or gain coaching qualifications, highlighting the proactive approach of NSOs. However, negative responses to the offer were acknowledged by one athlete participant due to the NSO not understanding individual needs during the transition process.

Transition to officiating was acknowledged by two NSOs (one NSO document and one NSO participant). Within these two NSOs, a pathway existed for retired athletes (men and women) to remain involved in their sport through officiating. While Robert, an NSO participant, noted that he had yet to see any elite women athletes transition to officiating upon their athletic retirement, he did observe that elite men athletes made this transition, particularly overseas. Robert stated his belief that these transitions are an emerging area that could provide significant opportunities for retired elite women athletes to stay connected to their sport:

And it's really different to somewhere in England, particularly the men's program. A lot of the umpires are ex- [elite athletes], so there's real encouragement for those players to go straight into umpiring. So quite a lot of them do that straight away. Whereas not as many of our ex-players do that. I think it's an area for the girls to really get into because there's a lot of opportunity that's going to come up.

The athlete participants also saw the potential for growth and development in other sport industry roles or viewed the sport industry as a gateway to gaining work experience or employment. Seven athlete participants had established second careers in the sport industry in roles such as sport administration, sport media, and sport law (see Table 12, Chapter Six). A further three athlete participants recommended that NSOs support suddenly retired elite women athletes transition to a second career in the sport industry (see Table 18, Chapter Six).

Recognition of an athlete's service to their sport was acknowledged across all three data sources: one NSO document, four NSO participants, and one athlete participant. Additionally, four athlete participants felt acknowledgement from their NSO as people and not solely as athletes, would have assisted their emotional wellbeing at the time of their sudden retirement (see Table 18, Chapter Six).

Financial support was acknowledged by one NSO participant and three athlete participants. One NSO provides two weeks of funding and relocation expenses for athletes who are deselected from the national squad. Three athlete participants were provided with financial support to manage and rehabilitate injuries that caused their sudden retirement. Two athlete participants received a financial payment from their NSO insurance provider, while the third received financial support directly from her NSO. Despite none of the athletes explicitly stating that they should receive more financial support, either during their career or when they retired suddenly, several athlete participants spoke about the financial challenges they faced when they retired, which included no longer having a stable income or having to move in with family (see Chapter Six).

Alumni or athlete support groups was acknowledged in two NSO documents and by two NSO participants. While none of the athlete participants referred to this practice, two women believed they would have benefitted from these groups had they been established (see Table 18, Chapter Six).

Mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors) was acknowledged in two NSO documents and by one NSO participant. None of the athlete participants acknowledged this practice.

Access to psychological or mental health support providers was acknowledged by two NSO participants. While none of the athlete participants acknowledged being offered this practice by their NSO, four had independently sought assistance from sport psychologists or counsellors. Four athlete participants also recommended that this support be available (see Table 18, Chapter Six).

Body image education was acknowledged by two NSO participants. While none of the suddenly retired elite women were offered this practice by their NSO, two athlete participants spoke about the difficulties they encountered with changes in their bodies when they retired suddenly (see Chapter Six).

A letter of support to assist athletes gain employment at retirement, was acknowledged by one NSO participant. Neither the NSO documents, nor the athlete participants identified this practice.

Alternative AW&E programming was acknowledged in one NSO document. Despite this practice not being recognised by the NSO or athlete participants, it was one of only two practices identified that specifically supported athletes who retired suddenly (as opposed to all athletes).

Chapter Summation

Analysis of the documents and the interviews (NSO participants and athlete participants) identified three organisational strategies to assist elite women athletes with their sudden retirement and transition to a second career: external service support during transition, internal service support pre-transition, and internal service support during transition.

External service support during transition was the most prevalent strategy reported across the three data sources. Three external agencies, the AIS, State Institutes of Sport, and Players' Associations, were reported across both the NSOs (documents and NSO participants) and women athletes (see Table 20). While internal service support during transition was reported consistently across the three data sources, only four practices (athlete check-ins, professional network services, support for the transfer of high-performance sport experience, and recognition) were reported across the NSOs and the athlete participants (see Table 22). Internal service support pre-transition was reported more frequently across NSOs (documents and NSO participants) than across the athlete participants. Only one practice, community engagement opportunities, was reported across all three data sources (see Table 21).

Next, Chapter Eight, Discussion, explores the findings reported in chapters Four to Seven. This chapter will address the three research questions by considering the findings from the three data sources. Research question one is answered based on the results from all three data sources at the organisational level. Research question two is answered by combining the results at the organisational level with the individual and interpersonal level findings from the interviews with the athlete participants. Finally, research question three is answered by drawing on the literature and the findings from all three data sources.

Chapter Eight - Discussion

Introduction

Many studies on the transition from athletic retirement to life beyond elite sport have focussed on men-only or mixed-gender participant groups (Park et al., 2013), perhaps assuming that women receive the same opportunities and support from sporting organisations as men (Knights et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2020). Only 10 studies were identified that explored retirement transition and associated support for women athletes. Five of these investigated the psychological impact of athletic retirement on women athletes (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008), while the remaining five explored the overall experience of transitioning out of elite sport for women athletes (Chow, 2001; Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Young et al., 2006; Zhu, 2023).

Only four of the 10 aforementioned studies included athletes who retired due to sudden and unexpected circumstances (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Young et al., 2006). However, these studies did not explore the details of athletes' experiences or the support they required or were offered, other than suggesting that these athletes found retirement more challenging than athletes who voluntarily chose to retire.

The focus of this thesis builds on these studies with the aim of expanding knowledge on how NSOs can support elite women athletes with the transition to a second career after sudden athletic retirement. To achieve this aim, the following three research questions were developed:

1. What policies and/or practices do NSOs implement to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?
2. How can these policies and/or practices be enhanced to meet the needs of elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?
3. How can the EIM and TT assist NSOs to target policies and/or practices to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?

Based on the results of the results of this research two clear themes emerged: athlete challenges and athlete attributes. This research has uncovered seven challenges (sub-themes) that elite women athletes who retire suddenly face with the transition to a second career. A summary of these seven challenges is included in Table 23.

This research also uncovered four attributes that retired elite women athletes possess that could be advantageous for transitioning to a second career earlier than anticipated. A summary of these four attributes (sub-themes) is included in Table 24.

The structure of this chapter is presented in three sections to provide an integrated understanding of the practical implications of key findings. The first two sections, Athlete Challenges and Associated Recommendations, and Athlete Attributes and Associated Recommendations, address research questions one and two. To minimise the identified challenges and support the critical attributes, 18 recommendations of how NSOs can enhance their support for elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career have been proposed. These recommendations are noted in Tables 23 and 24. Beside each recommendation is one of three transition phases (pre-transition, during transition and post-transition) proposed for when the policy and/or practice should be implemented. These phases began to evolve from the key findings in the Results Chapters (pre-transition and during transition) and strengthened upon forming the conceptual framework.

The third section of this chapter, Conceptual Framework, addresses the third research question. The framework, which combines the EIM with TT, assisted in identifying when policies and/or practices at the organisational level (i.e., that NSOs can influence) could be applied to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career.

Table 23

Athlete challenges, opportunities for NSOs and transition phase for sudden retirement

Athlete challenges for sudden retirement	Opportunity for NSOs	Transition phase for sudden retirement
Physical injury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide intensive injury rehabilitation. • Provide access to fast-track career counselling. • Advocate for the creation of a referral service for intensive injury rehabilitation (if unable to provide support). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During transition phase • During transition phase • Pre and during transition phase
Financial stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide entry level coaching/officiating qualifications to enable movement into paid work quickly. • Improve insurance coverage (injuries sustained during athletic career). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre and during transition phase • Pre and during transition phase
Negative feelings associated with sudden retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide access to psychologists/mental health support. • Recognise athletes' achievements and acknowledge service to sport. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During transition phase • During transition phase
Lack of work experience/vocational skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide work experience opportunities within NSO and affiliated members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During transition phase

Athlete challenges for sudden retirement	Opportunity for NSOs	Transition phase for sudden retirement
Immediate loss of peer support (sport network)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create Alumni or athlete support group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During transition phase
Dissatisfaction with support for sudden retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide education to high-performance staff on the personal implications of sudden athletic retirement and implications for women athletes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre and during transition phase
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct routine check-ins with retired athletes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre and during transition phase
Not knowing what support is available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document retirement process and ensure that it is available for all athletes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre and during transition phase
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce retired athletes to external organisations who provide support (i.e., Players' Association). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During transition phase

Table 24

Athlete attributes, opportunities for NSOs and transition phase for sudden retirement

Athlete attributes for transition to a second career	Opportunity for NSOs	Transition phase for sudden retirement
Plan for a second career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to encourage women athletes to plan for their second career. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre transition phase
Transferable skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide accessible opportunities for athletes to move into coaching, officiating, and other sport industry roles. Assist athletes to identify and promote transferable skills to potential employers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During transition phase Pre and during transition phase
Established athlete network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite athletes to take on mentoring role with current athletes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During transition phase
Cultivating interpersonal support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with family members to ensure they understand the importance of their support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre and during transition phase

Athlete Challenges and Associated Recommendations

Overwhelmingly, current strategies to assist elite women athletes transition to a second career focus on athletes being prepared for athletic retirement (Chow, 2001; Zhu, 2023). While most athlete participants in the current study heeded this advice by making appropriate and timely preparations for their second career, primarily through tertiary education, significant barriers were faced when they needed to transition earlier than anticipated and under unexpected circumstances. This research has identified seven challenges for sudden athletic retirement, including physical injury, financial stress, negative feelings associated with sudden retirement, lack of work experience/vocational skills, immediate loss of peer support (sport network), dissatisfaction with support for sudden retirement, and not knowing what support is available. While preparation for a second career is indeed essential (Knights et al., 2019) and should continue to be supported and promoted by NSOs, women athletes who retire under sudden and unplanned circumstances require additional support from their NSO to assist them with the transition to a second career (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020). These findings have identified policies and/or practices NSOs implement to support elite women athletes who suddenly need to transition to a second career (addressing research question 1) and have led to the formation of recommendations on how NSOs can enhance support for these athletes to meet their needs when suddenly retiring and transitioning to a second career (addressing research question 2).

Physical Injury

Women athletes who retire suddenly due to injury face unique challenges with the transition to a second career. The risks of athletic career-ending injuries are higher for women athletes than their male counterparts (Palmer et al., 2021; Von Rosen et al., 2018), and many of these injuries cause symptoms long after retirement (Thornton et al., 2023; Zhu, 2023). Injuries can result in a loss of mobility and chronic pain, which can hinder a retired athlete's ability to perform necessary tasks (such as prolonged periods of sitting or standing) as part

of their second career. Athletes who need extensive rehabilitation for their injuries may experience a longer phase between sudden athletic retirement and the beginning of their second career. Despite these challenges, limited research has been conducted, particularly on women, on the impact of athletic injuries on athletes' careers beyond their time as elite athletes (Stambulova et al., 2021). Instead, most research has focussed on the psychological and emotional support athletes require when facing career-ending injuries (Ivarsson et al., 2018; Samuel et al., 2015). This gap in support is where NSOs can play a pivotal role in assisting elite women athletes grappling with the challenges of suddenly retiring due to injury.

Findings from the research undertaken for this thesis reveal that NSOs have the potential to significantly contribute to easing the often-challenging transition from sudden athletic retirement to a second career for women athletes. By offering intensive injury rehabilitation, including individualised pain management strategies and fast-track career counselling during the transition phase, NSOs can provide a comprehensive support system. One key practice that NSOs can activate is to provide intensive injury rehabilitation and/or occupational therapy for suddenly retired elite women athletes to help physically prepare for their new career and transition to it in a timely manner. For NSOs that may be unable to provide this support due to resource constraints or geographical limitations, a referral service led by the AIS could be established, similar to the AIS MHRN (Australian Institute of Sport, n.d.-c; Rice et al., 2020) and AIS CPRN (Australian Institute of Sport, n.d.-a).

Moreover, for suddenly retired elite women athletes who need to alter their desired career path due to the severity of their injury, NSOs can provide them with or refer them to fast-track career counselling support. This type of counselling can be instrumental in identifying alternative careers that may align with the athlete's skills, education, physical abilities, and goals (Australian Institute of Sport, n.d.-b). Fast-track career counselling support could also involve collaborating with potential employers to identify workplace modifications, such as flexible or reduced hours, modified workspaces, or modified duties, to accommodate the athlete's limitations (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Such a

comprehensive approach to assist elite women athletes who retire suddenly due to injury could significantly enhance the prospects of these athletes and their second careers, ensuring they find fulfilling and sustainable employment.

Financial Stress

Financial strain and lack of financial security are exacerbated when women athletes retire suddenly. The majority of athlete participants in this research had significant financial concerns at the end of their athletic careers. Within a brief period, these athletes lost their main source of income, had not accrued significant savings from their athletic career, and were left with additional expenses relating to rehabilitating their injuries. A lack of financial stability is a well-documented stressor for women athletes during their athletic career (Sauvé et al., 2022) and at retirement (Pascoe et al., 2022). The results of the research supporting this thesis suggest that this stressor is exacerbated when retirement occurs unexpectedly and earlier than anticipated.

When athletic retirement occurs suddenly, women athletes may find themselves unemployed and without a source of income. To fill this employment 'gap,' most athlete participants in this research gained employment as a sport coach in schools or clubs. Such employment provided an immediate source of income, which, in turn, allowed the athlete participants time to explore other non-athletic careers or complete tertiary education in addition to building their vocational skills and work experience. Coaching did not just help these participants to ease the financial burden of sudden retirement but also allowed them to draw upon their sport and athletic experience. However, most of these athlete participants did not consider coaching to be their second career. Interestingly, research on retaining athletes in sport has focussed on fast-tracking retired athletes to become high-performance coaches (Blackett et al., 2017; Chroni et al., 2020; Rynne, 2014), while little attention has been given to grassroots coaching, which was the primary initial employment for the women participating in this research. An opportunity exists for NSOs to assist suddenly retired elite women athletes in relieving their financial stress by facilitating formal entry-level coaching

and officiating qualifications while they are still competing as athletes or at the time of their sudden retirement. NSOs can further this support by facilitating casual employment opportunities within their sport as a 'stop-gap' measure, enabling athletes to gain paid employment quickly and alleviating their immediate financial concerns.

In addition to the sudden loss of their main source of income, the athlete participants in this research often found themselves taking on the financial burden of their injuries. In lieu of being covered by Workcover (Workcover is a worker's compensation insurance that offers employees an important safety net if they become injured or ill because of work (Windholz, 2021)), elite athletes in Australia are provided personal accident insurance by their NSO. This insurance covers the athlete for injuries sustained while training and/or competing and provides compensation for medical costs and/or loss of wages. While two of the athlete participants who retired suddenly due to injury could access financial compensation from their NSO insurance provider, this compensation did not cover the full medical costs of their injury. These athlete participants (or their families) were then left to cover the medical costs of their injury over and above the compensation received from their NSO insurance provider. An opportunity exists for NSOs to ensure that suddenly retired elite women athletes are covered for the financial cost of treating and rehabilitating injuries that end their athletic career. NSOs could achieve this outcome by enhancing insurance coverage to cover the medical costs of injuries that elite athletes may sustain.

Negative Feelings Associated with Sudden Retirement

Suddenly retired elite women athletes may experience several negative emotions upon the termination of their athletic career. The women participating in this research expressed distress and disbelief upon realising their athletic careers were over suddenly; they were in shock and felt a sense of worthlessness, echoing previous research findings on sudden retirement (Lally, 2007). To navigate these psychological challenges, over half of the athlete participants sought the services of registered psychologists, and these psychologists played a pivotal role in helping them come to terms with the sudden loss of their athletic career and

identity. Athlete participants who did not access these services at the time of their sudden retirement expressed, in hindsight, a need for such support. The unique needs of women athletes facing sudden retirement underscore the importance of tailored psychological support. For example, athletes who know that retirement is imminent can build in psychological coping strategies such as withdrawing from their athletic identity. Athletes who retire suddenly and unexpectedly are challenged to implement this psychological coping strategy (Lally, 2007).

NSOs have a crucial role in facilitating access to registered psychologists for suddenly retired elite women athletes. Recognising the unique circumstances of sudden athlete retirement, NSOs could offer a range of support through accessible providers. For example, an athlete may need a specialist trauma counsellor, while another may require grief and loss counselling. NSOs could also take the initiative to provide women athletes with clear information on who they can contact for psychological support and how. This proactive approach to support may help alleviate the anxiety that women athletes may feel about seeking help at the traumatic time of sudden retirement.

Suddenly retired elite women athletes may harbour negative sentiments towards their NSO and their athletic career when they retire suddenly. These sentiments were expressed by each athlete participant in this research. Such negativity was often a result of the circumstances surrounding their sudden retirement (e.g., how their deselection was handled) or the lack of support they received from their NSO at and after retirement. The research supporting this thesis has identified that recognition of an athlete's achievements and service to their sport can play a significant role in helping them to adjust to the loss of their athletic career and reconcile their negativity towards their NSO. Only one athlete participant reported receiving any form of recognition from their NSO when they retired suddenly, despite previous research recommending that NSOs acknowledge the contributions of retired women athletes (Fairlie et al., 2020) and recognise their athletic achievements (Young et al., 2006). Recognition of an athlete's successes can take various forms, such as social media tributes, certificates, letters from the NSO CEO, thank-you presentations at national

championships, and annual award dinners for those who retire unexpectedly. These practices may help alleviate suddenly retired elite women athletes' negative sentiments towards their club/NSO and prevent them from feeling resentment toward their time as athletes.

Lack of Work Experience/Vocational Skills

Athletes need to be 'career ready' to assist with a smooth and efficient transition to a second career. Being 'prepared' for life after elite sport differs subtly from being 'ready' for retirement (Knights et al., 2019, p. 522). Career preparedness refers to athletes knowing what they will do once they retire from their athletic career (Brassard et al., 2022). Athletes who experience a positive transition out of elite sport are usually prepared and ready for retirement (Knights et al., 2019). However, career readiness is a practical approach to preparing oneself to enter the workforce aimed at developing key skills for professional success and easing the transition into the workforce. This approach can involve learning new vocational skills, creating goals, preparing for a career, and gaining practical work experience (Gysbers, 2013).

To apply these two definitions, career preparedness and career readiness, to the results of the research supporting this thesis, it is worth noting that most of the athlete participants had planned for their second career. They had completed or were completing tertiary education (i.e., convergent career path), worked part-time, or had non-athletic career goals. As a result, they considered themselves to be sufficiently prepared for their second career. However, when they retired earlier than anticipated, they realised they were not 'career ready.' Many found it hard to find full-time employment, even after applying for numerous jobs, because they did not have sufficient work experience. This challenge is not a new phenomenon. Research on men footballers previously found that while athletes felt they had prepared for life after sport, they were not ready to transition to a second career when their athletic career ended unexpectedly (Knights et al., 2019). Results from the research supporting this thesis reinforce the suggestion that preparation, by way of tertiary

education alone, is not a panacea for ensuring a quick transition into the workforce (Marciniak et al., 2022).

Work experience is crucial for athletes to gain employment once their athletic careers end. Findings from the research supporting this thesis suggest that suddenly retired elite women athletes who pursued higher education without participating in internships or part-time work placements alongside their athletic career failed to develop essential work experience and vocational skills that employers look for in potential employees. Vocational skills are practical skills that a person can attain to improve their hands-on expertise in their chosen career, and they can be immediately applied to their chosen career, while theoretical knowledge is more difficult to apply (Sage Education Australia, n.d.). Several athlete participants in the research supporting this thesis perceived that a lack of work experience and vocational skills hindered their ability to transition to a second career.

At the same time, these athlete participants acknowledged that vocational skills could be gained through their athletic career, and they immediately applied these skills to a role in the sport industry (refer to the Transferable Skills section). All but one of the women participating in this research moved into a role in the sport industry after they retired from their athletic career. The sport industry roles these athlete participants moved included sport coaching, administration, development, media and communications, psychology, and law. It is worth noting that the one athlete participant in the research who was no longer involved in sport hoped to return to coaching.

The interest of these athlete participants in remaining engaged in sport once they retired complements research conducted with retired women tennis players in Australia, in which 88% of participants maintained contact with their sport after they retired via coaching, assistant coaching, management, or administration (Young et al., 2006). Similarly, retired elite women athletes from a non-western country used sport to transition into and beyond athletic retirement (Chow, 2001). The results from the research supporting this thesis expand these findings and suggest that the circumstances surrounding an elite woman athlete's sudden retirement do not dissuade them from wanting to stay involved in their sport

(or the sport industry more broadly) in a non-playing capacity. This finding presents a clear opportunity for NSOs that would benefit suddenly retired elite women athletes and their own sport and/or organisation. NSOs could offer internships to suddenly retired elite women athletes within their organisation (or affiliated associations and clubs) in various departments (i.e., administration, event management, marketing, and player development). Virtual internships could be facilitated for suddenly retired elite women athletes (i.e., during transition phase) and may be particularly advantageous for those managing significant injuries or mental ill-health challenges. Women athletes could benefit from such support by building their vocational skills and work experience and remaining involved in a familiar environment. NSOs stand to benefit because they will engage potential employees with pre-existing knowledge of their sport and organisation.

Immediate Loss of Peer Support (Sport Network)

The sudden loss of a peer support athlete network is a difficult experience for many suddenly retired elite women athletes. Most athlete participants in this research reported struggling to come to terms with the sudden loss of their sport connections, including teammates, support staff, and coaches. The loss of sport connections is not a new phenomenon. Studies have shown that losing sport connections at retirement presents athletes with challenges and identity issues (Lally, 2007). A study of women athletes showed similar results (Clowes et al., 2015).

The athlete participants in the research supporting this thesis were left feeling sad and unsupported when they were unable to connect with their former sport network. This disconnection made it difficult for them to come to terms with the sudden end of their athletic career, as they had little to no access to the counsel of members of their main sport support network. To alleviate these feelings and come to terms with their retirement, these athlete participants expressed a desire to build new interpersonal support networks with other retired athletes who may have retired in similar circumstances. They believed other suddenly retired elite women athletes could provide emotional support and act as mentors because

they may have gone through similar experiences. This recommendation is not unique.

Retired women athletes in Hong Kong were so conscious of the need for athletes to maintain links with other athletes that two of them initiated a support network (Chow, 2001). Based on these findings, NSOs can enhance the support they provide to suddenly retired elite women athletes by introducing them to other retired women athletes. Alumni or athlete support groups, either sport-based or retired women athlete-only groups, could assist recently retired athletes in building a new sport network. When a woman athlete retires, suddenly or otherwise, NSOs could raise their awareness to these groups. Given that the athletic journey and experiences of women athletes differ from those of men, alumni groups could be created solely for women athletes.

Dissatisfaction With Support for Sudden Retirement

Women athletes who retire suddenly struggle to find support that genuinely suits their circumstances. Support to assist the transition to a second career needs to be gender-specific and suit the individual circumstances of the retired athlete (Ronkainen et al., 2023; Wylleman et al., 2016). The NSO participants outlined practices implemented for retiring athletes, such as assistance to plan for a second career. However, these practices did not account for sudden retirement. While this research did not aim to assess or critique specific NSO practices, the athlete participants were dissatisfied with the support they were offered and/or provided by their NSO when they retired suddenly. Previous research found a similar disparity between views on the requirements for support for athlete career transitions, with coaches and sporting organisations holding different views of athletes (Park et al., 2013). Evidence from the research supporting this thesis shows a gap between NSO support provided and the support that suddenly retired elite women athletes need, and this gap ultimately puts these women at risk of financial insecurity and mental health issues.

It is important for NSOs to be aware of women athletes' expectations of support due to sudden retirement and to align their expectations with the available resources. Regular and ongoing check-ins (i.e., during all athlete career transition phases) between NSOs and

athletes could be one practice to bridge this gap (Knights et al., 2019). These check-ins would allow both NSO managers and women athletes to discuss the support the women athletes require/desire during their transition from sudden athletic retirement to a second career. High-performance staff need to be aware of their role in supporting athletes throughout their career transitions, including sudden retirement (Ryan, 2015). Ongoing education needs to be provided to staff who work directly with athletes to ensure they understand the personal implications of sudden athletic retirement for women athletes and how they can support them.

Not Knowing What Support is Available

It is crucial for women athletes to be made aware of the support available to them and how to access it before they retire, whether they retire suddenly or otherwise. Despite NSO documents and NSO participants claiming to offer various forms of support, the athlete participants in this research were largely unaware of these provisions. Those who attempted to seek support directly from their NSO often encountered difficulties or found the support they needed was not available, leaving them feeling neglected and unsupported. Similar findings have been reported by athletes in Canada (Brassard et al., 2023) and Brazil (Santos et al., 2016). Conversely, athletes in New Zealand reported being aware of the career and education services available to them, seemingly because they were proactively offered by their NSOs Athlete Lifestyle Advisors (i.e., AW&E manager) (Lenton et al., 2020). The findings from the research supporting this thesis suggest that opportunities exist for NSOs to enhance and better communicate their support for elite women athletes who suddenly retire.

First, it is recommended that clear and transparent guidelines are developed that outline the support available for women athletes who retire suddenly. Second, these athletes need to be made aware of these guidelines, and NSOs could proactively provide this information, both pre-transition and during transition to a second career. Athlete check-ins would be an ideal time to provide this information, although it could also be provided by email. Third, if there is to be one key contact at an NSO whose role is to support retired

athletes (e.g., an AW&E manager), the individual employed in this position would ideally be able to build and maintain strong relationships with athletes through all phases of their athletic careers, noting that there are many factors that may hinder relationships building, such as lack of engagement for athletes (Chambers et al., 2019).

Due to their lack of knowledge on who to contact from their NSO, some of the athlete participants in this research sought external support from other sporting organisations, such as Players' Associations, the AIS, State Institutes of Sport, and sub-contracted providers such as universities and private athlete transition firms. These organisations provided psychological, career, financial, and injury rehabilitation support. Conversely, several NSO participants reported assisting or supporting athletes upon retirement is not common practice and that retired athletes were encouraged to access support from external organisations. Similar findings have been reported with Australian men's footballers, where there is no consensus as to which organisation (the club, player agent, the league or the Players' Association) is responsible for the duty of care for athletes during the transition and retirement phase (Knights et al., 2019). Given the service access challenges reported by the athlete participants in this research, it is recommended that NSOs be the first organisation they contact. If NSOs have agreements with external organisations, such as Players' Associations, it would be advantageous for the NSO to personally introduce these women to the new external organisation that can offer support assistance. While it is acknowledged that athletes are often introduced to these external organisations at the start of their athletic career, a personal re-introduction when an athlete retires suddenly could help ease the transition and make them feel more supported.

Athlete Attributes and Associated Recommendations

While elite women athletes face barriers with sudden retirement and their transition to a second career, the research supporting this thesis also revealed that they possess four critical attributes that could be utilised to assist the transition. These attributes include a plan for a second career, transferable skills, interpersonal support, and athletic network. These findings have led to the formation of recommendations on how NSOs can enhance their

support for elite women athletes so that they can build these four attributes during the transition stage (addressing research question 2).

Plan for a Second Career

Elite women athletes understand the importance of planning for a second career during their athletic career. Most of the athlete participants in this research pursued a convergent dual career path, whereby they engaged in tertiary education (often on a part-time basis) in conjunction with their athletic career, although their athletic pursuits took priority. These findings echo previous research findings that women athletes invest in education and develop a multi-sided self-narrative (Ekengren et al., 2020). A range of benefits arise from combining athletic careers with tertiary education. Combining tertiary studies with their athletic career can help athletes develop and refine valuable knowledge and skills across academic and sporting domains, such as planning and goal setting, teamwork, interpersonal skills, commitment, leadership, and the ability to prioritise (Tekavc et al., 2015). Encouraging athletes to pursue tertiary education provides a platform for their second career, gives them an opportunity to develop interpersonal networks outside of their sport, and helps them to develop transferable and vocational skills (Barriopedro et al., 2018; Barriopedro et al., 2019). The findings of this research reinforce the importance of NSOs continuing to encourage elite women athletes to pursue tertiary education in conjunction with their athletic careers.

During their tertiary studies, the athlete participants in this research faced significant challenges. The demands of being an elite athlete often conflicted with the need to complete group assignments and practicums. NSO managers can play a crucial role in supporting these athletes. They can work with universities to find alternative assessments that elite women athletes could complete. If the university is part of this network, NSO managers could also facilitate access to university student counsellors, course coordinators, and the Elite Athlete Education Network manager.

Transferable Skills

Suddenly retired elite women athletes possess skills they can promote and utilise when transitioning to a second career. Due to the high-performance sport experience, women athletes have learnt or acquired a core set of skills and abilities that go beyond their current athletic role. These 'transferable skills' complement vocational skills and contribute to an individual becoming a well-rounded employee (Turick et al., 2021). Unlike vocational skills, an individual's transferable skills can be used in almost any role and should be highlighted when changing jobs or industries (Bernes et al., 2009). While the athlete participants in this research may have lacked specific vocational skills, they knew they possessed an extensive array of transferable skills from their experience as elite athletes, including addressing challenges, communication, teamwork, and leadership. These findings echo research that has found women who played sport, possess transferable skills, such as problem-solving, communication, time-management, and team-building experiences that can assist them in their second careers.

Additionally, retired women athletes possess individual qualities such as assertiveness, persistence, determination, internal motivation, competitiveness, discipline and leadership that cannot be taught in a classroom setting (EY Global, 2015). While the athlete participants in this research knew of their transferable skills, they lacked the confidence to promote them to prospective employers. An opportunity exists for NSOs to assist suddenly retired elite women athletes identify their transferable skills and to showcase them within their resumes and job applications. A further opportunity exists for NSOs to showcase this service more overtly to women athletes during their athletic careers. By doing so, ensure that women athletes can confidently seek and apply for employment in case of sudden retirement and the need to transition to a second career.

Established Athlete Network

Several of the athlete participants in this research benefitted from connecting with other athletes who retired in similar circumstances. This finding aligns with previous research,

which highlights the positive impact that exposure to role models and supportive, mature adults can have on young athletes (Silver, 2021). Suddenly retired elite women athletes can offer unique and invaluable support and guidance to current athletes. Leveraging their wealth of experience and desire to stay connected, NSOs can establish an athlete network through a mentoring program led by suddenly retired elite women athletes, providing a platform for mutual support and growth.

The mentoring program could empower women athletes in their sudden retirement and transition to a second career. Co-designed by these women, this program could provide practical advice and emotional support for athletes navigating the challenging post-retirement period, specifically after sudden retirement. With their unique experiences, suddenly retired elite women athletes could be paired with current athletes to share insights and offer a valuable combination of emotional support and practical advice (e.g., preparing athletes if they need to retire due to severe injuries). This approach expands previous research, which recommends that NSOs provide opportunities for retired women athletes to mentor younger athletes so they have a continued role in their sport and feel valued (Clowes et al., 2015).

Cultivating Interpersonal Support

When athletes retire, their parents and partners become a significant source of support (Brown et al., 2019). The athlete participants in this research similarly reported their family and non-sport friends as their significant sources of support. They offered emotional support, such as listening or providing a shoulder to lean on, along with practical aid, such as providing a place to live or financial assistance for injury treatment and rehabilitation. This finding, which aligns with previous research, underscores the importance of athletes' interpersonal relationships when they retire (Arvinen-Barrow et al., 2019; Chow, 2001; Clowes et al., 2015; DeFreese et al., 2021; Harry & Weight, 2021; Park & Lavalley, 2015). Parents and partners provide emotional support (especially at the beginning of an athlete's retirement) and tangible support (i.e., support with gaining employment) (Brown et al., 2019).

While they are a significant source of support for suddenly retired elite women athletes, parents and partners are often unsure of their role as supporters and how they should provide support (Brown et al., 2019). This uncertainty underscores the need for NSO support systems to extend beyond that of the woman athletes and to their families.

As pivotal facilitators, NSOs have the power to bolster this support by actively engaging with the families of women during their athletic careers. By imparting knowledge on the crucial role of family support, particularly if sudden retirement occurred, NSOs could significantly assist build the wellbeing and coping strategies of these athletes and their families. The education to families on the importance of their support could begin during the athlete's career and become a focus if they retire suddenly.

Conceptual Framework

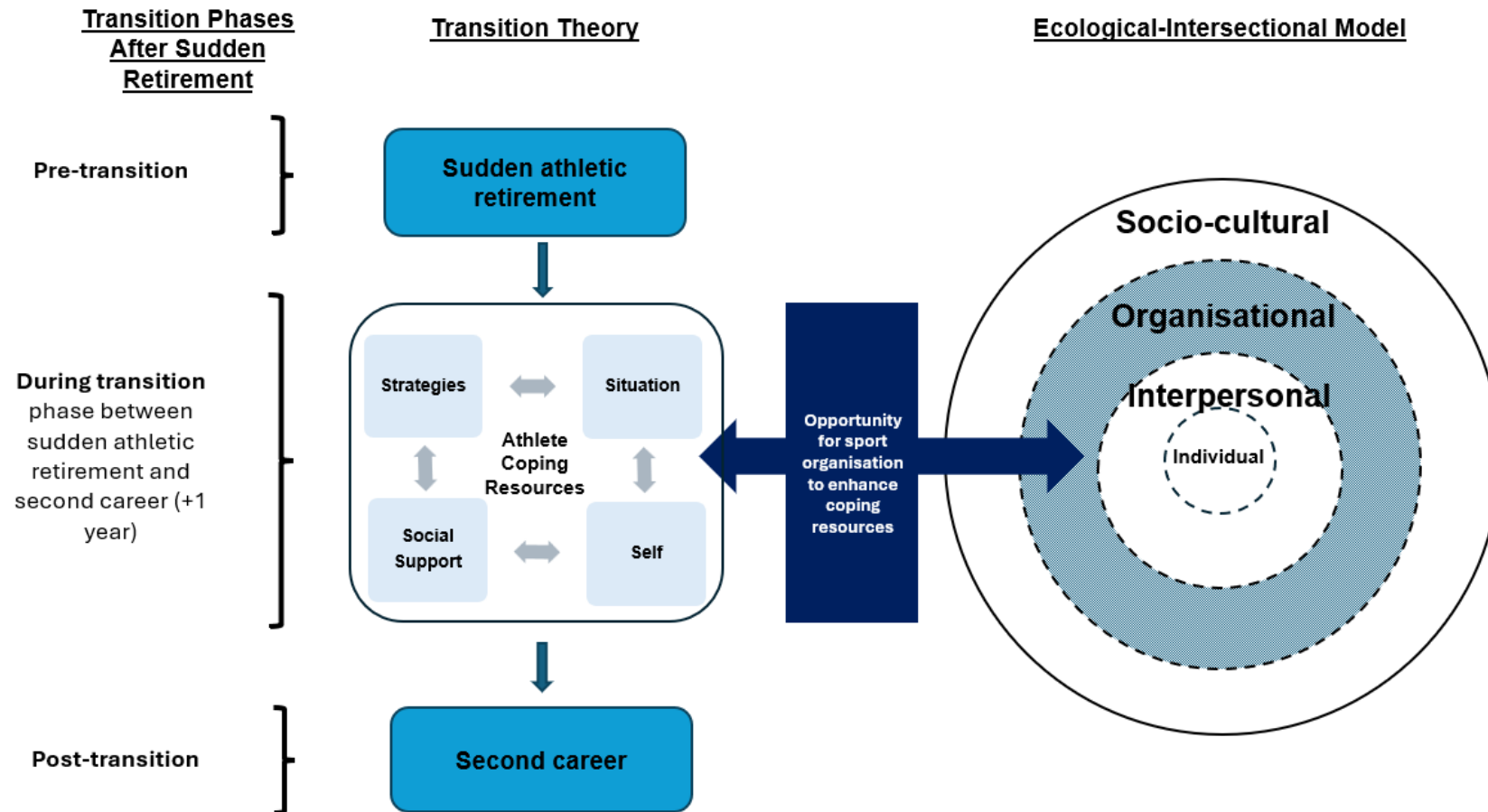
Much of the current literature on supporting women athletes with the transition to a second career has focussed on preparing athletes to be ready for this transition. When women athletes retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career earlier than anticipated, there is a dearth of research to inform NSOs on how best to assist these athletes in such circumstances (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020). To address this lack of research and the associated need to assist NSOs' target practices to support these women athletes, a bespoke conceptual framework was devised (Figure 1). The framework comprised a merging of two theories: the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) and TT (Schlossberg, 1981). The framework has been applied for two purposes in this research. First, core elements of the EIM and TT guided the deductive analysis of the three data sources (see Chapter Three). Second, the framework provides a structured approach to determine when NSOs can implement practices for elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career, thereby addressing research question three.

To advance the use of TT in athlete career transition research, this research has applied TT in order to identify the coping resources that elite women athletes utilise when retiring suddenly and need to transition to a second career. Furthermore, TT helped to identify when organisational practices, based on these athlete coping resources, could be

implemented for suddenly retired elite women athletes transitioning to a second career, as opposed to 'anticipation' of retirement. The application of this theory to the findings of the research revealed three sudden retirement-related transition phases including, pre-transition (the phase before sudden athletic retirement, i.e., during athletic career), during transition (phase between sudden athletic retirement and the start of a second career), and post-transition (when a suddenly retired elite woman athlete has moved into their second career). These phases are acknowledged in Chapters Four, Five and Six (pre- and during transition), and they provide guidance on the estimated timelines within these transitions (see Figure 2). The blue arrow in Figure 2 illustrates the connection between how athlete coping resources, identified using TT, can be transformed into supportive practices at each level of the EIM, with particular focus on the organisational level for this research. To tailor supportive organisational practices for suddenly retired elite women athletes, the recommendations derived from the current research, identified in Tables 23 and 24 and discussed further in the previous two sections of this chapter, provide an extensive list.

Figure 2

Conceptual framework integrating the EIM and TT



Findings from this research suggest that the pre-transition phase begins at the start of an elite woman athlete's career and ends when she retires suddenly due to non-normative factors such as injury, deselection, or other personal circumstances. Findings also revealed that the during transition phase lasts a minimum of one year. The 12-month time aligns with previous research, in which the transition phase from athletic retirement to a second career lasts between eight and 19 months (Alfermann et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007). The findings from this research, based on responses from suddenly retired elite women athletes, indicate that the post-transition phase to a second career may not have a stipulated timeline. Instead, NSO support is required until these athletes move into their second career. Previous research has found that meaningful progress towards a second career can take up to five years (Robnik et al., 2021). The indication of five years is a concern; several NSOs involved in the research supporting this thesis (evidenced through NSO participant interviews and documents) only offer support to athletes for six to 12 months post-retirement. This finding suggests that NSOs may not offer support over a long enough period, particularly for suddenly retired elite women athletes. To ensure these women are supported throughout their entire athletic career, which includes sudden retirement, it is recommended that NSOs extend the offer of support to retired athletes until they move into their second career (post-sudden retirement), regardless of time.

Chapter Summation

Analysis of the results from Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven of this thesis has uncovered that suddenly retired elite women athletes face seven challenges with the transition to a second career. These seven challenges include physical injury, financial stress, negative feelings associated with sudden retirement, lack of work experience/vocational skills, immediate loss of peer support (sport network), dissatisfaction with support from sudden retirement, and not knowing what support is available.

However, it is not all bleak for these athletes. The current research also uncovered four attributes that suddenly retired elite women athletes possess, which could be advantageous for the transition to a second career earlier than anticipated. These four

attributes include a plan for a second career, transferable skills, an established athlete network and cultivating interpersonal support. To support these critical attributes and minimise the identified challenges for suddenly retired elite women athletes who need to transition to a second career, 18 recommendations for NSOs to enhance support for these athletes have been proposed. A summary of these 18 recommendations is included in Tables 23 and 24. The identification of these challenges and attributes and the associated recommendations for NSOs address research questions one and two.

The conceptual framework developed specifically for this research addressed the third research question. The framework combined the EIM and TT to assist (1) in identifying the transition phases for sudden retirement (pre-transition, during transition and post-transition) and (2) in identifying what support NSOs could offer suddenly retired elite women athletes require at each of these phases. Therefore, each of the 18 recommendations for NSOs listed in Tables 23 and 24 are aligned to specific transition phases.

Next, Chapter Nine, Conclusion, will summarise and conclude the current research.

Chapter Nine – Conclusion

Introduction

An overview of the research and key findings is provided in this chapter. The contributions this thesis makes to theoretical and practical knowledge, the limitations of this research, and the opportunities for future studies are also provided.

Overview of the Research and Key Findings

A review of athletic retirement literature (see Chapter Two) highlighted that when athletes retire suddenly, they find the transition to life beyond elite sport more difficult than athletes who retire under more general, normative circumstances (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Eggleston et al., 2020; Knights et al., 2019; Tshube et al., 2018). The focus of these studies tended to be on men-only or mixed-gender groups. The paucity of research as to how elite women athletes can be supported with their sudden retirement and transition to a second career (Park et al., 2013) suggests that researchers have assumed that women experience the same opportunities and support from sporting organisations as men (Knights et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2020). Women athletes face unique challenges and different psychosocial stressors to men when retiring from elite sports, including limited options for continued involvement in sport (Burton, 2015; Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2018; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007), lower salaries (Barriopedro et al., 2018; Lopez de Subijana et al., 2020; Sherry & Taylor, 2019), and mental health issues (Walton et al., 2021).

Ten studies were identified that explored retirement transition and associated support for women athletes (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Chow, 2001; Clowes et al., 2015; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008; Young et al., 2006; Zhu, 2023). Only four of these studies identified whether athletic retirement occurred suddenly or generally. Three of these studies recognised participants who retired suddenly due to injury (Clowes et al., 2015; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Young et al., 2006), one recognised participants who retired suddenly due

to deselection (Fairlie et al., 2020), and one recognised a participant who retired due to conflict or difficulties with their coach (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

Three of these studies recognised women athletes who retired suddenly and who had experienced higher levels of distress at retirement and longer, more difficult transitions than athletes who retired generally (Clowes et al., 2015; Fairlie et al., 2020; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Importantly, these studies did not consider the support strategies or services that could have aided these athletes during their transition to a second career. This absence underscores the unique contribution of this thesis in providing evidence-based and gender-appropriate support for women athletes during their transition from sudden athletic retirement to a second career.

A targeted focus on women's experience of athletic retirement, including sudden retirement, is necessary given the exponential growth of women participating in elite sport. More elite women athletes will mean more women (eventually) will be retiring from sport. While NSOs play a vital role in supporting suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career, the role of the NSO has not been explicitly researched to determine how best they can support these women athletes (Knights et al., 2019). To address this knowledge gap and assist NSOs, this research aimed to expand the knowledge on how NSOs can support elite women athletes with the transition to a second career after sudden athletic retirement. To achieve this aim, the following three research questions were developed:

1. What policies and/or practices do NSOs implement to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?
2. How can these policies and/or practices be enhanced to meet the needs of elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?
3. How can the EIM and TT assist NSOs to target policies and/or practices to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?

To answer the research questions, a two-stage, qualitative, narrative inquiry research approach was designed and implemented. The first stage of the research included a

document analysis of 18 publicly available NSO documents (see Chapter Four). The purpose of the document analysis was to gain an understanding of the support NSOs offer suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career. These 18 documents included NSO transition guidelines, categorisation guidelines, position descriptions, program descriptions, and a CBA. Once collected, thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and report on repeated patterns of meaning (topic summaries or themes) that arose across the documents (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The NSO documents were analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to coding. The deductive approach comprised a descriptive coding framework, allowing for systematic data categorisation and analysis. The framework was informed by two theories: the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) and TT (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2011).

Transition theory is based on the premise that individuals continuously move into, through, and out of transitions. The theory recognises that the type and context of the transition determines the impact of the transition on an individual and their reaction to it (Anderson et al., 2011). As an individual-centric theory, it does not account for the interactions an individual has with the broader sport and socio-cultural environments (i.e., different ecological levels). Given the aim of the current research was to identify the organisational strategies that assist suddenly retired elite women athletes to transition to a second career, a second theory or model that encompasses the organisational level of an elite athlete's environment needed to be included. The EIM was selected.

The EIM model recognises that an individual does not live in a single environment. It acknowledges that individuals are influenced by different values and messaging received from the broader organisational (sport) and socio-cultural environments. Characterised by four ecological levels (individual, interpersonal, organisational, and socio-cultural), the EIM supports understanding how the values and messaging that an individual is immersed in influences that individual's behaviour and experience (LaVoi, 2016).

Each of the two theories provided four descriptive codes to identify strategies that support suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career. Three of the TT's descriptive codes aligned directly with three of the EIM's and these codes were merged. The five descriptive codes used for the deductive coding of the documents are outlined in Table 25.

Table 25

Descriptive and structural codes

TT	EIM	Descriptive/structural codes
Situation	<i>No equivalent</i>	Situation
Self	Individual	Individual characteristics
Support	Interpersonal	Interpersonal support
Strategies	Organisational	Organisational strategies
<i>No equivalent</i>	Socio-cultural	Socio-cultural

The second stage of the research approach involved semi-structured interviews with two distinct participant cohorts. The purpose of these interviews was two-fold: first, to build on the knowledge gained from the document analysis regarding the support that NSOs provide to elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career, and second, to understand the support suddenly retired elite women athletes require to transition to a second career.

The first interview cohort comprised 13 suddenly retired elite women athletes. These participants, who competed across nine sports and retired suddenly from 2014 onwards, shared their experiences of sudden athletic retirement and their transition to a second career. Reasons for sudden retirement included injury, deselection, issues with NSOs, and family circumstances. The second interview cohort comprised 15 NSO participants from 16 NSOs responsible for supporting athletes during and after retirement in their sport (one NSO

had more than one participant represented at the interview, and one NSO participant worked across multiple NSOs).

Similar to the first stage, document analysis, the interview transcripts were concurrently coded deductively and inductively. A structural coding method was applied for the first round of interview transcript coding (Saldana, 2021). A structural coding framework, designed in a similar way to the descriptive coding framework used for the document analysis, was created. However, the structural codes differed from the descriptive codes as the exact term or phrase in the coding framework was not used (Saldana, 2021). A word or a term similar to the code's definition was used instead. Once structural codes were applied to the data sources and inductive codes were discovered, interpretive codes were then created. Structural codes that shared common meanings were clustered to determine the interpretive codes (King & Horrocks, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interpretive codes added a detailed layer of meaning to the data. Topic summaries and themes were defined from the interpretive codes when they applied to at least two cases (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Thematic analysis of the three data sources (NSO documents, NSO participant interview transcripts, and athlete participant interview transcripts) enabled the identification of topic summaries, sub-topics, themes and sub-themes. These topic summaries are outlined in Table 26. A common topic summary across the three sources was organisational strategies. Stronger alignment in topic summaries emerged between the NSO participants and the athlete participants (i.e. five shared topic summaries) than between the NSO documents and the NSO participants (i.e. two shared topic summaries) (see Table 26). This difference could potentially signify a disconnect between NSO policy and guidelines and NSO practices for assisting suddenly retired elite women athletes transition to a second career, which would signal the need to strengthen this connection.

Table 26*Topic summaries across all data sources*

Topic summaries	Document analysis	NSO interviews	Athlete interviews
Situation	✓	✓	✓
Individual characteristics	✗	✓	✓
Interpersonal support	✗	✓	✓
Organisational strategies	✓	✓	✓
Socio-cultural level	✗	✓	✓
Recommendations for NSOs	✗	✗	✓

The results across these three data sources were then compared (see Chapter Seven). To address the first research question (what policies and/or practices do NSOs implement to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?), this thesis focussed on comparing the sub-topics identified from the organisational strategies topic summary (see Chapter Seven). Three sub-topic summaries emerged within this topic summary: external service support during transition, internal service support during transition, and internal service support pre-transition. These sub-topic summaries represent the support services provided to suddenly retired elite women athletes, at which transition phase from sudden retirement to a second career they are offered, and the source citations are outlined in Table 27.

Table 27*NSO practices*

<i>NSO practices</i>	Document analysis	NSO interviews	Athlete interviews
External service support during transition	16	13	8
Internal service support during transition	6	10	9
Internal service support pre-transition	11	8	3

External service support during transition was the most prevalent sub-topic summary. This sub-topic summary identified that the most common organisational strategy implemented by NSOs is to refer suddenly retired elite women athletes to external agencies for support. Three external (non-NSO) agencies were identified: the AIS, State Institutes of Sport, and Players' Associations.

Internal service support during transition was the second most prevalent sub-topic summary. This sub-topic summary identified 11 practices delivered by NSOs to suddenly retired elite women athletes during their transition to a second career. These practices were athlete check-ins, professional network services, support for transferring high-performance experience, recognition, mentoring programs (retired athletes as mentors), financial support, alumni, or athlete support groups, psychological or mental health support, body image education, a letter of support, and alternative AW&E programming. However, only four of these practices, athlete check-ins, professional network services, support for the transfer of high-performance experience, and recognition, were reported across all three data sources. Overall, most practices were available to women athletes for six to 12 months post-sudden retirement. Given that the findings from this research suggest that the 'during' phase (from sudden athletic retirement to a second career) lasts a minimum of one year, a recommendation arising from this research is that NSOs continue to offer support to

suddenly retired elite women athletes until they have moved into the post-transition phase (once a second career is gained).

Internal service support pre-transition was the third most prevalent sub-topic summary. This sub-topic summary identified seven practices delivered by NSOs to women athletes before their sudden retirement (i.e. when they were still active athletes). These practices included community engagement opportunities, work experience opportunities, development of life plans, career counselling, dual career support, mentoring programs (current athletes as mentees), and education sessions. Only one of these practices, community engagement opportunities, was reported across all three data sources.

To address the second research question (how can these policies and/or practices be enhanced to meet the needs of elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?), this research identified seven challenges that suddenly retired elite women athletes face with the transition to a second career. The challenges were physical injury, financial stress, negative feelings associated with sudden retirement, lack of work experience/vocational skills, immediate loss of peer support (sport network), dissatisfaction with support for sudden retirement, and not knowing what support is available. These challenges were identified from two topic summaries that emerged from the interviews with suddenly retired elite women athletes: individual characteristics and interpersonal support. Conversely, these two topic summaries also illuminated four key attributes suddenly retired elite women athletes possess that can be leveraged to better support their transition to a second career. These four attributes include a plan for a second career, transferable skills, established athlete network and cultivating interpersonal support. By understanding these challenges and attributes, recommendations for how NSOs could enhance support for suddenly retired elite women athletes who need to transition to a second career became apparent. As a result of these findings, 18 recommendations were made for NSOs to enhance their support of suddenly retired elite women athletes to transition to a second career, see Tables 23 and 24 (Chapter Eight).

To address the third research question (how can the EIM and TT assist NSOs to target policies and/or practices to support elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career?), the bespoke conceptual framework, initially applied during the data analysis stage, was also used to provide a structured approach to categorising the identified organisational practices and at which of the three transition phases they apply (see Figure 2).

Contribution to Theoretical Knowledge

The current research has advanced theoretical knowledge with the development of a bespoke conceptual model. Two theories previously used in sport management research, the EIM and TT, were merged to provide an understanding of sudden athletic retirement and the transition to a second career for elite women athletes. Transition theory emphasises that individuals continuously move into, through, and out of transitions (Schlossberg, 1981). To advance the use of TT in athlete career transition research, this research applied TT to better understand when the identified organisational strategies would be beneficial to support suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career. The application of this theory to the research findings revealed three transition phases, including pre-transition (the phase before sudden athletic retirement, i.e., during athletic career), during transition (the phase between sudden athletic retirement and the start of a second career), and post-transition (when a suddenly retired elite woman athlete has moved into her second career). These three transition phases are identified on the right-hand side of the conceptual model in Figure 2 (see Chapter Eight). These findings are the first to identify the three stages that suddenly retired elite women athletes move through when they transition to a second career. Two studies have previously used TT to understand the prospects and challenges elite women athletes face when transitioning out of elite sport. However, these women had retired under general circumstances (Chow, 2001; Zhu, 2023).

The fundamental elements of the EIM were used to deductively analyse the three data sources to determine the levels the identified practices applied to (individual, interpersonal, organisational, and socio-cultural) that assisted suddenly retired elite women

athletes with the transition to a second career. Expanding from this finding, the three phases of sudden retirement identified in the current research (pre-, during, or post-transition) were then applied across the four levels of the EIM to determine when organisational practices should be offered to elite women athletes. To address the aim of the research, the focus was on the 'organisational' level of the EIM. The double-headed arrow in Figure 2 (see Chapter Eight) illustrates the connection between the organisational level of the EIM, the strategies and support (practices) and the sudden athletic transition phase.

The inclusion of the EIM allowed for an ecologically-focused examination of the factors that influence suddenly retired elite women athletes and their transition to a second career. Subsequently, the supports and barriers at the organisational level could be identified (LaVoi, 2016). This bespoke conceptual framework provided a structured intersectional approach to determine the organisational practices required for elite women athletes who retire suddenly and need to transition to a second career (see Chapter Eight, Figure 2). The innovative framework not only enhances understanding of the transition to a second career process for women athletes who retired suddenly it also paves the way for further research and practical applications in this field. The framework can assist future research and expand findings from the current research to identify the needs of suddenly retired elite women athletes at each ecological level and explore how the implementation of recommendations from the current research could be applied within the transition phases (pre-transition, during transition and post-transition).

Contribution to Practical Knowledge

The current research has made a unique contribution to the field of sport management, specifically NSO support for suddenly retired elite women athletes. While the topic of athletic retirement and transition to life beyond elite sport for women athletes has been studied in sport psychology literature (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008), studies on the organisational strategies that aid suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career are scarce. Despite findings that organisational support, particularly from

NSOs, is essential when athletes retire from elite sport, regardless of the circumstances (Brassard et al., 2022; Knights et al., 2019), how NSOs can enhance this support has remained unclear. To expand knowledge in this field, this research moves beyond theoretical discussions. This research has translated findings into practical insights and practices that NSOs can implement to enhance support for suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career, thus providing translational research impact to the sport industry. Practically, 18 recommendations have evolved from the research that can guide NSOs on how they can enhance support for suddenly retired elite women athletes. Tables 23 and 24 (Chapter Eight) summarise these 18 recommendations.

Limitations and Future Research

While the current research provides invaluable insights into how NSOs can support suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this research and the possible implications of the research findings. These limitations relate to the research methods chosen, the contextual time differences between the contemporary information and participants' referencing experiences from many years before their interviews, the inclusion of women athletes from various sports, and the fact that these athletes retired suddenly for different reasons. The limitations of this thesis provide opportunities for further study.

The first limitation relates to the qualitative methods chosen for the research design. The first stage of data collection included a document analysis. The sparseness of documents can be a limitation of document analysis (Bowen, 2009). The initial document collection resulted in the collection of only eight NSO documents. To alleviate this limitation, broader inclusion criteria were established (see Chapter Three), and a second document collection was conducted. An additional 10 NSO documents were collected, resulting in a more comprehensive dataset.

The second data collection stage involved semi-structured interviews with two distinct participant cohorts. The interviews conducted as part of this research may have been susceptible to several limitations, including recall bias, anonymity, and social desirability bias

(Dittimore, 2011). First, interviews with suddenly retired elite women athletes were held retrospectively, meaning the athlete participants were asked to reflect and refer to past events or situations. As a result, these athlete participants may have been reflecting on events up to eight years before the interviews took place. Recall bias, a phenomenon where participants may not accurately remember past events or experiences, can be a limitation with retrospective interviews, and this bias may have existed among the athlete participants. This bias can significantly affect the accuracy of participants' memories, potentially leading to skewed or unreliable data (Veal, 2018). An opportunity exists for future research to interview suddenly retired elite women athletes who have recently retired, i.e., within one to three years of the interview. Findings from interviews with the women athletes participating in this research could be a benchmark for comparison with more recently suddenly retired elite women athletes to identify potential differences and changes in experiences.

Second, anonymity can be a concern with retrospective research methods, such as interviews with suddenly retired elite women athletes. Interviews provide less anonymity than surveys or other methods, and respondents may hesitate to share sensitive information due to privacy concerns (King & Horrocks, 2010). Several of the athlete participants in this research shared their concerns with the researcher at the beginning of their interview about their input being passed onto their own NSO or other sporting organisations. These concerns about confidentiality and anonymity may have prevented eligible, suddenly retired elite women athletes from participating openly in the research. An opportunity exists for future research to quantify data and use anonymous survey responses to potentially address the need for anonymity.

Third, the usefulness and reliability of interview results can be limited by social desirability bias. Social desirability bias occurs when participants tend to provide responses they believe will be viewed favourably by the researcher or other participants (Veal, 2018). In the context of this research, the NSO participants may have been influenced by this bias, leading to responses they believed were aligned with the researcher's or their NSO's expectations rather than sharing their actual opinions or experiences. While all NSO

participants appeared genuine and honest about the support offered by their NSO and recognised barriers their NSO faced, this bias may have influenced their responses and the interpretation of experiences.

Limitations beyond those associated with the research methods may also impact the research findings. There were contextual time differences between the contemporary information in the NSO documents, the interviews with NSO participants, and the information provided by the athlete participants who referenced their experiences from many years before the interviews. Findings from this research revealed that NSOs and external agencies have introduced new resources since many of the athlete participants retired. For example, support services, including the AIS MHRN and AIS CPRN, were introduced in 2019, after the retirement date of several of the athlete participants in this research. Similarly, the dAIS Transition Support grant was introduced in 2021, after the retirement date of the majority of the athlete participants in this research. Had these support services been available, they may have influenced their experience and perceptions of their NSOs and athletic retirement. Despite the introduction of new support services, the type of support that would benefit these athletes remains unchanged, and the recommendations in this thesis can be used as a checklist to guide NSOs on the support services required.

Another limitation of this research was the inclusion of elite women athletes from a wide range of sports. NSOs have varying governance and operating structures (e.g., centralised, de-centralised high-performance programs), competition schedules (e.g., year-round professional circuits, four-year Olympic cycles), access to financial and human resources (e.g., large commercial arrangements, reliance government funding), and full-time or part-time AW&E managers. These differences may influence the type of support individual NSOs can offer suddenly retired elite women athletes and the extent to which they can implement the recommendations made in this study. Capacity differences between sports can lead to the opportunity to explore how large, medium, and small sports could implement these recommendations separately or in collaboration with other sports and external sources. Indeed, one previous study that focused on the retirement experiences of

Australian women tennis players suggested that retirement from sport should be treated as a sport-specific issue rather than based on a generalisation of findings across several sports (Young et al., 2006). While this sport-specific approach may be achievable for large professional sports (e.g., tennis), it may not be achievable for sports with limited resources or a smaller pool of elite athletes (e.g. artistic swimming).

Several reasons why elite women athletes retire suddenly were identified in this research. These reasons include injury, deselection, lack of support from NSO or high-performance program, carer duties, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and each one presents unique challenges for suddenly retired elite women athletes. The variety of these circumstances underscores the complexity of sudden athlete retirement and the transition process, and the significance of the challenges that suddenly retired elite women athletes face. For example, the athletes who retired due to injury faced different barriers and required different support than those who retired due to deselection. An opportunity exists for future research to dissect the barriers and support faced by women athletes according to the types of sudden retirement, which might assist with the identification of support services specific to their needs.

Despite the limitations related to the research supporting this thesis, the findings are a benchmark on which to build research knowledge in a field that previously has been given little attention. An opportunity exists for longitudinal research to investigate the post-athletic career trajectories of suddenly retired elite women athletes (post transition stage).

Investigation into the second careers of suddenly retired elite women athletes could help identify the factors that influence career choices, the attributes they applied from their experience as elite athletes, and the challenges they face in their new careers, thereby informing the advancement of NSO career transition support programs. Coaching, for example, was a role that many of the athlete participants in this research immediately entered. However, prior to their sudden retirement, these athlete participants did not envisage coaching as an option for their second career. Regarding the athlete participants stating their entry into coaching was unexpected, several NSO participants spoke about

career transition programs that fast-tracked retired elite athletes to become high-performance coaches. It seems these transition programs focused on the needs of NSOs and not on the needs of and the transition process for suddenly retired elite women athletes. An opportunity exists to use the conceptual framework designed for this thesis to guide the expansion of these transition programs and embed the three transition phases.

Eighteen recommendations for NSOs to enhance their support for suddenly retired elite women athletes and the transition to a second career have been made as a result of this research. If implemented effectively, these recommendations could potentially improve the support for these athletes. The effectiveness of these interventions needs to be continuously monitored and evaluated. A systematic review of athletes' career transitions away from elite sport found a lack of studies that evaluated and monitored the effectiveness of support interventions offered to athletes at retirement (Park et al., 2013). An opportunity exists for research to assess the impact of the recommendations made in this thesis when practically implemented.

A final suggestion for further research is to analyse data using the more recent data analysis method known as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). When data for this research was collected in 2021, applying Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was arguably one of the most popular methods for conducting thematic analysis. However, since then, reflexive thematic analysis has gained significant recognition, particularly in their 2022 book, "Supporting Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy," (Braun et al., 2022) as well as in numerous articles published since late 2022.

Concluding Researcher Positionality Statement

The current research was motivated by a specific incident that resulted in the death of an Australian elite woman athlete and caused severe, career-ending injuries for five of her teammates. The impact of this incident had long-lasting effects on the athletes involved, particularly the sudden loss of their athletic careers. Due to the severity of their injuries, these athletes could not continue their athletic careers and had transition to a second career.

At the time of the incident, there was insufficient emphasis on athlete health and wellbeing, leading to inadequate support for these athletes during their transition.

While the retired elite women athletes who participated in this research may not have faced the same scenario as those directly affected by the incident, they all experienced sudden athletic retirement—whether due to injury, deselection, or other reasons. Their experiences provide valuable insights into how women athletes can receive better support during this transition.

To prioritise athlete health and wellbeing during their athletic development and careers, sports administrators and researchers, like the researcher, must actively listen to athletes' voices and take their needs into account. While this research did not aim to compare the perspectives of women athletes and NSO managers, it is clear that there exists a disconnect between the support provided by NSOs and the actual needs of these athletes.

Conclusion

The most prevalent NSO practice to support suddenly retired elite women athletes with the transition to a second career was to refer them to external agencies, such as the AIS or Players' Association. Proactively, internal NSO support was lacking, and, as a result, the women participating in this research experienced a lack of 'career readiness' for a second career and received minimal support when they retired suddenly. Despite many athlete participants completing tertiary study, working part-time, or engaging in community activities, their preparation for a second career was inadequate when their athletic retirement occurred suddenly and earlier than anticipated. Seven barriers were identified that impeded these athlete participants from making a swift transition to a second career. These barriers were physical injury, financial stress, negative feelings associated with sudden retirement, lack of work experience/vocational skills, immediate loss of peer support (sport network), dissatisfaction with support for sudden retirement, and not knowing what support is available. The identification of these barriers at the individual and interpersonal level helped identify how practices at the organisational level could be enhanced.

Overwhelmingly, the athlete participants recognised that NSOs could play a pivotal role in supporting women athletes like themselves, who retired unexpectedly and earlier than anticipated. With the lack of support provided by NSOs, these suddenly retired elite women athletes relied on emotional and tangible support from their families and friends. A conceptual framework, based on the EIM and TT, deductively guided data collection and analysis for this thesis, and led to the identification of specific organisational supports to assist NSOs guide suddenly retired elite women athletes to transition into a second career. Evolving from these findings were 18 recommendations (see Tables 23 and 24, Chapter Eight) as to how NSOs can build capacity to support suddenly retired elite women athletes during this crucial transition.

Conversely, this research has found that the suddenly retired elite women athletes possess four key attributes they can leverage during the transition to a second career. These attributes include a plan for a second career, transferable skills, having established athlete networks and cultivating interpersonal support. By understating these attributes, NSOs can play a significant role in helping these athletes launch their second careers and cope during the transition. For example, non-playing sport industry roles, such as sport media, coaching, and athlete wellbeing, have been a common entry point for these athlete participants when transitioning into their second career, and therefore, target areas for NSOs to on focus developing support capability.

The findings of this research represent more than just a valuable resource. It provides a unique opportunity to improve the support available to suddenly retired elite women athletes. The insights and perspectives gathered from athletes and NSO participants can influence organisational policies and practices within the sporting world, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship between suddenly retired elite women athletes and NSOs. The three transition phases identified in this research present a distinctive and vital opportunity for NSOs to actively support suddenly retired elite women athletes throughout these phases until they successfully transition to a second career. Implementing the recommendations from this research has the potential to empower elite women athletes and

provide a rich sporting legacy – not only for the individual athletes that face an unexpected and sudden end to their athletic careers, but also for the NSOs and the broader wellbeing of elite sport.

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Appendix A

SOCIAL MEDIA TEXT

Are you a retired elite woman athlete who suddenly needed to transition from elite sport (national/international) to a second career? we are keen to understand the support you needed during this transition. Click to complete the 30 sec criteria survey:

https://vuau.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0cYmXOpQCefC2mW

Appendix B

Invitation email to organisations re athlete recruitment

Dear.....

Can you help in understanding what support assists elite women athletes in their transition to a second career after a sudden retirement from elite sport?

Victoria University researchers seek retired elite women athletes to participate in a study to understand how sports can better support elite women athletes transition to a second career after a sudden retirement from elite sport (national/international level).

Further information about the research and criteria for participation can be found at the following link: https://vuau.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0cYmXOpQCefC2mW. As an organisation that offers athlete wellbeing and career transition support to elite women athletes, it would be appreciated if you could please pass this information onto your athlete alumna that may be interested in participating either by direct email or via your organisation's communication channels.

Thank you in advance for passing this information onto your athlete alumna. If you have any queries or would like to know any more about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,
Ashleigh Marshall
PhD Candidate, Victoria University
0409 996 895
ashleigh.marshall1@live.vu.edu.au

Appendix C

RETIRED ELITE ATHLETE SCREENING SURVEY

[insert VU Institute for Health and Sport logo]

WHAT:

Victoria University (VU) are seeking retired elite women athletes to participate in a study to understand how sports can better support elite women athletes transition to a second career after a sudden retirement from elite sport (national/international level).

WHY:

Retirement from elite sport and subsequent career transition can be a challenging and disruptive time for elite athletes, especially when athletic retirement is unplanned and occurs suddenly, for example due to a career-ending injury or deselection from sport. With the growing rise for women to develop and sustain a career in elite sport, there will inevitably be a greater number of women athletes who will eventually retire from competitive elite sport. To ensure sustainable pathways for women athletes' success, sporting organisations will need to provide fit-for-purpose support for women athletes as they transition from athletic retirement to a second career.

WHEN:

Data will be collected via a confidential interview conducted online. The semi-structured interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes, and you will be asked a range of questions about your transition to a second career and the support you received from your sport. Your responses will be confidential and unidentifiable. Only clustered responses (data themes) will be reported.

To have your say and contribute to improving the transition support for Australian elite women athletes, please complete this short survey [[answer Yes; No](#)] and provide your contact details below.

1. Have been an elite athlete (national/international level).
2. Participated in the women's category of your sport.
3. Retired from elite sport between 2014- 2021.
4. Your retirement from elite sport was sudden, however was not due to a code of conduct breach (e.g., doping violation).

Name: _____

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

Eligible participants will be contacted by the VU research team and sent further study information in [March 2022].

For queries or further information, please contact:

Ashleigh Marshall

PhD Candidate, Victoria University

0409 996 895

ashleigh.marshall1@live.vu.edu.au

Appendix D

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled *Maximising opportunities for elite women athletes who suddenly need to transition to a second career beyond elite sport*.

This project is being conducted by a student investigator Ashleigh Marshall as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Clare Hanlon and A/Professor Camilla Brockett from the Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University.

Project explanation

Retirement from elite sport and subsequent career transition can be a challenging and disruptive time for elite athletes, especially when athletic retirement occurs suddenly due to a non-normative factor such as career-ending injury or deselection from sport (Stambulova, 2017). In particular, the ability to transition and thrive in a second career after elite sport can be hindered when athletic retirement is sudden, unplanned, and unanticipated (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004). With growing elite sport opportunities and increasing professionalisation of sporting leagues for women in Australia, there will inevitably be an increase in athletic retirement for these athletes. Sporting organisations need to be ready to support these women athletes in their transition from athletic retirement to a second career. The purpose of this research is to understand and explore how national sporting organisations can better support elite women athletes who are faced with the sudden need to transition to a second career.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate you will be asked to provide information in a semi-structured interview of approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will include open questions that ask about your personal experiences retiring from elite sport and transitioning to a second career, as well as the support you received from your sport to transition to a second career and your recommendations for how support services can be improved.

Participation is voluntary. You can choose not to respond to any questions that you feel are uncomfortable and you can withdraw at any time. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. The information you provide will be confidential. If you decide at any time that you would no longer like to be involved in the research, please inform any of the investigators. You can discontinue your participation at any time.

What will I gain from participating?

Sharing your views and insights will greatly contribute to the research and understanding of the appropriate support and services that national sport organisations can provide to elite women athletes when faced with the sudden need to transition from athletic retirement to their second career. It is envisaged that an 'elite women athlete immediate career support framework' will be developed to better enhance national sporting organisation policies and practices to support elite women athletes if the sudden need to transition into a new career beyond elite sport arises.

How will the information I give be used?

All data is confidential and deidentified and will be kept safe in a secure database protected by Victoria University. Only those people directly associated with the study will have access to your interview responses. If you give us your permission by signing the Consent Form, findings will be used in a PhD thesis, and we plan to write articles about the research for publication. We may also present data from the study at conferences and meetings. In any publication or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified.

What are the potential risks of participating in this project?

We do not expect that taking part in the interview will cause you any distress, however some of the items will ask you about your experience in retiring from elite sport. If you do experience any distress, contact details for psychological support services are provided below.

Again, participation is voluntary. You can choose not to respond to any questions that you are uncomfortable in answering and you can discontinue your participation at any time. If you decide at any time that you would no longer like to be involved in the research, please inform any of the investigators.

How will this project be conducted?

Data will be collected by interviewing participants. These interviews will either be conducted via teleconferencing technology (i.e., Zoom, WebEx, Teams). Each interview will be audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Only the investigators will have access to the transcripts. Codes will be used to remove your personal details from the transcripts. The interview transcripts will then be analysed to identify and report themes that will be used to develop recommendations for the development of strategies that maximise opportunities for elite women athletes who need to transition to a second career after a sudden, unplanned, and unanticipated retirement from elite sport.

Who is conducting the study?

The Institute for Health and Sport (iHeS), Victoria University

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator.

Chief Investigator:

Professor Clare Hanlon

Institute for Health and Sport (iHeS), Victoria University^[1]

Phone: 0438 953 120 Email: Clare.Hanlon@vu.edu.au

Other investigators:

A/Professor Camilla Brockett (Victoria University), Ashleigh Marshall (PhD student, Victoria University).

If you require support as a consequence of your participation in the study, please access the following psychological services:

Beyond Blue

1300 22 4636

www.beyondblue.org.au

Lifeline

13 11 14

www.lifeline.org.au

If you have any queries or complaints about how you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

Appendix E

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

We would like to invite you to be a part of a study into *maximising opportunities for elite women athletes who suddenly need to transition into a second career beyond elite sport*.

The principal aim of this research is to explore the role of national sporting organisations in maximising opportunities for elite women athletes who need to transition to a second career after a sudden, unplanned, and unanticipated retirement from elite sport. Data will be collected in two stages: (1) data analysis of publicly available documents that outline organisational support for elite women athletes and (2) semi-structured interviews with retired elite women athletes and high-performance managers of Australian sporting organisations. The risks associated with your participation in this project are low, however if you do feel any distress in participating in this research you will be provided with details of appropriate support services that you are able to access.

CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT

I, "[Click here & type participant's name]"
of "[Click here & type participant's suburb]"

certify that I am at least 18 years old* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study:

Maximising opportunities for elite women athletes who suddenly need to transition into a second career beyond elite sport. being conducted at Victoria University by: Clare Hanlon (Chief Investigator)

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by: Ashleigh Marshall (Student Researcher)

and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

- Semi-structured interview of approximately 60 minutes in duration

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I consent to this interview being recorded on an audio recording device.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator:

Chief Investigator:
Professor Clare Hanlon

Institute for Health and Sport (iHeS), Victoria University^{[1][2]}

Phone: 0438 953 120 Email: Clare.Hanlon@vu.edu.au

Other investigators:

A/Professor Camilla Brockett (Victoria University), Ashleigh Marshall (PhD student, Victoria University).

If you require support as a consequence of your participation in the study, please access the following psychological services:

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www.beyondblue.org.au

Lifeline

13 11 14

www.lifeline.org.au

If you have any queries or complaints about the way, you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email Researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

[*please note: Where the participant/s are aged under 18, separate parental consent is required; where the participant/s are unable to answer for themselves due to mental illness or disability, parental or guardian consent may be required.]

Appendix F

Invitation email to NSO CEOs, high-performance managers and/or athlete wellbeing managers

Subject: NSOs that support elite women athletes who suddenly need to transition into a second career

Dear XXX,

Analysis of publicly available documents from 43 NSOs, identified six sports who recognised the importance of supporting their athletes transition to a second (non-athletic) career. Your organisation has been identified as one of these NSOs. As part of our study to assist the broader NSO community, we seek your permission to gain insights from you and your high-performance manager or athlete wellbeing manager on the support needed and provided to these women athletes.

Involvement would entail a confidential online interview (45-60 minutes) related to your organisation's policy and support practices available to elite women athletes transitioning to a second career. Responses will be unidentifiable with only data themes reported.

In return for your participation, a summary report on the overall study findings will be provided. These findings will help NSOs build capacity to support elite women athletes who need to transition to a second career after a sudden retirement from elite sport.

We look forward to [NSO] being involved in this study. If interested, please respond to this email. Interviews will then be arranged accordingly.

If you have any queries or would like to know any more about this research, please do not hesitate to contact the lead researcher.

Kind regards,

Ashleigh Marshall (Lead Researcher), PhD Candidate, 0409 996 895

Supervisors: Professor Clare Hanlon, Associate Professor Camilla Brockett
Victoria University

Appendix G

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled *Maximising opportunities for elite women athletes who suddenly need to transition to a second career beyond elite sport*.

This project is being conducted by a student investigator Ashleigh Marshall as part of a PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Clare Hanlon and A/Professor Camilla Brockett from the Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University.

Project explanation

Retirement from elite sport and subsequent career transition can be a challenging and disruptive time for elite athletes, especially when athletic retirement occurs suddenly due to a non-normative factor such as career-ending injury or deselection from sport (Stambulova, 2017). In particular, the ability to transition and thrive in a second career after elite sport can be hindered when athletic retirement is sudden, unplanned and unanticipated (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Park et al., 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004). With growing elite sport opportunities and increasing professionalisation of sporting leagues for women in Australia, there will inevitably be an increase in athletic retirement for these athletes. Sporting organisations need to be ready to support these women athletes in their transition from athletic retirement to a second career. The purpose of this research is to understand and explore how national sporting organisations can better support elite women athletes who are faced with the sudden need to transition to a second career.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate you will be asked to provide information in a semi-structured interview of approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will include open questions that ask about your career experiences in high performance sport including athlete wellbeing and career transition support, as well as your views on current organisational support for retiring women athletes transitioning to a second career and your recommendations for how support services can be improved.

Participation is voluntary. You can choose not to respond to any questions that you feel are uncomfortable and you can withdraw at any time. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. The information you provide will be confidential. If you decide at any time that you would no longer like to be involved in the research, please inform any of the investigators. You can discontinue your participation at any time.

What will I gain from participating?

Sharing your views and insights will greatly contribute to the research and understanding of the appropriate support and services that national sport organisations can provide to elite women athletes when faced with the sudden need to transition from athletic retirement to their second career. It is envisaged that an 'elite women athlete immediate career support framework' will be developed to better enhance national sporting organisation policies and practices to support elite women athletes if the sudden need to transition into a new career beyond elite sport arises.

How will the information I give be used?

All data is confidential and deidentified and will be kept safe in a secure database protected by Victoria University. Only those people directly associated with the study will have access to your interview responses. If you give us your permission by signing the Consent Form, findings will be used in a PhD thesis and we plan to write articles about the research for publication. We may also present data from the study at conferences and meetings. In any publication or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified.

Appendix H

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

We would like to invite you to be a part of a study into *maximising opportunities for elite women athletes who suddenly need to transition into a second career beyond elite sport*.

The principal aim of this research is to explore the role of national sporting organisations in maximising opportunities for elite women athletes who need to transition to a second career after a sudden, unplanned, and unanticipated retirement from elite sport. Data will be collected in two stages: (1) data analysis of publicly available documents that outline organisational support for elite women athletes and (2) semi-structured interviews with retired elite women athletes and high-performance managers of Australian sporting organisations. The risks associated with your participation in this project are low, however if you do feel any distress in participating in this research you will be provided with details of appropriate support services that you are able to access.

CERTIFICATION BY SUBJECT

I, "[Click here & type participant's name]"
of "[Click here & type participant's suburb]"

certify that I am at least 18 years old* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study:

Maximising opportunities for elite women athletes who suddenly need to transition into a second career beyond elite sport. being conducted at Victoria University by: Clare Hanlon (Chief Investigator)

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by: Ashleigh Marshall (Student Researcher)

and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

- Semi-structured interview of approximately 60 minutes in duration

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I consent to this interview being recorded on an audio recording device.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator:

Chief Investigator:

Professor Clare Hanlon

Institute for Health and Sport (iHeS), Victoria University^[1]_{SEP}

Phone: 0438 953 120 Email: Clare.Hanlon@vu.edu.au

Other investigators:

A/Professor Camilla Brockett (Victoria University), Ashleigh Marshall (PhD student, Victoria University).

If you require support as a consequence of your participation in the study, please access the following psychological services:

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13 11 14

www.lifeline.org.au

If you have any queries or complaints about the way, you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email Researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461.

[*please note: Where the participant/s are aged under 18, separate parental consent is required; where the participant/s are unable to answer for themselves due to mental illness or disability, parental or guardian consent may be required.]

Appendix I

Interview Guide: Retired Elite Women Athletes

Thank you for your time today to talk about your experience in transitioning to a second career after a sudden athletic retirement. Your involvement in this research is extremely valuable as it will help us better understand NSO policies and practices, and ultimately what improvements can be made to better assist elite women athletes to transition to a second career after a sudden retirement from elite sport.

All your answers will remain confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time. If there is a question that makes you feel uncomfortable, you can choose to skip it or not answer it.

Do you have any questions?

I'll be audio recording the interview also. If this interview does cause you distress at any time than the numbers of support services that you are able to access have been provided in the information to participants form and consent form.

Do you provide your consent to participating in this interview?

Interview Questions	Descriptive/structural code addressed
<u>Background</u> 1. What age bracket are you in? (i.e., 25-29, 30 – 34, 35-39, 40-44, 45-49) Do you come from an intersectional background: CALD, Indigenous, LGBTQIA, Disability? 2. Please provide a brief overview of your sporting career. <u>Prompt:</u> Tell me about the sport/s you have played, and how you got into your main competitive sport? What were the motivations for you engaging in that sport? <u>Prompt:</u> What were a few of your highlight sporting achievements? <u>Prompt:</u> What drove you in your athletic career?	Individual characteristics Individual characteristics
<u>Athletic Retirement</u> 3. Generally, can you tell me about the circumstances surrounding your (sudden) retirement? <u>Prompt:</u> How long had you planned/intended to continue as an elite athlete?	Individual characteristics
<u>Transition to Second Career</u> 4. Please tell me about your second career.	Individual characteristics

<p><u>Prompt:</u> What did you do? What does this career entail? How long have you been in this career/ were you in this career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> How satisfied with your second career are/were you?</p>	
<p>5. Prior to your sudden retirement, did you have a plan or preparations for a second career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> When did you start (actively) thinking about your second career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> How were you preparing for a second career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> What support or encouragement did you receive from your NSO/sport in planning your career beyond elite sport (i.e., whilst you were still a competitive athlete)?</p>	Individual characteristics and organisational strategies
<p>6. How did these plans change when your athletic retirement occurred suddenly/earlier than you had anticipated?</p>	Individual characteristics
<p>7. How soon after athletic retirement were you able to commence your second career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> What steps had you already taken in establishing your second career during your athletic career?</p>	Situation and individual characteristics
<p>8. How did your sport/NSO support you during your transition?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> What specific support services did they provide you in your transition to a second career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> At the time of your athletic retirement, were you aware of specific policy or service support available to you (from your NSO) to assist you with your next (second) career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> How long (what period of time) did they provide transition support?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> Describe how satisfied you were with the process and level of support provided by your NSO?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> Tell me about any support you were offered but did not take up? Why didn't you take up the support offered?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> What other organisations did you receive support from and what was this support?</p>	Organisational strategies
<p>9. What barriers (if any) did you face in transitioning to your second career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> How did/could your NSO assist you overcome these barriers?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> How did you feel these barriers may have been exacerbated due to your sudden retirement from elite sport?</p>	Organisational strategies and socio-cultural
<p>10. Ideally, what NSO support would have assisted you in your transition to a second career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> How would this support have helped you in your transition to a second career?</p> <p><u>Prompt:</u> Are you aware of helpful support that other elite women athletes (i.e., from different sports) have received to assist their transition to a second career?</p>	Organisational strategies and socio-cultural

Conclusion

11. Are there any other comments that you would like to make on required NSO support or good practices from other NSOs provide to elite women athletes transitioning to a second career?

Thank you very much for your time today. Your answers will be used to provide advice and guidance in how NSOs can support elite women athletes in their transition to a second career.

Appendix J

Interview Guide: NSO Managers

Thank you for your time to chat about women elite athletes and their sudden transition into another career. Your involvement in this research is extremely invaluable and will help to understand the policies and practices that will help elite women athletes to transition to a second career after a sudden retirement from elite sport.

All your answers will remain confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time. If there is a question that makes you feel uncomfortable, you can choose to skip it or not answer it.

Do you have any questions?

I'll be audio recording the interview also. If this interview does cause you distress at any time than the numbers of support services that you are able to access have been provided in the information to participants form and consent form.

Do you provide your consent to participating in this interview?

Interview Questions	Descriptive/structural code addressed
<u>Background</u>	
1. What age bracket are you in? (i.e., 25-29, 30 – 34, 35-39, 40-44, 45-49) Do you come from an intersectional background: CALD, Indigenous, LGBTQIA, Disability?	Individual characteristics
2. Please provide a brief overview of your career in high-performance sport and/or athlete wellbeing? <u>Prompt:</u> What is your experience in supporting athletes in their transition from athletic retirement to their second career? What formal qualifications do you hold that may be relevant to this role?	Individual characteristics
3. What is your current position at [NSO] and how long have been employed by this organisation?	Organisational strategies
4. Please give me an overview of the key roles and responsibilities of your role at [NSO]. <u>Prompt:</u> How much of your time in this role is spent on athlete transition support, especially for sudden retirement?	Organisational strategies

Conclusion

11. Are there any other comments that you would like to make on the support that your organisation or the good practices the other organisations provide to elite women athletes, transitioning to a second career?

12.

Thank you very much for your time today. Your answers will be used to provide advice and guidance in how NSOs can support elite women athletes in their transition to a second career.

Appendix K



Updated 23 March 2022

Investment allocation Financial Year 2021-22¹

NSO	High Performance - Able ²		High Performance - Para ³		Core Participation		Other ⁴		Total FY2021-22 (\$)
	FY2021-22 (\$)		FY2021-22 (\$)		FY2021-22 (\$)		FY2021-22 (\$)		
Archery	\$	965,238	\$	430,878	\$	100,000	\$	-	1,496,116
Artistic Swimming	\$	70,000	\$	-	\$	-	\$	-	70,000
Athletics	\$	6,247,326	\$	3,035,000	\$	450,000	\$	380,000	10,112,326
Badminton	\$	464,000	\$	-	\$	325,000	\$	450,000	1,239,000
Baseball	\$	471,885	\$	-	\$	650,000	\$	-	1,121,885
Basketball	\$	5,287,532	\$	1,481,252	\$	950,000	\$	-	7,718,784
Bocce	\$	-	\$	-	\$	50,000	\$	-	50,000
Boccia	\$	-	\$	227,412	\$	-	\$	-	227,412
Bowls	\$	840,970	\$	400,000	\$	650,000	\$	-	1,890,970
Boxing	\$	149,000	\$	-	\$	50,000	\$	-	199,000
Combat Institute*	\$	2,291,206	\$	-	\$	-	\$	-	2,291,206
Cycling	\$	8,335,826	\$	1,935,000	\$	650,000	\$	300,000	11,220,826
Diving	\$	3,020,194	\$	-	\$	50,000	\$	-	3,070,194
Equestrian**	\$	2,757,236	\$	675,000	\$	900,000	\$	90,000	4,422,236
Fencing	\$	91,000	\$	-	\$	50,000	\$	-	141,000
Football	\$	1,903,750	\$	-	\$	-	\$	-	1,903,750
Golf	\$	1,149,500	\$	-	\$	650,000	\$	-	1,799,500
Gymnastics	\$	2,276,322	\$	-	\$	950,000	\$	-	3,226,322
Hockey	\$	6,458,516	\$	-	\$	650,000	\$	443,620	7,552,136
Ice Racing	\$	-	\$	-	\$	50,000	\$	-	50,000
Judo	\$	370,000	\$	-	\$	100,000	\$	-	470,000
Karate	\$	-	\$	-	\$	100,000	\$	-	100,000
Lacrosse	\$	-	\$	-	\$	100,000	\$	222,100	322,100
Motorcycling	\$	-	\$	-	\$	100,000	\$	258,350	358,350
Motorsport	\$	-	\$	-	\$	200,000	\$	-	200,000
Netball	\$	2,483,198	\$	-	\$	950,000	\$	-	3,433,198
Olympic Winter Institute	\$	4,050,646	\$	-	\$	-	\$	-	4,050,646
Orienteering	\$	-	\$	-	\$	100,000	\$	-	100,000
Paddle	\$	6,080,475	\$	845,294	\$	200,000	\$	120,000	7,245,769
Paralympics***	\$	-	\$	4,125,536	\$	300,000	\$	1,010,000	5,435,536
Polocrosse	\$	-	\$	-	\$	50,000	\$	-	50,000
Pony Club	\$	-	\$	-	\$	100,000	\$	-	100,000
Rowing	\$	9,238,552	\$	792,098	\$	200,000	\$	20,000	10,251,650
Rugby Union	\$	2,545,130	\$	-	\$	-	\$	456,080	3,001,210
Sailing	\$	8,461,000	\$	-	\$	650,000	\$	20,000	9,131,000

NSO	High Performance - Able ² FY2021-22 (\$)	High Performance - Para ¹ FY2021-22 (\$)	Core Participation FY2021-22 (\$)	Other ⁴ FY2021-22 (\$)	Total FY2021-22 (\$)
Shooting	\$ 2,511,000	\$ 480,252	\$ 200,000	\$ 300,000	\$ 3,491,252
Skate	\$ 710,000	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 335,000	\$ 1,045,000
Snow	\$ 1,297,600	\$ 1,263,678	\$ 450,000	\$ -	\$ 3,011,278
Softball	\$ 1,358,000	\$ -	\$ 450,000	\$ -	\$ 1,808,000
Squash	\$ 811,000	\$ -	\$ 450,000	\$ -	\$ 1,261,000
Surf Life Saving	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 650,000	\$ -	\$ 650,000
Surfing	\$ 2,277,396	\$ -	\$ 450,000	\$ -	\$ 2,727,396
Swimming	\$ 9,715,670	\$ 2,250,000	\$ 650,000	\$ 450,000	\$ 13,065,670
Table Tennis	\$ 73,107	\$ 843,446	\$ 200,000	\$ -	\$ 1,116,553
Taekwondo	\$ 126,907	\$ -	\$ 200,000	\$ 242,000	\$ 568,907
Tennis	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,500,000	\$ 1,500,000
Terpin Bowling	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 450,000	\$ -	\$ 450,000
Touch Football	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 650,000	\$ 690,000	\$ 1,340,000
Triathlon	\$ 2,607,000	\$ 833,154	\$ 450,000	\$ -	\$ 3,890,154
University Sport	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 50,000	\$ 450,000	\$ 500,000
Volleyball	\$ 2,594,232	\$ -	\$ 450,000	\$ -	\$ 3,044,232
Water Polo	\$ 3,637,928	\$ -	\$ 200,000	\$ 401,050	\$ 4,238,978
Waterski & Wakeboard	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 100,000	\$ -	\$ 100,000
Weightlifting	\$ 555,740	\$ -	\$ 50,000	\$ -	\$ 605,740
Wrestling	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 50,000	\$ -	\$ 50,000

National Sporting Organisations for people with disability (NSOD)

Blind Sports	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 65,000	\$ -	\$ 65,000
Deaf Sports	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 85,000	\$ 118,000	\$ 203,000
Disability Sports	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 210,000	\$ 328,000	\$ 538,000
Disabled Wintersport	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 60,000	\$ 445,255	\$ 505,255
Riding for the Disabled	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 100,000	\$ -	\$ 100,000
Special Olympics	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 545,000	\$ -	\$ 545,000
Sport Inclusion Australia	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 100,000	\$ 40,000	\$ 140,000
Transplant	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 70,000	\$ 260,000	\$ 330,000

Total

NSO:	\$ 104,285,082	\$ 19,617,800	\$ 16,475,000	\$ 8,138,200	\$ 148,516,082
NSOD:	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,235,000	\$ 1,191,255	\$ 2,426,255
Total Investment	\$ 104,285,082	\$ 19,617,800	\$ 17,710,000	\$ 9,329,455	\$ 150,942,337

Notes

1. This table reflects investment allocations for activities primarily undertaken in 2021/22, and includes a portion of investment paid in June 2021 and will be reported in the 2020/21 ASC Annual Report.

The expenditure profile of an High Performance program can vary significantly from year to year of an Olympic/Paralympic cycle. It is the expectation of the AIS that the sport manages the funding provided annually to support activities to enable the implementation of their 4 year High Performance plan.

2. High Performance Able: includes High Performance program funding, Performance Pathways, Performance Support, Athlete Wellbeing & Engagement, High Performance Infrastructure funding, Mental Performance in Competition and other special initiatives.

3. High Performance Para: includes High Performance program funding, Performance Support, Athlete Wellbeing & Engagement and other special initiatives.

4. Other funding: includes National Integrity Manager Pilot Program funding, Women Leaders in Sport, Participation 2.0 Grant Program and other special initiatives.

* Combat Institute: High performance funding includes funding for Boxing, Judo and Taekwondo

** Equestrian: During 2021 and in the first half of FY22 High Performance funding was held by Sport Australia and managed through the NSO administrators. From January 2022 funding was provided to Equestrian Australia.

*** Paralympics: High performance funding includes funding for Wheelchair Rugby