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Coleman Childers

Illinois State University, soccerplayer.cc@gmail.com

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# EXAMINATION OF STUDENT-ATHLETES' DEVELOPMENTAL TRANSITION FROM YOUTH SPORT TO COLLEGE SPORT

Coleman Childers

91 Pages

The majority of research in developmental sport psychology has targeted the youth and adolescent age groups (aged five to 18) and has tended to avoid athletes in organized and highly competitive environment such as major college athletics. The transition from high school to college brings many challenges. Academically and socially, students encounter increasing course rigor, decreasing in-class time, and adjustment to new social groups. Additionally, student-athletes encounter scrutiny from the public, extensive time commitments, changing social dynamics, and physical and mental demands as they combine athletic and academic pursuits. This study explores student-athletes' perspectives of the developmental transition from youth sport to collegiate sport; specifically looking at the influential experiences that student-athletes believe to have experienced and the development and transfer of psychological skills, leadership skills, and life skills from one level to the next in light of these experiences. An interpretivist, narrative approach was used to understand experiences and perceptions of student-athletes who recently completed their first year in college. Thirteen student-athletes participated in interviews that involved pictorializing a developmental timeline and responding to questions from a semi-structured interview guide. Narrative thematic analysis revealed categories, themes, and sub-themes across student-athletes from various sports. This study suggests that individuals that transition from youth sport to college sport are becoming culturally constructed "emerging-adult

student-athletes”, are prone to unique forms of environmental adversity due to their status as a student-athlete, and are consistently faced with rapidly changing social dynamics. In light of this, participants believed to have developed and/or strengthened important psychological and life skills throughout their unique transition from youth sport to college sport. This study provides evidence that student-athletes emerging into adulthood within an athletic context experience especially challenging circumstance. Furthermore, most influential developmental transitions involved adversity. Additionally, student-athletes sought external resources and support in addition to implicitly developing psychological and life skills. The findings of this study will be able to provide insight to produce educational resources that can cultivate a smoother transition in to collegiate sports for not only the student-athletes, but parents, coaches, and support staff as well.

**KEYWORDS:** student-athletes, emerging-adulthood, athletic identity, life skill transfer, “big fish in a little pond” phenomena, social dynamics, adversity

EXAMINATION OF STUDENT-ATHLETES' DEVELOPMENTAL TRANSITION FROM  
YOUTH SPORT TO COLLEGE SPORT

COLEMAN CHILDERS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Kinesiology and Recreation

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2019

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EXAMINATION OF STUDENT-ATHLETES' DEVELOPMENTAL TRANSITION FROM  
YOUTH SPORT TO COLLEGE SPORT

COLEMAN CHILDERS

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Scott Pierce, Chair

Tony Amorose

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C.C.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), is driven by the goal to provide an education for student-athletes and help them benefit from the physical, mental, and social benefits obtained from participation as a college athlete (Sage, 1998). The statement highlights personal development as a primary aim for athletes who participate in intercollegiate sport. It is problematic, however, that college athletics has been critiqued as an industry rife with economic exploitation and control that manipulates and subordinates the student-athlete (Coakley, 2015; Sage, 1998) and student-athletes may not be receiving the support they need to develop as athletes and people (Benford, 2007; Seligman & Maier, 1995). Specifically, first-year student-athletes entering the collegiate sport lifestyle face the above challenges in addition to a newfound detachment from parents and social support networks (Arnett, 2000), integration in to an unknown sport and academic environment, and being flooded with new information and social dynamics, often leading to experiences of adversity. This study seeks to examine the influential experiences of first year student-athletes as they transition from youth sport to college sport.

To gain an understanding of psychosocial development in sport, studies should attempt to select age groups based on specific cognitive, physical, or social developmental criteria (Weiss & Raedeke, 2004). Unfortunately, the majority of studies in developmental sport psychology have targeted the youth and adolescent age groups (ages five to 18), and have tended to avoid athletes in organized and highly competitive environment such as major college athletics (Gould, Griffes, & Carson, 2011). Similarly, research in educational psychology has focused predominately on the general college student population (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). Therefore, there is a need to examine the unique psychosocial experiences of collegiate student-athletes from a developmental perspective. This study seeks to understand the psychosocial developmental

experiences of first year student-athletes as they transition from high school sport to college sport.

### **Holistic Athlete Development**

The study of athlete development in the sport psychology literature has established a series of experiential athlete career stages (Côté, 1999; Salmela, 1994; Stambulova, 2000). By examining the experiences of student-athletes, current elite performances, and former Olympians and international champions, these stages of career development have been depicted holistically on multiple levels (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The holistic athletic career (HAC) model is depicted in Figure 1, with both normative (e.g., predictable age-related stages, such as academic level) and non-normative (e.g., unpredictable stages influenced by situation, such as financial support) stages. On the athletic level, athletes progress from initiation or sampling of sport (from five or six years), to development or specializing (from 12 to 13 years), to mastery and investment (from 18 or 19 years), and finally to discontinuation of sport (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Salmela, 1994). On the psychological level of the HAC, individuals experience childhood, puberty and adolescence, and young or emerging adulthood. On the psychosocial level of this model, development is influenced by multiple support persons, with different individuals having significant impacts at different stages. Specifically, the importance of the support of parents, siblings, peers, coaches, and teammates being variable across the stages of psychosocial development. Academically and vocationally, individuals experience primary education, secondary education, higher education, possibly a semi-/or professional athlete, and a post-athlete career. The final level of development represents the sources of financial support individuals financial support, with initial family support potentially being replaced by governing body, academic institution or sponsor support, and then family or employer support required post-career (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

While these stages provide valuable insight of the athlete development process, a ‘whole

career' or 'whole person' approach requires a particular focus on the transitions between each stage (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). That is, to consider a holistic perspective and integrate knowledge on both talent development and sport transitions, there is a need to move beyond prescriptive models and focus on process markers and transitions of development (McNamara & Collins, 2010) and gather more complete and detailed understanding of relationships between existing factors and the continuous process of athlete development (Coutinho et al., 2016). A focus on developmental transitions not only provides a more detailed understanding of the lived experiences of individuals in sport, it will help to provide context-specific insights for design and implementation of athlete development and support programs (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Stambulova, 2000). This study will focus on the developmental transition of collegiate student-athletes in the United States and their transition from high school into the college athletic environment.

### **Development and Transitions for Collegiate Student-Athletes**

The examination of the development of intercollegiate student-athlete population is in particular need of attention. Development on each level of the HAC is claimed to be a focus of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) as it supposedly driven by the goal to provide an education for student-athletes and help them benefit from the physical, mental, and social benefits obtained from participation as a college athlete (Sage, 1998). From a developmental perspective, it is problematic, however, that college athletics has been critiqued as an industry rife with economic exploitation and control that manipulates and subordinates the student-athlete (Coakley, 2015; Sage, 1998), and can hinder an athletes' ability to think and act for him or herself (Benford, 2007; Seligman & Maier, 1995). Based on these critiques of the collegiate athletic context, it is imperative to understand if and how the student-athletes' perceive and interpret their

developmental experience.

Morgan and Giaccobi (2006) interviewed student-athletes, their parents and coaches to examine the process of talent development in intercollegiate athletics in the United States. In line with studies examining the talent development of elite athletes (e.g., Gould et al., 2002; MacNamara et al., 2010), the researchers found that student-athletes must establish appropriate support networks, develop a range of psychological skills, and deal with multiple obstacles and experiences of failure as they navigate the college athletic experience. Notably, Morgan and Giaccobi (2006, p. 297) concluded that “a more complete examination of links between social support and athletic development could focus on important milestones, experiences of adversity, and transitions from one competitive level to other (e.g., high school to college).” This statement suggests that there is a need to examine the specific developmental transition into the first year of college athletics and life and to consider its complexity on multiple levels. As outlined by the HAC, the transition for 18 or 19 year-old student-athletes is characterized by an athletic progression from a development focus to a mastery or elite environment (Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Salmela, 1994), the conclusion of adolescence and transition into emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), new relationships and adapting psychosocial influences from coaches, teammates, peer groups, and parents (Côté, 1999), added educational expectations in higher education (Carodine et al., 2001), and the potential for financial support and external regulation from college scholarships (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

### **Student-Athlete Psychosocial Development**

As noted in the HAC, the timing of the student-athlete transition into college sport and college life coincides with the transition into emerging adulthood. Specifically, emerging adulthood occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 and is a distinct period from adolescence and a

time characterized by individual change and exploration (Arnett, 2000). This transition is important because of the detachment from parents, focus on peer relations, and the development of reasoning and transition into adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2000) further argues that emerging adulthood is culturally constructed and largely influenced by the environment and support systems each individual interacts with. Academically and socially, students in college encounter increased course rigor, decreased in-class time, and adjustment to new social groups (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Student-athletes, in their multiple roles, may also need to cope with intense scrutiny from the public, extensive time commitments, and a physically and mentally demanding existence as they combine athletic and academic pursuits in college (Carodine et al., 2001).

While anecdotal in nature, there is a documented concern among coaches, parents, and public consumers of college athletics, that first year student-athletes have to transition from being a “big fish in a little pond” in youth sport to being a “little fish in a big pond” in collegiate sport (Drotar, 2015; Teare, 2015). According to the big-fish little-pond effect, individuals compare their own self-concept with peers in their current environment, and that equally capable individuals have higher self-concepts when in a less capable group (Marsh & Parker, 1984). Self-concept is an “individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is” (Baumeister, 1999, p. 13). For first year college athletes, then, these combined effects would infer that being in their new sporting environment could have a direct influence on their self-concept and provide complex challenges as they the transition into emerging adulthood.

As a sport-related component of self-concept, athletic identity refers to “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993, p. 237), and for many student-athletes, the athlete role is the most significant piece of their identity. In fact, some athletes see the role of student and athlete as competing and actively neglect growth



opportunities outside of sport (Lance, 2004). This narrow vision of one's identity can lead to difficulties such as lower career maturity (Houle & Kluck, 2015), and greater difficulty (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and anxiety as they transition out of sport (Lavallee, Grove, & Gordon, 1997). For these reasons, there is a need for a culturally and context-specific examination of the transition into student-athlete emerging adulthood, and an exploration of the experiences and challenges the influence holistic individual development.

For student-athletes, self-concept and identity encompasses the attributes, mindsets and skills that influence their behavior and functioning in sport and life contexts. To therefore explore student-athlete's psychosocial self-concept and identify, perceptions of psychological skills and life skills can provide valuable insight (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). Psychological skills are the skills, assets, and tools to nurture excellence in sport and other life domains (Aoyagi et al., 2012); and life skills are "characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and transferred for use in non-sport settings" (Gould & Carson, 2008, p. 60). Psychological skills and life skills are often promoted as key developmental outcomes for young athletes to gain from youth and high school sport, therefore shaping self-concept. While psychological and life skills can be developed through sport (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007), the transfer of these assets to other domains does not occur automatically (Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017).

The process of transferring life skills occurs when "an individual learns and internalizes a life skill in sport and then experiences personal change through the application of the life skill in one or more life domains beyond the context where the life skill was originally learned" (Pierce, Gould & Camiré, p.194). Recent research has examined perceptions and experiences of

transferring of life skills from high school sport. Pierce, Erickson and Dinu (2018) interviewed high school teacher-coaches about their perspectives what student-athletes experience related to life skills transfer. Coaches believes that while confident, motivated and growth minded youth are more aware of their ability to transfer sport skills to new contexts, their experiences and perceptions of their transfer environments (e.g., classroom) strongly influence whether skills are applied in new contexts (e.g., college sport and life). That is, if they do not receive support from mentors, are not provided opportunities to transfer the skills, and are not actively aware and confident in transferring skills, then they will be less likely to do so (Pierce, Erickson, & Dinu, 2018). Kendellen and Camiré (2018) conducted a grounded theory study of the process of life skills transfer from the perspective of former high school student-athletes. A complex process of active decision-making, life skill application, cognitive appraisal of life skill applicability, and subsequent change to the person and the context was revealed. These findings emphasized that both behavioral and cognitive processes influence if and how student-athletes are able, or unable, to apply skills across different sport and life contexts. This has important implications first year student-athletes who are expected to possess the psychological, academic skills, and social skills to assimilate smoothly to life as a collegiate student-athlete. Collectively, these findings make clear that potential challenges will exist for student-athletes as emerging adults who are seeking to transfer and apply psychological skills and life skills in their transition to the collegiate sport field and classroom.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study seeks to understand the psychosocial developmental experiences of first year student-athletes as they transition from high school sport to college sport. Specifically, this study examined (1) what experiences and challenges do first year student-athletes believe are

influential to their psychosocial development during the transition from youth sports to college sport; and (2) how do perceptions of self-concept, psychological skills and life skills evolve during the transition from youth sports to college sport?

## CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

### **Research Approach**

A constructivist, qualitative philosophical perspective guided this research study. This approach was used to gain an understanding of first-year student-athletes' descriptions and interpretations of their psychosocial developmental experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The constructivist approach assumes that events and realities are socially- and experientially-based and may change as individuals' engagement with their experience changes. In addition, a narrative approach was also utilized. The narrative approach provides a technique that seeks to interpret the ways in which people perceive reality, make sense of their world, and perform social actions (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), and allowed student-athletes to tell their individual stories of their youth sport experience prompt the emergence of specific memories, and latent meaning being communicated by each participant (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Collectively, these approaches promoted an understanding and reconstruction of knowledge, being open to new interpretations, and allow this study to gain a valuable and sophisticated perspective about student-athlete development.

### **Researcher Role and Positionality**

This research project provided an opportunity to examine of the transition of student-athletes from high school sport and life to collegiate sport and life and its developmental impact on skill development. Because of my continued involvement in this project, it is important to address researcher role and positionality, and potential validity threats.

In this study, I personally interviewed all 13 student-athlete participants and guided them through each of their own timelines highlighting memorable experiences during their two-year transitional period. After listening to the student-athlete experiences, reviewing the interview

transcriptions, and sifting the data through the Narrative Thematic Analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Jowett & Frost, 2007), I believe that emerging-adulthood with a collegiate athletic context, is especially challenging. I believe that the majority of the influential transitional experiences of the student-athletes involved adversity and challenges. Additionally, I believe that through these experiences, student-athletes implicitly developed various psychological and life skills to implement in both sport and non-sport settings. I do, however, acknowledge that the effects of each student-athletes experiences are individualized and that positive psychosocial skill development is not guaranteed. I agree that sport does not automatically develop positive psychosocial skills in young people (Coakley, 2011), and that the transfer of these skills and behaviors from sport to other life domains is a complex and often wrongfully assumed outcome (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009). Because of this balanced perspective, I believe that I was well positioned to investigate the student-athletes experiences and transfer of psychological and life skills from sport to other life domains. I do not - and did not - assume that described skills were directly developed through their specific sport experiences and are transferred to other life domains. I do however believe that this transfer is possible.

In conducting this study, the researcher role was a complex one that must be addressed. In order to collect data, student-athletes were contacted directly by the researcher via email or text message where a brief synopsis of the study was shared (see Sample Justification section). From there, messages were exchanged to establish a time and date to meet. Before the interview, I reminded the participants of the synopsis of the study. I was however, very cautious about my comments and discussions about the research behind the study and to not assume any potential transfer findings. I attempted to stay objective to the possible findings of the study. I did not speculate on possible findings. I kept notes of my role and in-interview details that may have not

been easily retrieved or remembered during a transcription process or reading the interviews. These details included notes on vocal tones, non-verbal communication, and body language nuances which were used for

### **Sample Justification**

A purposive and convenient sample was used to select cases that meet some criteria and have particular characteristics (Given, 2008), gain ‘information-rich cases’ that produce significant amounts of data of relevance to the research investigation (Patton, 2002), and maximize the insight gained about student-athlete development. Participants were recruited using the criteria. Student-athletes of having recently (within three months) completed their first year/first year as a college student-athlete. Participants were conveniently recruited from one Division I Midwestern university in the United States. Following approval from the university Institutional Review Board and with guidance from athletic directors, coaches, and current student-athletes, student-athletes who met the study criteria were identified and contacted via email or text message. Additionally, a snowball sampling approach was used, with student-athlete participants assisting in identifying other first-year student-athletes who met the study criteria and who can provide “rich descriptions” of their developmental experiences (Patton, 2002).

### **Participants**

A total of thirteen student-athletes participated in the study. The participants came from 10 different sports teams on the campus of the same NCAA D1 Midwestern University in the United States. These sports included Women’s Soccer ( $n=2$ ), Women’s Basketball ( $n=1$ ), Men’s Baseball ( $n=1$ ), Women’s Gymnastics ( $n=1$ ), Women’s Softball ( $n=1$ ), Men’s Track and Field ( $n=1$ ), Men’s Golf ( $n=2$ ), Women’s Volleyball ( $n=1$ ), Men’s Tennis ( $n=1$ ), and Women’s Dive

( $n=2$ ). Participants ages ranged from 19-20 years old with a mean age of 19.08 ( $SD=.27$ ). For the anonymity of the participants, each was given a pseudonym, however the details of their stories are accurate and self-reported by the student-athletes. Each participant is introduced in the section below.

### **Sarah**

Sarah was a 20-year-old, Hispanic-American female student-athlete and was a member of the women's soccer team at her university where she studied political science. She was originally from a suburb of a large Midwestern city. She grew up playing both high-level club soccer as well as for her high school.

### **Cece**

Jess was a 19-year-old, White female student-athlete studying biology and was a member of the women's basketball program at her university. Jess grew up in a small Midwestern town where she recalled basketball always being an integral part of her life.

### **Rachel**

Rachel was a 19-year-old, White female student-athlete and was on the women's soccer team at her university. She was a mathematics major hailing from a suburb of a large Midwestern city. Soccer was Rachel's top choice of sport ever since she could remember, with experience at the elite club level, high school, and then collegiately.

### **Liam**

Liam was a 19-year-old, White male on the men's baseball team at his university, where he was majoring in finance. Liam grew up in mid-sized city in a Western state before he came to college. Growing up, Liam traveled all across the United States for baseball as a youth sport athlete.

**Jess**

Jess was a 19-year-old White, female gymnast studying marketing. She grew up in the same city as the university where she chose to attend and was able to accept the last available scholarship on the gymnastics team before transitioning in to college.

**Leslie**

Leslie was a 19-year-old White, female student-athlete on the women's softball team at her university where she was a public relations major. She grew up in a small Midwestern town where she recalled always playing softball. Getting the opportunity to play Division I softball was big news in her town.

**Ben**

Ben was a 19-year-old White male on the track and field team at his university. He coincidentally was from the same small Midwestern town that Leslie is from. He studied physical education in hopes to be a PE teacher post-graduation.

**Jerry**

Jerry was a 19-year-old White male on the golf team at his university. Jerry originated from a suburb of a mid-sized Midwestern city and studied exercise science in college.

**Ron**

Ron was a 19-year-old White male on the golf team at his university where he majored in political science. Ron grew up in a town in Midwestern state and recalled golf as being an integral part of his life from a childhood to college.

**April**

April was a 19-year-old White female on the women's volleyball team at her university. April grew up in a suburb of a mid-sized city in a Northern state before transitioning in to college.



where she decided to study criminal justice. Like many other participants, volleyball has been a key component of her childhood and adolescent life.

### **Ann**

Ann was a 19-year-old White female diver from a Northern state. She dove at the college level where she chose to major in journalism. Ann was a gymnast for the majority of her childhood and adolescent life and made the switch to diving at age 17 during her junior year of high school.

### **Tom**

Tom was a 19-year-old White male on the men's tennis team at his selected university. Tom was originally from a suburb of a large Midwestern city. He was a high-achieving student as he was a finance, insurance, and economics triple major.

### **Donna**

Donna was a 19-year-old White female on the women's dive team at her selected university. Donna was an international student from a European country and chose to come to the United States to study psychology so that she could more easily balance her academic and athletic pursuits.

## **Research Procedures**

Using the constructivist and narrative approaches, a two-phase process was followed to gain student-athletes' perspectives and experiences of their transition into college sport. First, to elicit participant narratives, each participant was asked to draw a timeline of their sport and life experiences. On paper provided, each participant was asked to identify and label key sport experiences and life events (i.e., memorable events/experiences, personal sport and life achievements; positive and/or enjoyable experiences in sport and life; negative and/or

challenging experiences in sport and life; unique or unexpected sport or life experiences) during the two-year transitional period. This period started and the beginning of their high school final year through to the finish of first year college year. As participants drew events on the timeline, the researcher prompted them to describe the experience in detail. The timelines are provided in Appendix A.

Second, semi-structured interviews were used as the preferred method of data generation using the constructivist approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The purpose of individual interviews was to allow each participant to expand on the timeline with their informed descriptions and explanations of the transition and events from youth sport to college sport (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interviews were conversational in nature but followed a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions designed to orient the interviewee toward their experiences and perspectives of the transition for first year student-athletes (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to describe events and experiences in high school, college, and the transition between the two contexts. Follow-up questions to each experience explored if, how, and why participants believed they gained psychological skills and/or life skills through the experience (e.g., Do you believe you gained psychological/mental skills from this high school sport experience? If so, what, when, and how?). Participants were provided with the following definitions of psychological skills and life skills: “Mental skills are internal capabilities (e.g., motivation, goal setting, self-control) that help an athlete improve performance” and life skills: “characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and transferred for use in non-sport settings.” A series of questions were then asked to each participant that focused directly on the transition between high school and college (e.g., How has your college sport experience been similar to your youth/high

school sport experiences? How has your college sport experience been different to your youth/high school sport experiences? Have you experienced challenges or difficulties in your first year of college sport and life? If so, what and why?). Student-athletes were also asked to provide recommendations and advice for first year student-athletes in the future.

Throughout the interviews, participants were provided with flexibility to describe their own experiences and perspectives as they wish, and for this reason, interviews took distinctly different paths. While the timing and use of the questions was dependent on the responses from each participant, all questions were asked by the conclusion of the interview.

### **Data Analysis and Rigor**

A narrative thematic analysis was used to interpret how participants perceived their new reality, academic and athletic worlds, and the unique social actions and relationships as first-year collegiate student-athletes (Jowett & Frost, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The thematic analysis was used to understand core patterns within each narrative individually as well as across all thirteen narratives collectively (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Specifically, this approach was selected to focus on the flow of individual experiences (Jowett & Frost, 2007), to identify core patterns of *what* student-athletes believed were individual experiences and developmental outcomes from their transition into college sport and life. This approach followed the steps outlined by Sparkes and Smith (2014) for the thematic and structural narrative analysis and are explained in detail below.

The first step was *immersion*, which involved the lead researcher listening to the recorded interview, transcribing each interview verbatim, reviewing each pictorial timeline, and re-reading each transcript. Second, based on the review of the timeline and transcript, the researcher wrote *initial thoughts* of each participant with impressions and key ideas related to the research

questions and general comments made about potential patterns in relation to the research questions. The third step involved the lead researcher *identifying key themes* for each transitional story and identify patterns and meaning for each individual participant. This phase involved identification of the key events and experiences with a specific focus on the meaning and emphasis each participant gave to experiences. Fourth, key themes and patterns were *tracked within each narrative* by the lead researcher to identify how participants described positive and negative experiences and analyze the interplay between transitional experiences (e.g., new relationships) and developmental outcomes (e.g., life skills learned). During each of these phases, a second researcher served as a ‘critical friend’, reviewing by the thoughts, themes, and analysis along with the transcripts and asked clarifying questions about the applicability and relevance of each comment to the research questions.

In the fifth phase, the two researchers worked together, reviewing the transcripts, analysis tables, and thematic framework to make *conceptual comments* about how the theoretical concepts related to each theme. This resulted in a final thematic framework that aligned with the core tenets of relational developmental systems (RDS; Lerner et al., 2004) frameworks to help to present the student-athlete experiences. When this general framework was created, each *theme was named* to accurately depict the transitional nature of each student-athletes experience. Idiographic *stories* were then written to provide the rich profile of each individual and interplay of key themes and cultural contexts. Finally, each individual narrative was *compared and contrasted* with the most meaningful themes identified. These meaningful themes identify the main similarities across the participants to explain (1) the experiences and challenges that student-athletes believed were influential to their psychosocial development during the

transition, and (2) how perceptions of self-concept, psychological skills and life skills evolved during the transition.

### CHAPTER III: RESULTS

This study explored the experiences and challenges first year student-athletes believed were influential to their psychosocial development during the transition from youth sports to college sport, and how they perceived changes in self-concept, psychological skills and life skills during the transition from youth sports to college sport. The initial narrative thematic revealed that student-athletes experienced a range of transitional experiences that directly or indirectly influenced changes in their development of self-concept, psychological skills, and life skills.

Three categories of transitional experiences were identified, including *becoming a culturally constructed “emerging-adult-student-athlete”*, *unique environmental adversity*, and *changing social dynamics*. Within each category, specific themes were identified. In the *becoming a culturally constructed emerging-adult-student-athlete* category, the two themes *forming athlete identity* and *emerging into adulthood*, in addition to *recognizing cultural expectations of student-athletes* were recognized. These themes described the pivotal changes in self-perception and self-concept during the transition into college sport and life. In the *unique environmental adversity* category, five themes were identified as external, yet uncontrollable, factors that student-athletes viewed as being an especially challenging during their transitions. These included the *daunting recruiting and committing process*, *new academic pressures*, *new sport adversity and pressures*, and *navigating life adversity*. In the *changing social dynamics* category, student-athletes identified four themes. The *evolving coach relationships*, *continued parent involvement*, *previous and new peer-focused social dynamics*, and leadership challenges where student-athletes wondered whether to *lead or not to lead*. See Table 1 for a complete and detailed examination of the categories, themes, and sub-themes.

Finally, student-athletes also described specific psychosocial changes and developments that they believe occurred during - or as a result of - the transition (See Table 2). These changes were identified in three main developmental outcomes: *intrapersonal qualities and skills*, *interpersonal qualities and skills*, and *cognitive and behavioral skills*. Each category and theme is presented, with quotes and examples from student-athletes, to show how transitional experiences and challenges influenced psychosocial student-athlete development.

Table 1

Narrative Thematic Analysis' Categories, Themes, & Sub-Themes

Category	Theme	Sub-Theme
Culturally Constructed "Emerging-Adult Student-Athlete"	Recognizing cultural expectations of student-athletes	
	Forming athlete identity	New social status  Feeling of needing to prove themselves  Neglect of growth opportunities outside of sport  Beliefs in themselves to be the best  Associating quality of life with sport performance
	Emerging into adulthood	Independent living from parents  Establishing their own values and morals  Managing peer-pressures
Unique Environmental Adversity	Recruiting & committing process	Stress & frustrations
		Status of being "verbally committed"
		Coach or scholarship loss/change

(Table Continues)

Category	Theme	Sub-Theme
		Seeking social support for the commitment process
	New academic pressures	Difficulty balancing academics & sport First time academic disappointment
	New sport adversity & pressures	Adjusting to the new & higher level-of-play “Need to win” culture Physically exhausting strength & conditioning regiments Increased anxiety with performance expectations Playing time & perceived talent discrepancies Physical setbacks/injuries
	Navigating life adversity	
Changing Social Dynamics	Evolving coach-relationship	Coach conflict Coach support Coaching/communication style
	Continued parent involvement	Instilled lessons, values, & morals Unconditional parents support
	Previous & new peer-focused social dynamics	Maintaining peer-based social support Peer-conflict & confrontation Emphasis placed on team rather than the individual

(Table Continues)



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Category	Theme	Sub-Theme
	To lead or not to lead	Refining definitions of leadership
		Shifting from a leader to a follower
		Difficulty leading due to lack of college sport experience
		Observing & critiquing leadership in teammates

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Table 2

Developmental Outcomes

Category	Skill Type	Developmental Outcomes
Culturally Constructed “Emerging-Adult Student-Athlete”	Intrapersonal Skills	Increased intrinsic motivation
		Self-confidence
		Responsibility
		Accountability
	Interpersonal Skills	Self-understanding
		Managing peer-pressures
		Conflict resolution
		Seeking social support
		Respecting others
		Cohabitation
		Work ethic
	Cognitive & Behavioral Skills	Self/emotional-regulation
		Long-term planning/thinking skills
Time-management skills		
Finance-management skills		
Unique Environmental Adversity	Intrapersonal Skills	Self-confidence
		Mental toughness
		Resiliency
		Perseverance
		Adaptability

(Table Continues)

Category	Skill Type	Developmental Outcomes
		Integrity
		Focus
		Commitment
		Humility
	Interpersonal Skills	Managing peer-pressures
		Conflict resolution
		Ability to know how to ask for help
		Work ethic
	Cognitive & Behavioral Skills	Goal-setting
		Self/emotional-regulation
		Time-management skills
		Communication skills
		Organizational skills
		Effective study techniques
		Resiliency
		Mental toughness
		Ability to accept one's mistakes
		Self-confidence
Changing Social Dynamics	Intrapersonal Skills	
	Interpersonal Skills	Conflict resolution
		Maintaining social support
		Role modeling
		Vocal leadership skills
		Willingness to be led

(Table Continues)

Category	Skill Type	Developmental Outcomes
	Cognitive & Behavioral Skills	Goal-setting
		Work ethic
		Self/emotional-regulation

### **Becoming a Culturally Constructed Emerging-Adult-Student-Athlete**

The category, *becoming a culturally constructed emerging-adult-student-athlete*, is a complex and complicated title depicting a complex and complicated process. This category was comprised of experiences from student-athletes' narratives surrounding themes of emerging adulthood and athletic identity, both of which were described as an especially challenging experience by first-year student-athletes. Additionally, through the challenging experiences surrounding emerging into adulthood and forming an athletic identity, student-athletes attributed an acquisition of various psychological and life skills from their difficult transitional experiences.

### **Recognizing Cultural Expectations of Student-Athletes**

The participants in this study described an increased awareness and recognition of the expectations placed on collegiate student-athletes. Collectively, these cultural expectations referred to the requirements for student-athletes to commit significant time to their athletic and academic pursuits; to perform to a high level in each domain while being under new scrutiny from coaches, academic instructors, and staff; and to be role-models for themselves, their family, their home community, their new athletic program, and their university. Sarah, a women's soccer student-athlete, discussed the expectations in her leadership role within her team when she said "...how high stakes everything in leadership is showed in college. Every little thing I do is

essentially ten times more magnified, which sucks” (Sarah, 2018). Rachel, also a women’s soccer student-athlete added to the idea of cultural expectation in the realm of academic expectations when she stated “There is always an expectation of athletes to be smart...If we have a bad grade, our coach finds out. I try my best to make sure that never happens (Rachel, 2018). Lastly, Jess, a women’s gymnastics student-athlete discussed perceived expectations that infiltrated her social life outside of school and sport. She stated:

Your social life matters. I feel like when you’re in high school, you can post something goofy [on social media] that you probably shouldn’t and maybe your mom will yell at you. But now [in college], it could literally be your money [scholarship] or your traveling to a meet. You just have consequences that are on you...” (Jess, 2018).

Student-athletes stated that these cultural expectations were shared explicitly from coaches, parents, and other support personnel, while also being implicitly reinforced through their introduction to, and experiences of the life of a college student-athlete.

### **Forming Athletic Identity**

As student-athletes transitioned into college athletics, they reflected on the ‘athlete’ component of their perceived self-identity. For some student-athletes, the transition marked the first time they had ever questioned the sport-related component of their self-concept. One evident element of athletic identity was the student-athletes’ perceptions of their *new social status* playing at the NCAA Division I level. April stated:

[In college], you represent a brand name that is publicized. Not just to your family or your friends in town, but literally the whole world because everyone watches college sports. So it’s that publicity that comes with college is one of the biggest things that

people aren't aware of coming from high school... You'll walk around town and not just your friends and family know your name, but everyone knows your name (April, 2019).

Student-athletes also discussed *feelings of needing to prove themselves* as dominant in their sport as they were beginning college sport. Jerry stated:

...coming in as a freshman, until you prove yourself and do something, I feel like you're kind of the 'little fish'. Until you achieve stuff, [and win] like the big fish has done, you get overshadowed (Jerry, 2018).

Additionally, student-athletes described the re-evaluation of their ability. During their transition, they realized their *beliefs in themselves to be the best* no longer held truth. This belief was challenged when they began college sport and were surrounded with other high-level athletes of the same sport. Ben went on to say, "I've gone from being a 'big fish in a little pond' to being a 'little fish in a big pond'. That is 100% the first thing I noticed going into college athletics...I'm no longer one of the best".

Student-athletes described how they began to *neglect growth opportunities outside of sport*, specifically in academics. This shift was due to the perceptions that sport was now their main priority, and was discussed by Jerry discussed in rich detail when he stated:

Golf made me lazy outside of golf...because we would miss school a lot. Just like we do here. We'd miss school a lot to go play. In high school, there wasn't a lot of demands to make up your work, so I'd just miss a lot of assignments. I would put them off so far, [but] you could still turn stuff late in high school, so I'd just end up turning a lot of stuff in late. I would work really hard at golf, but outside of golf I didn't work hard at many things... I put so much time and effort into golf, I didn't really desire to work hard outside of it (Jerry, 2018).

Student-athletes were faced with harsh realizations coming in to college sport that the sport itself was not the only important component of being a student-athlete. This idea was further emphasized when Jerry described how an injury helped him reach this realization. He went on and said:

My goal coming into college was to play professionally after college. [Now], I don't know how certain that is. I still want to pursue that, but I'm still not sure what level I'll still be able to get to. Hopefully I can still reach my goals of that, but now I work a lot harder in the classroom. In case that doesn't work out, I'll have a good degree that I can fall back on. I work a lot harder in the classroom now in case golf doesn't work out. I know that if I was healthy and hadn't really had these [injuries] happen, I probably wouldn't care as much about my grades knowing that I was going to play professionally. But now, I don't know if I will based on my health. [My academic] work ethic completely flipped (Jerry, 2018).

The last component of athletic-identity that showed difficulty during this transition was student-athletes *associating quality of life with their sport performances*. Ron said that “my life is kind of all about golf. I do fine in school and [I am] having fun outside of golf, but by the way I judge my year, is how golf goes” (Ron, 2018).

### **Emerging into Adulthood**

Several trends related to challenges of emerging in to adulthood became evident throughout the participant narratives. First, *independent living from parents* was a theme that student-athletes described as a large difference between high school and college as they were faced with living with new and different individuals. Jess, a women's gymnast SA stated:

Living in a dorm teaches you a lot about cohabitating. I have learned a lot about relationships with people you don't know very well and people that are different than you and how to respect people and try not to be as judgmental. I learned that people are raised differently than I am and that's not necessarily better or worse. It's just different and you have to find a way to work with it because you can't get around it. There's always going to be things you don't like but you have to work with it (Jess, 2018).

Similarly, student-athletes discussed a new concept of *establishing their own values and morals* after transitioning in to college. Sarah mentioned her personal story of defining herself for the first time once in college, highlighting that the student-athletes were faced with existential questions that they may have never faced when living with their parents. She stated:

[My biggest challenge was] figuring out who I am and finding my own confidence. My mom told me that I find my confidence in what others think of me and then I thought, 'well then who am I?' (Sarah, 2018).

Additionally, student-athletes were left to *manage peer-pressures* when their current values and morals were tested in their new college environments. Pressures involving underage drinking, smoking, and substance abuse were identified to challenge personal morals and values and were amplified as student-athletes were beginning to live a more independent lifestyle.

Rachel discussed how the college lifestyle aided in her ability to manage peer-pressures when she stated:

...staying grounded in my values when being around so many things that are against my values. Being strong is something I've definitely learned from being in college. Because you're exposed to so much more and there are so many opportunities to go out and do



whatever...[and] participate in something you know you're not supposed to participate in (Rachel, 2018).

Related to peer-pressures, Jess said "there are always going to be temptations. But always remember what you're here for and what is important" (Jess, 2018). These perspectives show the difficult situations that student-athletes and any college-aged individual-face that potentially question their previously held beliefs.

### **Developmental Outcomes from Becoming A Culturally Constructed Emerging-Adult-Student-Athlete**

Key developmental outcomes that participants believed they acquired or strengthened through their unique experiences emerging in to a culturally constructed "emerging-adult student-athlete" were placed in to three categories. Intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, and cognitive and behavior skills. Intrapersonal skills that student-athletes believed to have gained or strengthened were intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, responsibility, and accountability. Identified interpersonal skills were managing peer-pressure, conflict resolution, seeking social support, respect, finding self, and the ability to cohabitate. Lastly, cognitive behavior skills that student-athletes identified as important were work ethic, self/emotional-regulation, effective long-term planning skills, time-management skills, and finance-management skills.

### **Idiographic Story of Development From Culturally Constructed Emerging-Adult-Student-Athlete**

To explain the experiences of, and development from becoming a culturally constructed "emerging-adult student-athlete" throughout the transition to college sport, one idiographic story is presented below. This represents Jerry's challenging transition that highlights some of the key aspects of this category.

**A rude awakening.** Jerry, a men's golf student-athlete had an especially difficult first year of college golf. Jerry began his interview by recalling fun memories he had during his final high school year of golf. He reminisced on memories with teammates, making a run at the State tournament, and other various accolades that he received before graduation. He went on to discuss his decision to play golf in college and how his repeated sport success filled him with confidence, leaving him with the desire to want more success at the next level. He talked about a friend he made that was a then-current collegiate student-athlete and how this friend was a key influence in Jerry's decision to commit to the university he now attends. Not only was the social influence of Jerry's friend influential in the process, but the two played against one another for an entire summer with Jerry often winning. These results against a successful Division I collegiate student-athlete solidified Jerry's decision to commit. Jerry went in to his first year of college sport extremely confident in his golfing abilities. However, he was in for a rude awakening. In discussing college golf, Jerry said:

I feel like coming in here, I had such a good summer, that I almost expected it to be easier than it was getting in to that starting lineup... My transition of high school into college was not very smooth...there was a lot of pressure on myself and from the coach to play well. Because if you don't, you're just back out of the lineup (Jerry, 2018).

Jerry's underestimation of the level-of-play differences between high school sport and college sport made for a tough first college season. As if Jerry's situation was not hard enough, he suffered a back injury that sidelined him for a good portion of his season. He described the situation by saying, "[I] lost all credibility I had to myself of producing scores for the team that I had done [earlier in the season] (Jerry, 2018).

Continuing to discuss his injury, Jerry discussed how he felt under constant pressure from his coach to heal and to get back on the green. Jerry was very frustrated with the situation and struggled to keep positive. After several weeks of trying different treatment options, he was finally able to overcome the injury and return to play. In hindsight, Jerry learned a lot from his injury. Jerry described how because of his injury, his appreciation for sport is much greater. Jerry said:

It was challenging having that injury...I work so much harder now, outside of golf and in the classroom. They go hand-in-hand. My goal coming in to college was to play professionally...[but] after getting the injury, I don't know how certain that is. I work a lot harder in the classroom now in case that doesn't work out, I'll have a good degree in exercise science to fall back on (Jerry, 2018).

Jerry's account highlights some of the underestimation that student-athletes can have as they enter college sport. It is important, however, to note that through Jerry's adverse circumstance, he was able to develop an appreciation of a physically healthy body and was able to learn the importance of an academic work ethic.

### **Unique Environmental Adversity**

A range of external and uncontrollable, factors were identified by student-athletes as being especially challenging during their transition from high school to college. The *daunting recruiting and committing process, new academic pressures, new sport adversity and pressures, and navigating life adversity* were all themes described by all student-athletes to frame the developmental transition as psychologically and socially difficult.

## The Daunting Recruiting and Committing Process

The recruiting and committing process refers to the recruitment of student-athletes by university athletic programs, and the requirement to accept a position or scholarship within the team or program. When an offer is made that the student-athlete accepts, they are considered “verbally committed” within college-athletics recruiting culture. This was viewed as a stressful and evolving process often fraught with unexpected complications that the student-athlete had little control over. Student-athletes described *stress and frustrations* with the process, the *status of being “verbally committed”* to a university athletic program, and *coach or scholarship loss/change*, and *seeking social support* as unique experiences for a student-athlete searching for a college roster spot or scholarship would face.

Participants explained the need to *sacrifice for a commitment*. This sub-theme described the financial, emotional, time, and social commitment and sacrifices that student-athletes had to make in their final year/s of high school to secure a commitment to a collegiate sport program. Student-athletes believed that this helped to fuel a strong inner desire to play college sport, and reported enjoyment of the sport as an influence to their desire to continue at the collegiate level. In describing her recruitment process, Leslie said:

For me to commit right before my senior year to play softball in college, it really taught me that if you really work for something it will work out for you... if you want it bad enough [and] if you do the right things, I think that it will work out (Leslie, 2018).

Student-athletes also reported *stress and frustrations* throughout the recruitment and commitment process due to a lack of interest from collegiate athletic programs, inadequate sport talent or academic standards required for some programs, and the social pressures to commit. Ron, a men’s golf student-athlete, vividly described some of his feelings towards golf during his

final year of high school when he had yet to commit to a university. He mentioned, “It bothered me that I didn’t have a scholarship already.”

The *status of being “verbally committed”* referred to the moment when student-athletes accept a spot or scholarship on a university athletic program. For some student-athletes, a verbal commitment signified a distinct end to this type of environmental adversity. Once this commitment occurred, student-athletes believed that they experienced relief from the stressful process. Liam described his recruitment process as:

...very stressful...Instead of being more relaxed for everybody, I was traveling going to different camps and playing in different tournaments just trying to make sure I can find a place to play baseball. Then my commitment happened, and it was just a big sigh of relief for everything (Liam, 2018).

Leslie discussed how her status as a Division I commit increased her self-confidence and played a role in her ability to practice role modeling with her high school team. She said:

[My high school teammates] would be like, ‘wow she is going to play college softball at a Division I school. I want to do what she does...I want to see what she does... how she eats...how she works out...how she does in the classroom...how she communicates with her friends.’ It’s the little things that people pick up on ... they look up to you. I really became attentive to the little things that I did [after I committed] (Leslie, 2018).

For other student-athletes, the verbal commitment only provided a temporary relief from adversity with *coach or scholarship loss/change*, creating a new stressful experience. Five student-athletes reported that at various points throughout their committing process, there were various types of coaching changes and/or scholarship losses. Specifically, coaches took new coaching jobs at separate universities, or coaches quit their jobs completely causing student-

athletes to lose scholarships, putting scholarships in jeopardy, or causing them to de-commit to a specific program during the transitional period.

Cece, described her transition as especially challenging due to her late commitment to her current university basketball program. She stated:

I was previously committed somewhere else and then at the end of my senior year I decommitted from the college I was committed to because the coach got fired. So I was scrambling trying to figure out where to go. I visited here [current university] once or twice and I knew the coaching staff but I hadn't met the team. So I just committed off of knowing and trusting them...It was just very nerve-wrecking because I was going in completely blind and late... (Cece, 2018).

*Seeking social support for the commitment process* occurred from participants as they reached out to high school coaches, family, and peers. This was identified as necessary to navigate the adverse experiences. Jerry described a supportive relationship he was able to make while in high school with a collegiate student-athlete that was a member on the university athletic team that he decided to attend. He mentioned how being verbally and athletically affirmed by an older and experienced collegiate student-athlete increased his desire to want to play college sport. Jerry stated:

Playing with him and doing well gave me a lot of confidence. I felt ready to come into school here [college] and make a big impact...I felt really confident coming in here [college] (Jerry, 2018).

Supportive social dynamics such as one the described in Jerry's quote, provided a source of encouragement to student-athletes enduring this rigorous and stressful process.

## **New Academic Pressures**

*Difficulty balancing academics and sport* and *first-time academic disappointment* were described by student-athletes as an especially difficult part of their transition. *Difficulty balancing academics and sports* was depicted as a challenge of focusing on academic success in a new learning environment, while also committing and fitting in to a more intense and demanding athletic environment. Jess stated that “being a collegiate athlete is a lifestyle and not just about the sport. It’s about eating, sleeping, getting your stuff done, being as close to perfect as you can, [and] going to every class” (Jess, 2018). This statement highlights the various aspects of a collegiate student-athlete lifestyle that student-athletes are required to balance as soon as they arrive on a college campus. While student-athletes described this as a difficult balance, over time, they believed that achieving the balance relied on finding out who and how to ask for help academically and building effective study habits. Rachel, a women’s soccer student-athlete, stated “...managing school...the STUD [Student Athlete Study Center] really helped with that” (Rachel, 2018).

*First time academic disappointment* was a sub-theme characterized by the high school academic environment being easy and requiring less work than the college academic environment. For many participants, this difference contributed to performing poorly failing on an exam, assignment or course for the first time, causing stress and self-doubts. Liam discussed the contrast in study requirements and academic performance between high school and college when he stated:

...studying for a test in high school, you could literally read a textbook and be fine...Sadly I tried that on my first math exam and it didn’t go too well...work ethic is a skill I learned from my mistakes on the academic side (Liam, 2018).

## **New Sport Adversity and Pressures**

*New sport adversity and pressures* was characterized by student-athletes as difficulty adjusting to the new demands required in the sport. *Adjusting to the new and higher level-of-play* was a sport-specific challenge that many student-athletes described in their narratives. Student-athletes had a hard time performing well in practices and games at the beginning of their seasons, due to the speed and pace of the athletic training environment. Sarah shared her experience with this challenge when she said:

The freshman are always yelled at [by coaches and more experienced players] to play faster and you think you are, but you're not. You're playing fast for high school standards, but in college you have to be faster with [your] decisions. I basically used it [the criticism] as a way to get ready to be a college athlete and to get acclimated to the game because it's so different (Sarah, 2018).

Student-athletes also described the new surprising feeling that collegiate sport was made to feel job-like and brought a new emphasis on a “*need to win*” culture. This unique culture was framed as an adverse challenge exclusive to student-athletes. Sarah stated:

In high school, yeah, we wanted to win, but there is a whole new meaning to that when you get to college. It's not that you want to win, it's that you have to win. It's like you give your life to win the game (Sarah, 2018).

The *physically exhausting strength and conditioning regiments* were a new and exciting challenge in the first-year student-athlete experience. Ann, a women's dive student-athlete, stated:



I feel like I learned a lot in the weight room too because I had never done weightlifting before. Just learning to do that stuff was...crazy. I wish I would've done weight training before I came here [college] to be prepared (Ann, 2019).

Additionally, *increased anxiety with performance* was identified by many athletes as increased performance expectations were presented to them at the college level. Student-athletes described past struggles with anxiety resurfacing throughout the uncertain transition as well as new nerves and apprehensions with new performance and practicing demands providing challenges. Ann, a women's dive student-athlete, stated:

When I got here [college], I was having some issues with diving [because] in high school, I didn't dive a lot. I had a whole bunch of mental blocks, but I was like, 'you're not allowed to have those you're in college.' I developed a new mental toughness that was like, 'this is real, you can't not go.' I didn't really think about it. I would throw whatever [dives] he [coach] told me to do. That was new, which was really good because it helped me improve a lot. I've always been that in-my-head type of person, like, 'oh my gosh I'm scared to do it', but when I came here [college], I developed a more brave mindset (Ann, 2019).

*Playing time and perceived talent discrepancies* among college teammates was a sub-theme that many student-athletes described as a sport-specific challenge to their transition. Many student-athletes described how hard it was to earn playing time in competitions and that it was not an expected part of their transition. Sarah discussed her lack of playing time and said "In HS I was a hot shot soccer player and now [in college] I barely see any time" (Sarah, 2018). Sarah referred to moving from the "big fish in a little pond" to a "little fish in a big pond" as she was

used to being a consistent contributor within her sport in the high school setting, but quickly was not given the opportunity to contribute once in the college sport setting.

Lastly, *physical setbacks/injuries* were described by student-athletes as influencing their perceptions and appreciation of sport and life. Liam discussed how an injury to his thumb effected his mindset by saying, “I definitely learned from tearing my thumb. [I learned] that injuries happen and I can’t let that be a setback for me. I can’t let that be a mental block for me” (Liam, 2018). Jerry discussed a challenging back injury and stated:

It’s challenging to have an injury... I work so much harder now [after the injury]. Outside of golf and in the classroom... they go hand in hand. I have this injury. I don’t know what I can do with this injury (Jerry, 2019).

### **Navigating Life Adversity**

Various student-athlete participants discussed adverse personal life experiences that had a tragic outcomes during the two-year transition period. These experiences included relationship breakups, parent divorce, personal health issues, family health concerns, and the death of a parent. For example, Rachel believed the tragic loss of her mother forced her in to “growing up quickly”. She stated that “there was a lot of self-regulation...that I developed in terms of setting my own goals and trying to accomplish things [now that my mom is gone]” (Rachel, 2018). She went on to discuss how sport was her “getaway after everything had happened [mother’s death]” Jess also discussed a form of life adversity that she experienced when she went through a “heartbreaking” breakup with her significant other and how it negatively impacted an important upcoming sport performance. She said:

...he [significant other] broke up with me the day we left for conference...two days before our meet. I was heartbroken and really upset about it. At the training day for conference, I was not being a good teammate. I was throwing a tantrum (Jess, 2018).

### **Developmental Outcomes From Unique Environmental Adversity**

The daunting *recruiting and committing process*, *new academic pressures*, *new sport pressures and adversity*, and navigating *life adversity* combined and facilitated in the growth of psychosocial skills that student-athletes recognized as being important for sport performance and in other life domains. There were significant developmental outcomes that participants identified to have acquired or strengthened through their unique experiences laden with adversity.

Intrapersonal skills that student-athletes identified were self-confidence, mental toughness, resiliency, perseverance, adaptability, integrity, focus, and commitment. Interpersonal skills that student-athletes identified were managing peer-peer pressures, conflict resolution, humility, and the ability to know how to ask for help. On reflection of these adverse experiences across domains, participants believed that sport provided a valuable outlet to direct their attention and a social context that provided avenues and opportunities to ask for help and reliable access to social support. Lastly, cognitive and behavioral skills that the student-athletes identified were work ethic across multiple domains, goal-setting, self/emotional-regulation, time-management skills, communication skills, organizational skills, leadership skills, and effective study techniques.

### **Idiographic Story of Development From Unique Environmental Adversity**

To explain the experiences of, and development from environmental adversity during the transition to college sport, one idiographic story is presented below. This represents Leslie's challenging transition that highlights some of the key aspects of this category.

**Too cool for school.** Leslie is an outgoing women's softball collegiate student-athlete who lives and breathes softball. She started off describing her final year of high school by saying that she did not feel challenged in any way. School and softball were coming easy to her and she found herself coasting through. Leslie is from a small town in a Midwestern state and graduated with a class of 86. According to Leslie, being a Division I commit was "a big deal" in her town as not many athletes made it to such a level. Softball was a breeze for Leslie as she would game after game never seeing a challenge. Her dad influenced her to set individualized and challenging goals for herself so that she would be push herself further in games than she may have necessarily needed to. After her final year of high school ended and she continued the transition in to college, she soon realized that it would no longer be a breeze.

Leslie described how she initially thought the hardest part would be the difficult strength and conditioning workouts and the overall physical demand that softball would require from her. The biggest challenge for Leslie throughout her transition, however, was adjusting to the differences in academic standards from where she attended high school to where she attends college. She discussed how her grades took a hit early in her first year of college and how she was not sure how to fix it. She went on to discuss her academic challenges by saying:

[I was] not getting the grades I thought I would in college. I never really knew how to study. I didn't know how to apply myself to actually hard concepts. I think that was probably the hardest transition even with the hard workouts. It really strained me mentally and emotionally... making that adjustment. I think academically is where I didn't expect to get hit so hard with learning how to study and form study habits (Leslie, 2018).

Leslie went on to say that although she endured a difficult first semester and year, that she is “on the rebound now”, utilizing the University’s study center and has now learned how to effectively study; setting herself up nicely for academic success as she continues to study public relations.

### **Changing Social Dynamics**

Student-athletes described specific changes in their social dynamics and relationships during the transition from high school to college sport and life as being influential in their personal growth and development as a student and an athlete. This theme represented the multi-faceted social element of the student-athlete’s transition in to collegiate sport as the student-athlete managed *evolving coach-relationships, continued parent involvement, previous and new peer-focused relationships*, and the decision to *lead or not to lead*.

#### **Evolving Coach-Relationship**

Relationships with coaches, both past and present, were described by student-athletes as particularly important during the transition from youth sport to college sport. *Coach conflict* involved disagreements between new coaches by student-athletes, and through this circumstance, student-athletes described learning life skills such as managing conflict or disagreement with an authority figure, often for the first time. For example, Sarah, a women’s soccer student-athlete, transitioned in to a collegiate soccer program and developed a dislike of one of the program’s coaches. This conflict resulted in her ability to respectfully confront her coach and work on solutions to mend the relationship. In discussing this conflict, Sarah went on to say,

[I learned that] I need to deal with things... after a whole season of complaining...and literally crying over it to my parents and then finally dealing with it. Dealing with things

for my mental state. Dealing with things for myself. That's the biggest thing that I've learned (Sarah, 2018).

*Coach support* was characterized by maintaining the supportive social relationship with previous and current athletic coaches. Student-athletes believed that these supportive coach relationships aided in their ability to effectively learn and track goal-setting skills, increased perceived mental toughness, and increased sport confidence as they transitioned in to collegiate sport. For example, Liam, a men's baseball student-athlete, highlighted how his relationship with a previous coach helped create a new and unique emotional support that maintained and developed confidence.

One of my [former] coaches was very good with the psychological part of sports ...I usually give him a call every couple of weeks just to talk to him...he always gave me good tips and a good foundation on how to stay positive and to have a good mental mindset on not just baseball in general, but in life (Liam, 2018).

The personality traits of coaches and their *coaching/communication styles* were identified as having a direct impact on student-athletes developmental transition. Leslie, a women's softball student-athlete, discussed how consistent verbal feedback after a mistake, alongside the caring, coach support, helped her develop a mental toughness to overcome and move on from her mistake.

...especially here [college] because it's kind of intimidating with a new coach. They're different when you get recruited versus when you get here. But having a tough skin when they yell at you or when they criticize you. It's in a way that you know that they care. So, if you get yelled at or if something doesn't go well and someone points it out to you I

kind of just realized it's because they care and they want you to get better so you don't take it personally (Leslie, 2018).

Additionally, student-athletes described that if they liked the coach's coaching style and were performing well, that there was an increase in sport enjoyment. Ron, a men's golf student-athlete, discussed a series of poor golf performances, and because of this, his decision to hire a new personal swing coach. Ron said "I got a new coach [and] I actually still have him today. [The coach] changed my swing around [and I] just came off the best summer of my life, playing well again" (Ron, 2018).

### **Continued Parent Involvement**

Relationships with parents was another important component of student-athletes transition in to college sport. Participants described how parents reminded them of, and reinforced their *instilled lessons, values, and morals* when they experienced the transition to college. Specifically, parents reminded student-athletes that they possessed foundational life skills such as human kindness, knowing how to reach out for help, work ethic, accepting of one's mistakes, and possessing high standards for self. Ben, a men's track and field student-athlete, discussed his mother's support in a challenging way. His relationship with his mother and her consistent reminder of his life skills, was key in helping him accept his mistakes in college sport, despite no longer living within the same household. He said, "my mom kind of yelled at me for that [getting angry after a poor sport performance] because she said that's not how we raised you. You're supposed to be a good sport" (Ben, 2018). He went on to describe how this vital moment was memorable in the development of his ability to effectively accept and cope with his mistakes. Tom, a men's tennis student-athlete, attributed his high academic self-expectations as being instilled in him by his parents when he stated that "My parents were hard

on me and because of that, [I know] that I won't be happy unless I do well in school. That's all that matters right now" (Tom, 2018).

*Unconditional parent support* was a maintained source of encouragement to student-athletes as they experienced a newfound distance between themselves and their parents. Jess discussed significant changes in her social networks during the transition and stated that consistent unconditional support from her parents was critical in her ability to self-regulate during particularly difficult situations. She said:

[My mom] was really good at saying 'okay, let's sit down and write out everything and keep control of these things; and when things start to get overwhelming, to figure it out.' I've done it a couple times on my own now, being in college. Because there are times when it feels like everything is falling apart and everything isn't going to be okay and she was good at being like, 'we can make this okay.' (Jess, 2018).

### **Previous and New Peer-Focused Social Dynamics**

Student-athletes highlighted the changing and evolving relationships with friends and teammates as something they had not experienced prior to this transitional experience. The need to *maintain peer-based social support* throughout their transitions was recognized, especially during times of adversity. Sarah stated, that despite the challenging transition, social support from peer-relationships was a consistent and critical factor.

When I was younger...my coach would always tell me that when I get to D1 soccer, no one would be friends on the team, it's a job, and that they wouldn't be my best friends, but that's not true at all. The one thing that stayed consistent throughout all of soccer is that my teammates are my best friends. I wasn't expecting that coming in because I was



told it wasn't going to be that way so I was prepared for it not to be, but then it was (Sarah, 2018).

*Peer-conflict and confrontation* was an experience that student-athletes were often faced with, especially in the uniquely competitive collegiate sport environment. This challenged and required student-athletes to develop interpersonal conflict management skills. Jess stated:

...if you have a problem with someone you need to address it. Maybe not right away when you're feeling emotional, but the less people you talk about it with that aren't involved, the better it will get. You need to learn how to go up to people and be like, 'we need to talk about this,' ... They're your teammates whether you like it or not. You don't have to be best friends but you have to be able to work it out and be able to be in the same place at the same time. And just take care of yourself (Jess, 2018).

The final peer-focused social dynamic that student-athletes described as especially specific to their transition in to college sport was the *emphasis placed on the team rather than the individual*. Donna, a women's dive student-athlete, believed that being a part of a college dive team (in comparison to a high school dive team) taught her the importance of social support in sport, as well as respecting others and having a selfless, team-first mindset. She highlighted this idea when she stated:

A big change I guess I would say would be the team spirit. Even in my club, we were a team, but we were not that close. We never did [team] bonding exercises or stuff together because it's an individual sport. You're not expected to be on a team as a diver. But that's something I was looking for when I came to the US, because in my club everyone was kind of fighting each other and I didn't want that. I wanted a team. So that was good. I really feel close to the team [in college] (Donna, 2019).

## To Lead Or Not To Lead?

Student-athletes reflected their leadership skills and roles during the transition, and collectively described the challenge of balancing the decision of when and how to be a leader. Specific sub-themes included experiences of *refining definitions leadership*, *shifting from a leader to a follower*, and *observing and critiquing leadership in teammates*. This unique piece of adversity is specific to student-athletes because of their involvement within a sports team and the pressures to quickly adapt to their respective teams. Specifically examining the element of leadership, this adaption often requires moments for first-year student-athletes to speak up and offer input, which was a daunting task for many.

Every student-athlete reported *refining definitions of leadership* from their previous youth or high school sports experiences. They believed that through their team captain status on previous teams, they were experienced in leading in some capacity. Various types of leadership that the student-athletes mentioned were vocal leadership, leading by example, and role modeling. Rachel discussed role modeling specifically when she stated "...you're in a leadership position, everything you do is seen and looked at through a magnifying glass" (Rachel, 2018). However, as student-athletes transitioned into their new program, they realized that sport leadership in college required much more of them than previous sport leadership roles in high school. Ben discussed this unique challenge when he said "It [college] showed me what being a leader is really like and what the feeling of being a leader should feel like. It showed me that I want more" (Ben, 2019).

Student-athletes reported that *shifting from a leader to a follower* provided unique challenges. Specifically, going from a youth or high school sport setting where they held leadership positions, to entering the college sport setting where some did not have leadership

positions, was especially challenging. April discussed her experiences navigating this sub-theme when she stated:

As a leader my freshman year it was hard coming in because I had [an upperclassmen] who was a junior and she was a big personality... That was a big difference from high school into college. I think the biggest difference is I know that everyone is always going to show up and do their job to the best of their ability. Leadership [in college] is more of a supporting role and being supportive towards that... I think what I've learned from last year [high school] and especially coming into this year [college]. You need to be a rock. You can't break. You have to be that person that's always there... If they [teammates] need to lean on me mentally, then they can do that because I'm that person that's there all the time and capable of taking whatever pressures that needs to be released from them (April, 2019).

Another unique challenge surrounding leadership that many of the student-athletes described in their narratives were *difficulties leading because of lack of collegiate sport experience*. This challenge especially showcased itself when first-year student-athletes' positions within their respective sports teams (e.g., a setter in volleyball, a goalkeeper in soccer) required more of a vocal leadership presence than compared to other positions within the sports team.

This experience was highlighted when Rachel stated:

[During my] freshman year, [I thought] 'I'm not going to be the leader of the team. I don't know what's going on. How am I supposed to lead this?' So that was a new experience for me, but I learned a lot from it. I'm a vocal person on the field, but I was very quiet at first because I needed to learn what I could and couldn't say without stepping on people's toes. Were people's toes stepped on? Yes, and I learned that that's

okay...That's the thing with leadership that I struggle with: it's okay to tell people what to do. It's okay to not be liked, which is something I struggled my freshman year with and still am...working through that in terms of leadership and being able to manage that this is business on the field. You don't have to like me afterwards but we're here going for the same goal. I'm doing this because I want us both to be the best we can be (Rachel, 2018).

Lastly, *observing and critiquing leadership from teammates* was an approach that student-athletes described to help them learning what good leadership was and was not. Student-athletes described experiences in observing good and bad leadership in their upperclassmen teammates and critiquing those behaviors to help them in the future. For example, Ron described his observations and critiques on his golf team, resulting in key takeaways on how and how not to lead.

It's [about] what a good leader is and what a good leader isn't. We had a kid on the team last year...and we'd hang out all the time. He was a good role model. He was really smart and took care of his business. [He] did everything right. You just saw what a good leader was in college. We had another senior...he's not exactly what you would call a leader. He was really self-centered... He played good golf and all, but the leadership wasn't quite there with him...He would be perfectly okay if the team sucked but he played well. That's not exactly what you want on a team. Golf is such an individual sport, and we're all individuals out there, but our scores together come to be a team...You need a bunch of guys that care about their team more than themselves (Ron, 2018).

## **Developmental Outcomes from Changing Social Dynamics**

Collectively, these experiences of maintaining *peer-based social support*, *managing peer-conflict*, *emphasizing the team rather than the individual*, and *deciding to lead or not to lead*, facilitated the growth of psychosocial skills that student-athletes recognized as being important for sport performance and in other life domains. The main developmental outcomes, specifically intrapersonal skills, that participants said to have acquired or strengthened through these changing social dynamics were resiliency, mental toughness, an ability to accept one's circumstances, and self-confidence. The most identified interpersonal skills by student-athletes, in regard to the changing social dynamics, were conflict resolution between peers, parents, and coaches as well as the maintaining of social support from friends and family during difficult times. Additional interpersonal skills that were specific to leadership that student-athletes identified were role modeling, vocal leadership skills, and a willingness to be led. Lastly, goal-setting, work ethic, and self-regulation were three cognitive and behavioral skills that student-athletes believed to have gained through the unique evolution of their social dynamics as they transitioned from high school sport to college sport.

## **Idiographic Story of Development From Changing Social Dynamics**

To explain the experiences of, and development from changing social dynamics during the transition to college sport, one idiographic story is presented below. This represents Sarah's challenging transition that highlights some of the key aspects of this category.

**Coach chaos.** Sarah grew up playing high-level club soccer ever since she could remember. She recalled her transitional period from high school to college as being especially challenging beginning with a poor relationship with her club coach. As her final season in club soccer was underway, she began to disagree with several of the coach's decisions in how

practices, games, and interactions with players were handled. Sarah endured the majority of the season without confronting her coach with her bottled frustrations, however in retrospect, Sarah regrets that decision. As the long and unenjoyable season neared the end, Sarah's bottled emotions overflowed after a tough loss and she made it clear to her coach with how unhappy she was.

Sarah's parents were unhappy with how she handled this adverse situation and heavily encouraged her to reach out to her coach to attempt to preserve the relationship. Fast forwarding to her first year in college, Sarah had a similar negative relationship with a college coach. This time, however, Sarah decided to handle the situation differently due to the similarities in the previous situation. Sarah respectfully approached her collegiate coaching staff with her concerns and resolve was reached. In discussing what Sarah learned from this experience, she stated:

[I learned that] I need to be myself and I need to deal with things...after a whole season of complaining to the other goalkeeper and literally crying over it to my parents and then finally dealing with it. Dealing with things for my mental state. Dealing with things for myself (Sarah, 2018).

This statement highlights that although Sarah faced difficult relationships with her coaches, she was able to learn how to respectfully navigate confrontation with authority figures.

## CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

This study sought to understand the psychosocial developmental experiences of first year student-athletes as they transition from high school sport to college sport. Specifically, this study examined the experiences and challenges first year student-athletes believed were influential to their psychosocial development during the transition from youth sports to college sport; and (2) how their perceptions of self-concept, psychological skills and life skills evolved during the transition from youth sports to college sport.

The narrative thematic analysis revealed that student-athletes' transition into emerging adulthood within a collegiate athletics context was a challenging experience that triggered or supported the development of self-concept, psychological skills, and life skills. Student-athlete experiences were identified across three main categories. First, the thirteen narratives depicted the development of participants as culturally constructed emerging-adult-student-athletes. This profile highlighted the complex nature of the student-athlete transition and was characterized by the emergence in to adulthood (Arnett, 2000) and forming their athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). Second, student-athletes provided evidence that various forms of environmental adversity, unique to student-athlete experience, shaped how they developed their view of self and skills for sport and life. This transition showed new forms of adversity that student-athletes had not faced before and their perceived growth and personal changes through such experiences. (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Third, through evolving social dynamics with peers, parents and coaches, student-athletes were able to gain and/or strengthen a variety of psychological and life skills.

Collectively, the findings from this study emphasize the social and psychological complexity and challenges associated with the transition from high school sport and life to collegiate sport and life in the United States. Specifically, the premise of relational

developmental systems (RDS) frameworks, such as the bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979), are supported by the student-athlete narratives. Development was a function of the Process–Person–Context–Time model (PPCT), emphasizing how the person and environments change over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Participants were exposed to multiple contexts and systems over a distinct and influential time period, that shaped their perceptions of self-concept, psychological skills and life skills used to navigate the experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Of particular note, student-athletes' exposure to their new microsystem influenced their development. The macro-system refers to the cultural and social environment that an individual lives in (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). For participants in this study, the underlying cultural beliefs and expectations of student-athletes emerging from the United States college environment intensified their transition into emerging adulthood and triggered commitment to an athlete-focused identity. Student-athletes perceived that the culture of college athletics created pressure to perform to a high standard athletically and academically and be a role-model across contexts.

First year student-athletes in this study were 19 or 20 years of age. Consequently, their experiences reflected those anticipated in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood with newfound independence from parents, new peer relations and establishing their own values (Arnett, 2000). As revealed in their narratives, they were also encountering culturally-specific developmental challenges as emerging adults with high athletic abilities, reporting conflicting views of their ability, feeling the need to prove themselves, and associating quality of life with athletic performance. These findings represent the “big fish in a little pond” phenomena with perceptions of going from the best in their athletic environment to the bottom-end of their new athletic environment (Marsh & Parker, 1984). This phenomenon not only involved student-



athletes' perceptions of their talent and athletic ability, but also their leadership abilities on their respective sports teams, making this an especially unique challenge to student-athletes as they transition from youth sport to college sport. These findings supported previous research that student-athletes are susceptible to facing new academic pressures and adversity unique to their status as a student-athlete (Carodine et al., 2001; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Moreover, along with these new academic pressures came the potential for athletes to see the role of student and athlete as competing and actively neglect growth opportunities outside of sport (Lance, 2004).

As a result, the transition into this new microsystem left a conflicting paradox for student-athletes. Specifically, they were required to juggle cultural expectations and NCAA and university rules and guidelines, all while being immersed in a college culture strife with underage drinking, substance abuse, and other pressures that do not align with being a collegiate student-athlete. This paradox leaves an institutionalized norm of what it is to be, and how it is to act as a "student-athlete." A sense that student-athletes enhanced the degree to which they identified with the athlete role emerged, highlighting 'athletic-identity' (Brewer, et al., 1993), as the most significant piece of their identity and the most important part of their daily life. This highlights the possibility of student-athletes with a high athletic identity to potentially face the misconception of sport-related activities being more important than other opportunities. This is particularly concerning, considering that a narrow vision of one's identity can lead to difficulties such as lower career maturity (Houle & Kluck, 2015), and greater difficulty (Brewer et al., 1993) and anxiety as they transition out of sport (Lavalley, Grove, & Gordon, 1997).

Student-athletes did, however, frame their transitions in a developmentally positive way. While the results of this study showed that the majority of memorable and influential experiences

revealed by student-athletes related to adversity or challenges, they viewed them as experiences of psychosocial growth. A range of intrapersonal (e.g., mental toughness), interpersonal (e.g., conflict resolution) and cognitive-behavioral (e.g., goal setting) skills were reported. This reflects the development of resilience, as a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). As a developmental process, resilience occurs through cognitive appraisal and positive personality and social support (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). For these challenging experiences, most student-athletes in this study sought external resources and support in addition to relying on their confidence and motivation to implicitly develop psychological skills for sport and life.

The experiences of these student-athletes also align with evidence from talent development research (Gould et al., 2002; MacNamara et al., 2010), suggesting that athletes must establish appropriate support networks, deal with multiple obstacles and experiences of failure, and develop a range of psychological skills, to effectively progress to elite levels. Furthermore, this study was able to directly address Morgan and Giacobbi’s (2006) prescribed need to examine the critical holistic athlete development transition of collegiate student-athletes and highlights how the chronosystem (temporal changes) are particularly influential in athlete development. The study was able to extend our understanding of the multiple life and athletic considerations in the collegiate transition (Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006), with each level of the HAC being considered within this study. The narrative categories and themes incorporated transitions in athletic level (e.g., college athletics as *higher level of play*), psychological level (e.g., *forming athletic identity* and *emerging into adulthood*), psychosocial level (i.e., *changing social dynamics*), academic level (e.g., *new academic pressures*), and financial level (e.g., *the*

*daunting recruiting and commitment process*), and described how the specific challenges needed to be overcome.

Social support systems were recognized as being particularly influential throughout the student-athlete transitions, as important interactions in student-athletes microsystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Previous research has suggested that parents play a key role in each stage of athlete development, with the type of support changing over time (e.g., from direct involvement such as coaching to emotional support; Côté, 1999; Morgan & Giaccobi, 2006). It was interesting that this change, was not reflected in student-athlete narratives. Rather, parental roles and involvement were recognized as being one of the constant forms of social support (e.g., providing consistent, unconditional support). The results of this study align with the previous literature regarding emerging adulthood and the newfound focus on peer relations (Arnett, 2000), in that student-athletes social support systems were largely in an athletic context with most of their close friends being teammates.

Additionally, student-athletes have their own separate academic resources, coaches, athletic trainers, strength and conditioning staff, and counselling services specific to student-athletes that are all available for them to use at their convenience. This support is provided in an attempt to offer resources for student-athletes' holistic success and may inherently solidify student-athletes athletic identity as most of their social interactions are directly or indirectly related to their status as a student-athlete. It is possible that these social systems would play a role in how student-athletes are treated from a social perspective outside of a sport setting. As the results of this study showed, participants' status as a collegiate student-athlete was associated with feelings of being in a constant spotlight. Adding this spotlight perception to their sport concentrated social support systems combines to potentially cultivate a social environment where

student-athletes are treated differently to other students and may fuel the conception of the athlete-centered identity.

Finally, while the developmental outcomes from student-athletes highlighted personal growth, it is valuable to view this through a critical lens. That is, student-athletes developed resilience and skills that were applicable to specific challenges and experiences as life as a student-athlete, but that does not necessarily mean that the qualities and skills are transferrable life skills (Pierce et al., 2017). Far transfer refers to application of life skills in contexts are environmentally and culturally different to those in which the skills were learned (Perkins & Solomon, 1989). The student-athletes in this study described the skills that they used and developed to navigate the expectations for a student-athlete to perform to a high-level athletically and academically, to be a role-model, and to interact effectively with coaches and teammates. However, these skills were often wrapped within their perceived student-athlete identity. That is, participants were resilient and described the skills to overcome the challenges of a first-year college student-athlete. That does not necessarily mean that participants will be equipped to overcome the challenges of life outside of college athletics. To this point, participants provided evidence that they had difficulty applying the life skills in the academic context and assumed that these will be helpful skills later in life. This makes sense, considering that resilience is a context-specific quality (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013) and far transfer of intrapersonal and cognitive skills is difficult to achieve (Perkins & Solomon, 1989). There is growing evidence that student-athletes struggle to overcome the athletic-enclosed identity. If student-athlete psychological skills and life skills are encompassed within this athletic identity, we need to consider that many of these skills may not transfer as life skills, as many sport stakeholders assume (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014).

## **Future Directions for Research and Practice**

Although this study provides deeper insight to the types of challenges student-athletes face as they transition between levels of athlete development, a number of questions remain unanswered with future directions for research and practice emerging. Researchers should continue to examine the development of athlete identity as student-athletes transition in to the collegiate sport context and implications of the athletic identity on athletic and academic performance. Furthermore, studies could examine how this type of identity effects an athlete's experiences as they transition out of collegiate sport.

The results from this study should be used to develop educational resources for not only current and prospective student-athletes, but also parents, coaches, athletic directors, athletic trainers, strength and conditioning coaches, nutritionists, sport psychologists, and academic advisors. Any role that a student-athlete would find themselves seeking support from must be educated on the complex challenges that first-year student athletes undergo as they transition from youth sport to college sport, and not assume that student-athletes will be aware of - and able to - navigate the challenges themselves. Support personnel who work solely with collegiate student-athletes must be aware that they are embedded within a unique culture and should ensure that they expose first year student-athletes to experiences, mentors and peers outside of the athletic-realm to help to promote a balanced student-athlete identity. The results from this study provide evidence that there is a need for an educational resource to cultivate a smoother transition for these first-year student-athletes.

In creating supportive programming for student-athletes, a number of approaches should be considered. Crisis-prevention interventions may be effective to support transitioning athletes by helping them plan to mobilize coping resources, while crisis-coping interventions may help to

reducing anxiety, distress and maladaptive cognitions (Stambulova, 2017). Furthermore, both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies can be incorporated. Problem-focused coping refers to efforts that identify and solve a problem while emotion-focused coping decreases emotional distress and are utilized when the problem cannot be modified (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lastly, these educational resources must consider the literature on how to more effectively cultivate life skill transfer. Pierce and colleagues (2018) suggest that this is possible when student-athletes are provided an environment characterized by receiving support from mentors, being provided opportunities to transfer skills, and being engulfed in a climate of confidence. Support personnel should, therefore, incorporate explicit approaches to discuss and promote the transfer of life skills from the collegiate sport transition.

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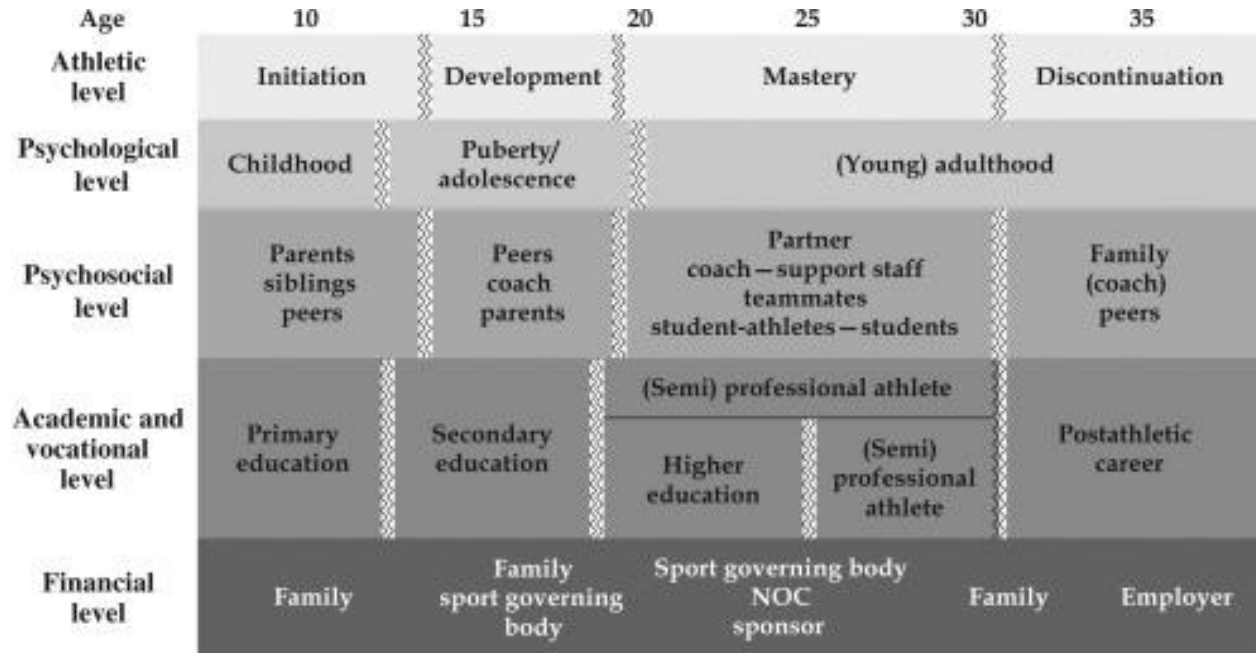
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APPENDIX A: FIGURES

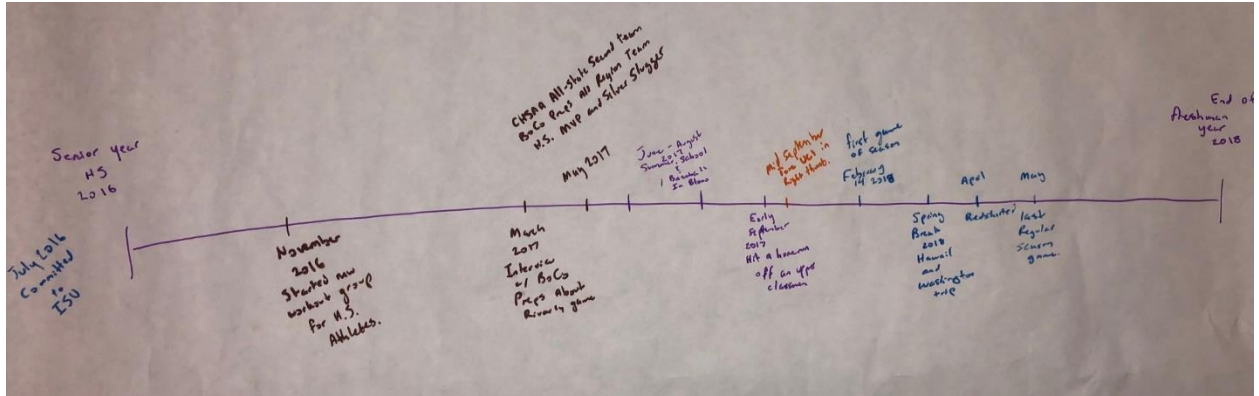
Figure A-1

Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavalee, 2004)

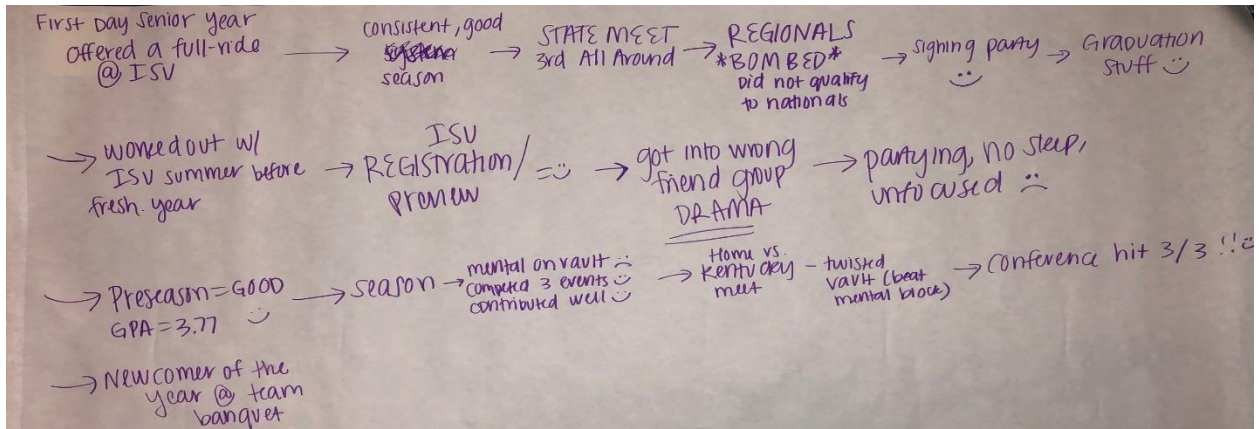




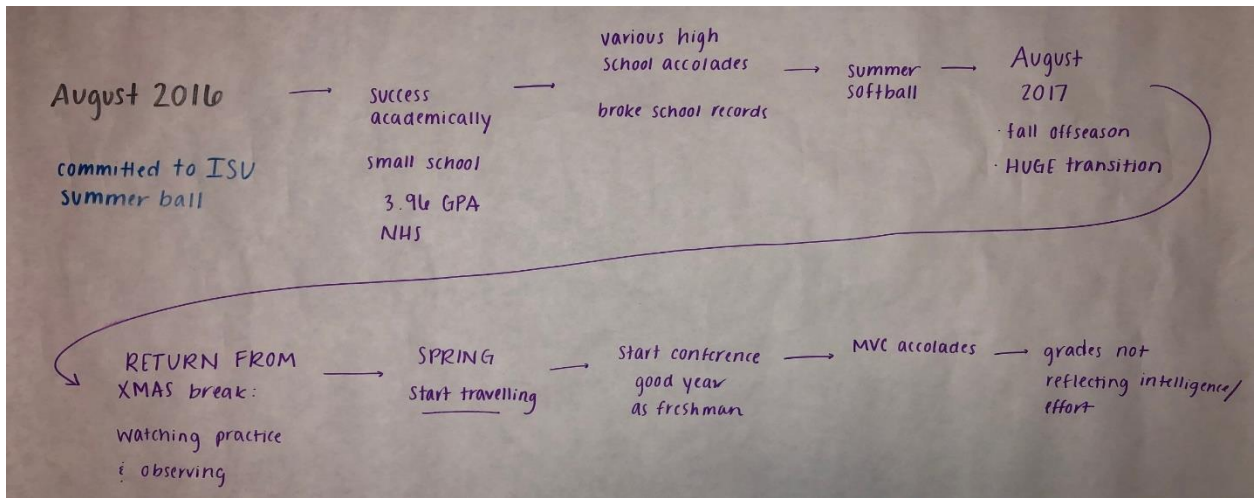
Liam



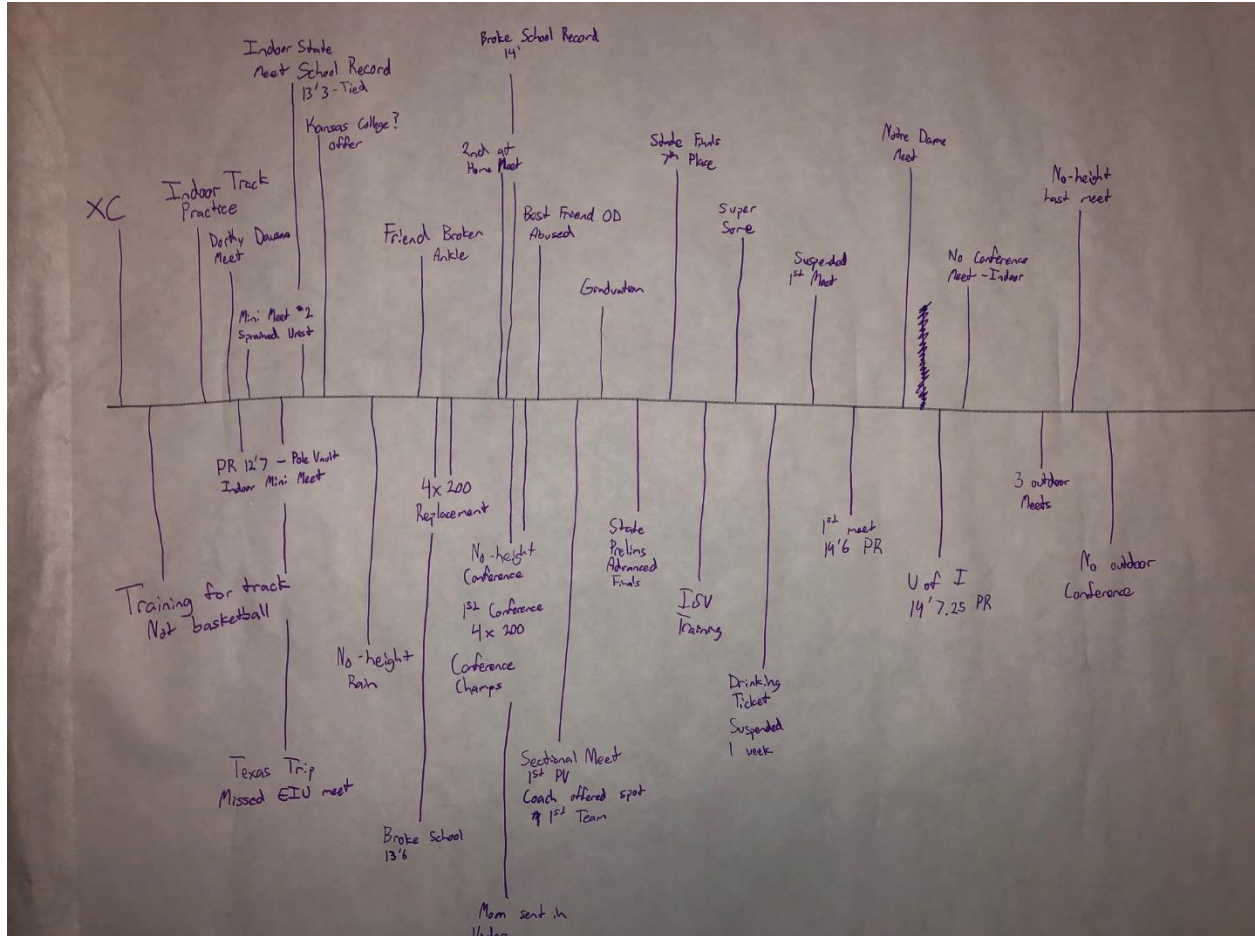
Jess



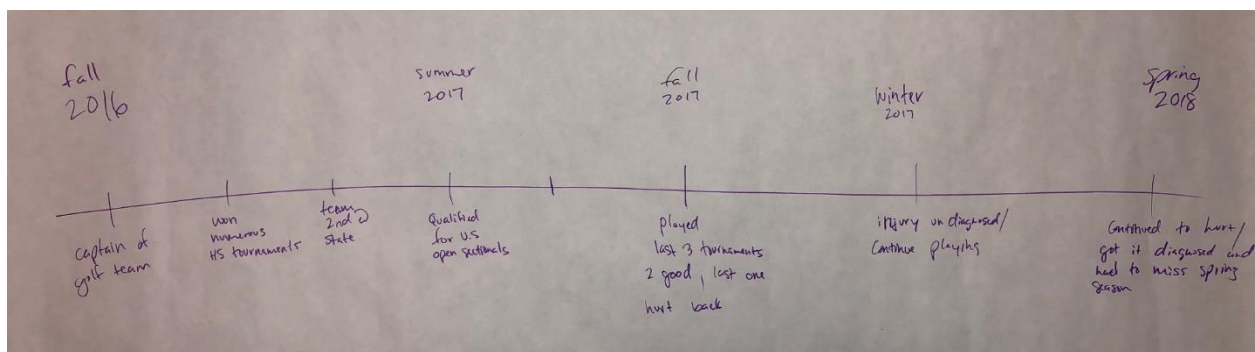
Leslie



# Ben

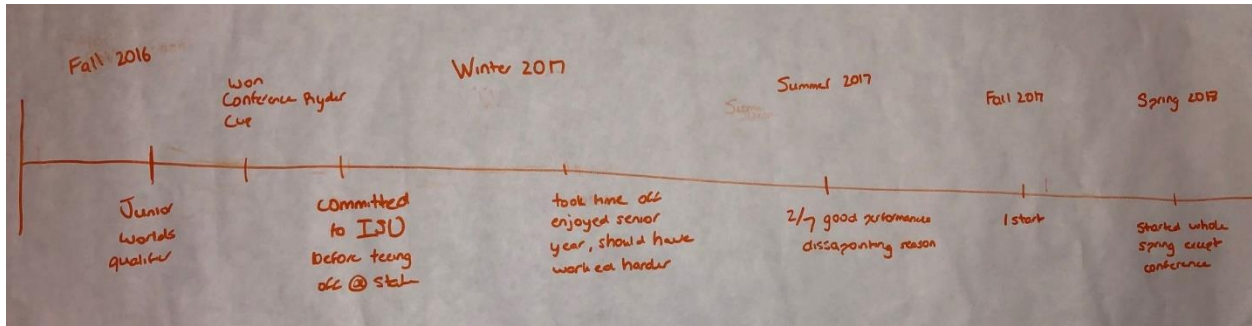


# Jerry

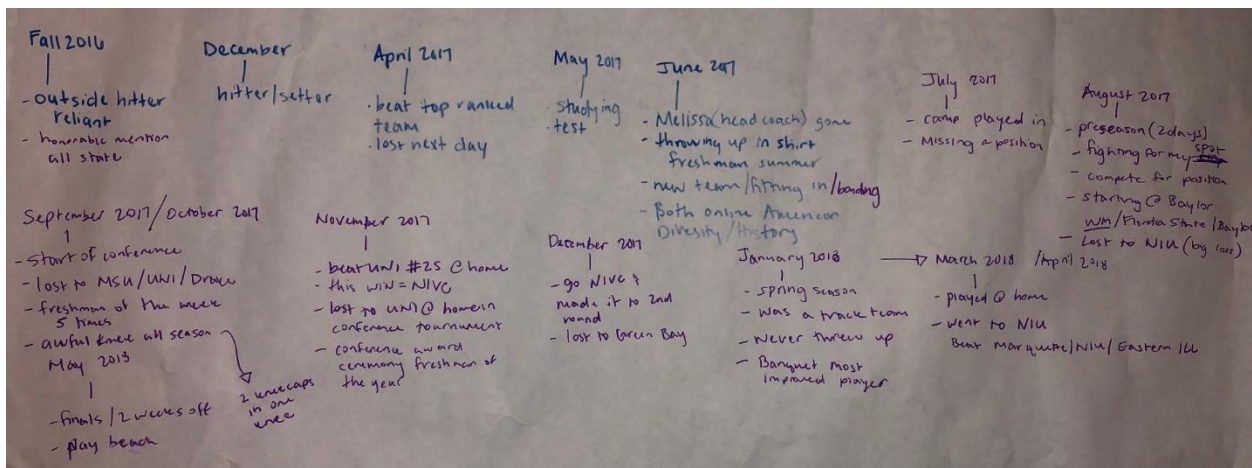




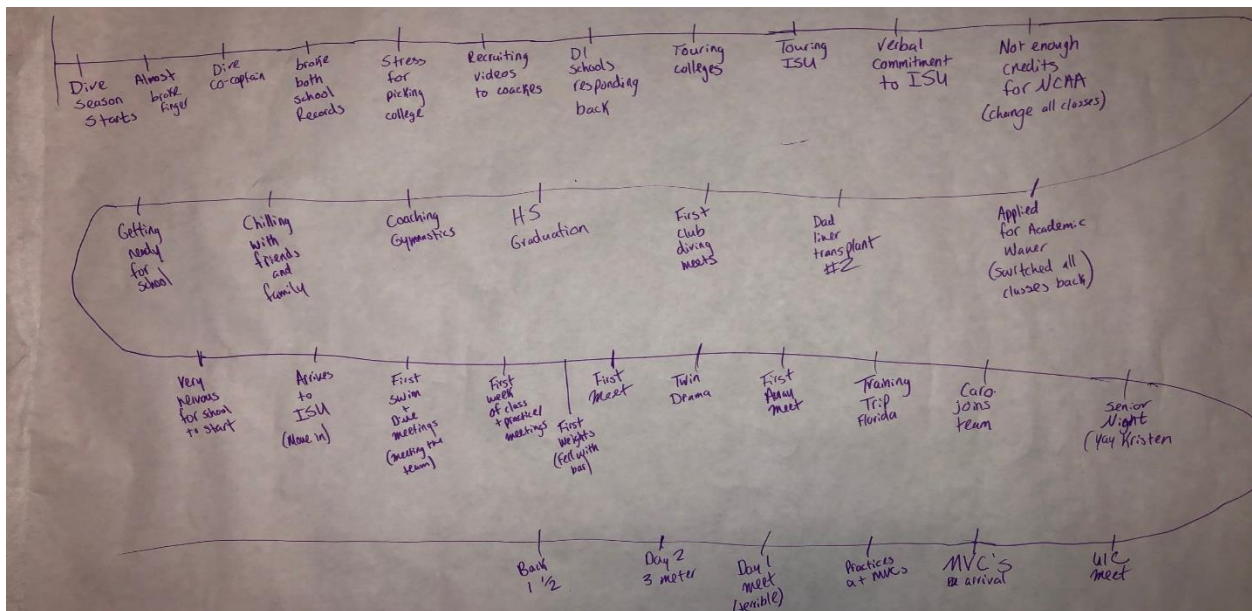
Ron



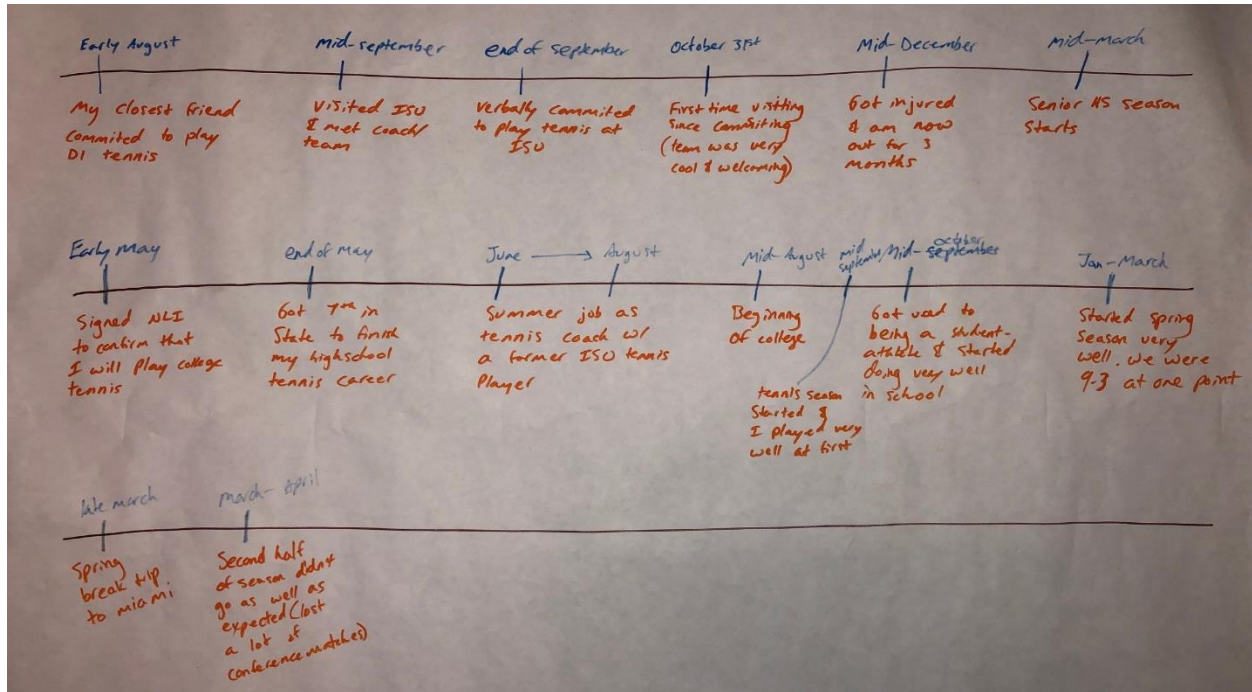
April



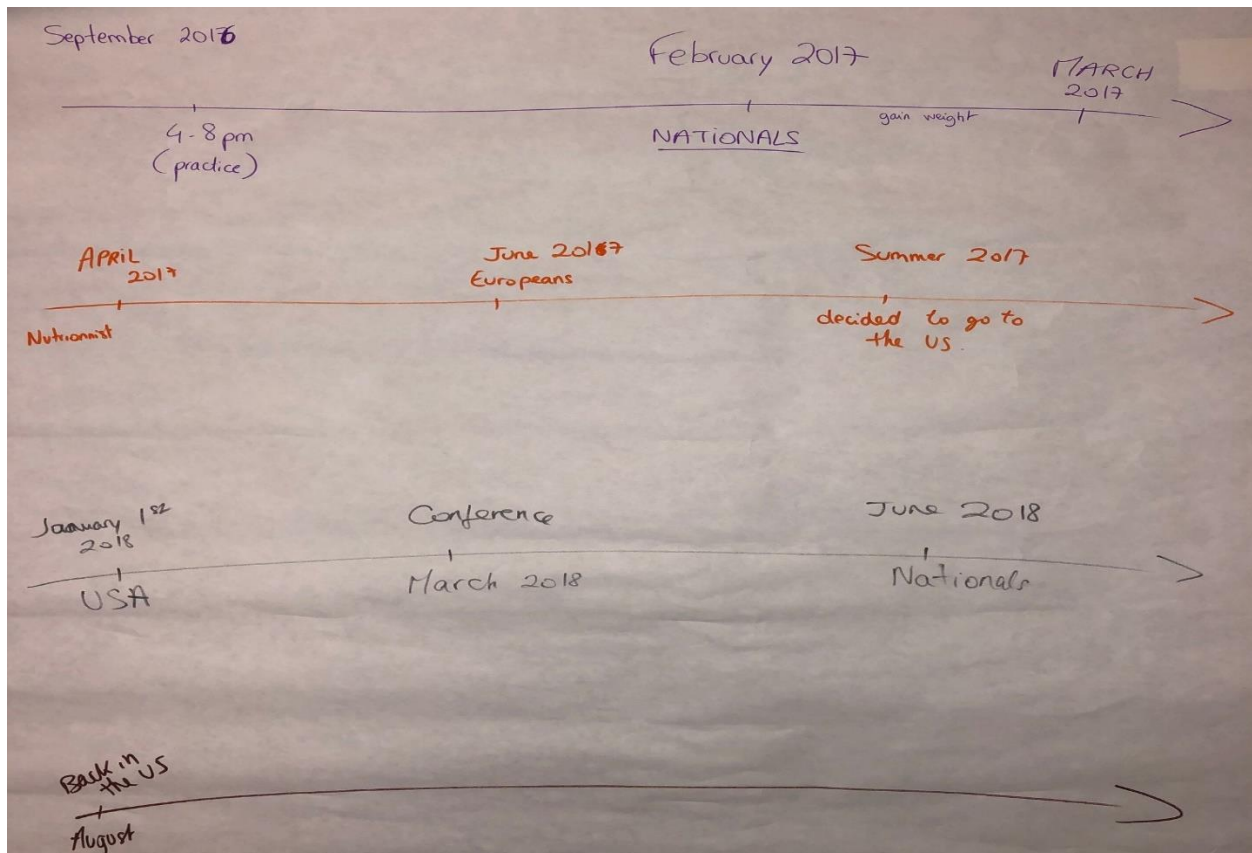
Ann



Tom



Donna



## APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Instrumentation:

The following interview guide is designed for student-athlete participants.

### **Create Athlete Timeline/Grand Tour Question:**

1. Please describe and depict key sport experiences and life events during the two-year transitional period (start of HS senior year to finish of first year college year)
2. Please identify and explain:
  - a. The most memorable events/experiences
  - b. Personal sport and life achievements
  - c. Positive and/or enjoyable experiences in sport and life
  - d. Negative and/or challenging experiences in sport and life
  - e. Unique or unexpected experiences

### **Timeline Experiences:**

3. Key high school/youth sport teams and experiences
  - a. Do you believe you gained psychological/mental skills from your youth/high school sport experiences? If so, what, when, and how?
    - Mental skills: “internal capabilities (e.g., motivation, goal setting, self-control) that help an athlete improve performance”
  - b. Do you believe you gained leadership skills from your youth/high school sport experiences? If so, what, when and how?
  - c. Do you believe you gained life skills from your youth/high school sport experiences? If so, what, when, and how?
    - Life skills: “characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and transferred for use in non-sport settings”
4. Key collegiate sport teams and experience
  - a. Do you believe you gained new or different psychological/mental skills from your collegiate sport experiences? If so, what, when, and how?

- Mental skills: “internal capabilities (e.g., motivation, goal setting, self-control) that help an athlete improve performance”
- b. Do you believe you gained new or different leadership skills from your collegiate sport experiences? If so, what, when and how?
  - c. Do you believe you gained new or different life skills (i.e., compared to those learned in youth/HS) from your collegiate sport experiences? If so, what, when and how?
    - Life skills: “characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and transferred for use in non-sport settings”

**Transitions:**

5. How has your college sport experience been similar to your youth/high school sport experiences?
6. How has your college sport experience been different to your youth/high school sport experiences
7. Have you experienced challenges or difficulties in your first year of college sport and life? If so, what and why?
8. For first year student-athletes who may struggle with the transition to college sport and life, what recommendations and advice do you have for them?
  - a. What additional skills and qualities do you wish you during this transition
9. Finally, some people believe that first year student-athletes struggle because they have to transition from being a “big fish in a little pond” in high school sport to being a “little fish in a big pond” in college sport. Please describe your thoughts and experiences with this idea

## APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT NARRATIVE PROFILES

*Coach Chaos:* Sarah grew up playing high-level club soccer ever since she could remember. She recalled her transitional period from high school to college as being especially challenging beginning with a poor relationship with her club coach. As her final season in club soccer was underway, she began to disagree with several of the coach's decisions in how practices, games, and interactions with players were handled. Sarah endured the majority of the season without confronting her coach with her bottled frustrations, however in retrospect, Sarah regrets that decision. As the long and unenjoyable season neared the end, Sarah's bottled emotions overflowed after a tough loss and she made it clear to her coach with how unhappy she was.

Sarah's parents were unhappy with how she handled this adverse situation and heavily encouraged her to reach out to her coach to attempt to preserve the relationship. Fast forwarding to her first year in college, Sarah had a similar negative relationship with a college coach. This time, however, Sarah decided to handle the situation differently due to the similarities in the previous situation. Sarah respectfully approached her collegiate coaching staff with her concerns and resolve was reached. In discussing what Sarah learned from this experience, she stated:

[I learned that] I need to be myself and I need to deal with things...after a whole season of complaining to the other goalkeeper and literally crying over it to my parents and then finally dealing with it. Dealing with things for my mental state. Dealing with things for myself (Sarah, 2018).

This statement highlights that although Sarah faced difficult relationships with her coaches, she was able to learn how to respectfully navigate confrontation with authority figures.

***Committed to Lead:*** Cece was a high-achieving basketball 1 student-athlete on the women's basketball team at her selected university. Cece was from a small town in a Midwestern state where she recalled the basketball culture at her school as "really good" and consistently competed for a state title. Cece recalled that she was never the most talented player on her team. She said that due to her perceived talent discrepancies between her and her teammates, it was key in in her desire to become a leader on the team. Cece believes she was always a leader on her various sports teams growing up and that in high school she began to consider herself a "natural leader." In discussing her high school basketball leadership role, she stated:

I've learned that being a leader you're not always going to be in the light. There's always going to be people around you, no matter how hard you work, who will be just naturally better than you. I learned that being a leader can happen in different ways than just being the star of the team (Cece, 2018).

Another challenge during Cece's transition in to college involved her recruiting and committing process. She was verbally committed to a different university but lost her scholarship when the coach at that university was let go. Cece was left scrambling in an attempt to find a college home as this fiasco occurred just a couple of short months before the academic year began. She selected her current university based off a previous visit. Due to this circumstance, Cece was especially nervous to acclimate to her new team and life. Cece discussed how her natural leadership abilities were put to the test due to this extenuating circumstance when she said:

I didn't expect to be a leader, but since I played so much it was kind of forced on me. You have to be a [vocal] leader because you play and you know the whole game and everything the coaches are asking you to do. I was kind of thrown into that position and

sometimes it was a little awkward because I was the new freshman and I didn't want to overstep anyone, so finding that balance and speaking up when it really needed to be addressed... That was something that was really hard and weird" (Cece, 2018).

This statement shows how the difficult pressures and adverse circumstances associated with her recruiting and committing process, coupled with a challenge to her perceived leadership abilities, aided in Cece developing an increase in her ability to lead vocally.

***Adversity Stricken:*** Rachel was a women's soccer player who grew up in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. Rachel described her home life as atypical as her parents were divorced at a young age. She discussed how balancing time with her father and mother – whom were several states apart - was a challenge for her. Rachel said that even in high school, she was always been driven by her GPA, trying to keep it at a perfect 4.0. One of the first challenges Rachel remembers during her transitional period was finding out the coach at her university of choice was taking another job at a different university. She was left with the difficult decision to go back on her near two-year college commitment to follow the coach, or to take the risk and stay committed to the university and play for a new coach. She chose to stay committed to her originally selected university. To add to this stressful moment in Rachel's life, in the fall of her final year of high school, received the earth-shattering news of her mother's death. Rachel then was faced with more difficult decision to make as to whether she should move out of state to live with her father or to remain where she had always lived to finish out high school. She chose to stay where she knew and was overwhelmed with the amount of social support she received from her friends and community. She decided to move in with a friend and her family, however that situation also did not turn out positively as tensions began to form between her and the family.

Throughout these adverse events that were simultaneously occurring in Rachel's life, she described soccer as her "one getaway". Rachel described the social support she received from her teammates as being vital for her during that time. She went on to describe how due to her instable home and personal life, being able to continue to compete at an elite level for club soccer was especially tough. She said that because of her situation as well as seeing a regular counselor, she was able to develop an exceptional ability to emotionally-regulate herself. She says she still used these skills today as she's now in college sport. Rachel additionally attributed her life challenges as cultivating a keen ability to be resilient and mentally tough. She highlighted these skills when she stated:

Resilience and mental toughness allowed me to take over the frustrations that I often have. I'm often very frustrated, but I've decided to put my head down and go for it anyways. It's something that has allowed me to be successful [even] when others fail (Rachel, 2018).

Rachel's unfathomable life challenges and adversity were able to teach her valuable life skills such as emotional-regulation, resilience, and mental toughness.

***Coach Connection:*** Liam, a men's baseball student-athlete from a Western state, started off his account by discussing the amount of stress he endured during his college selection process. Liam was previously committed to a different NCAA D1 school, but lost his scholarship due to inadequate grades and standardized testing scores. This reality was especially challenging for Liam as he had his hopes set on the opportunity for quite some time. After the lost scholarship, he realized that he needed to make some changes in certain patterns in his life, specifically in the category of work ethic. Because he now needed to re-showcase himself to college coaches, he stated that his sport work ethic experienced a significant increase. Similarly,



he believed his academic work ethic saw a significant increase as well, to ensure that this circumstance did not repeat. Eventually, Liam found a college home where he is able to balance both school and sport.

During Liam's transition in to college sport and life, he disclosed that he began to struggle with some sport-related anxieties. He decided to reach out to a prior youth sport coach of his who had helped him with similar struggles in the past. Liam said this about continuing the helpful relationship he had with his coach:

I usually give him [coach] a call every couple of weeks just to talk to him. He was the founding point of my mental and psychological side of baseball. I always talk to him and he always gives me good tips and a good foundation on how to stay positive and to have a good mental mindset on not just baseball, but in life (Liam, 2018).

Liam's statement shows the important social influence that coaches can have on athletes and how he used this relationship to develop the self-regulatory skill of knowing how and when to reach out for help.

***Under Pressure:*** Jess started off her story by saying that her first day of her senior year of high school was also the day that she accepted the last scholarship at her university. She went on to describe her final year of high school as fairly normal and uneventful, placing third at the State meet as being a highlight. College, however, was a different story for Jess. As she began to balance classes, sport, and a social life, her situation quickly became more difficult. She began to develop a mental block on her vault routine, therefore increasing performance pressures within the sport environment. On top of that, she was in the midst of social tensions among teammates and facing the aftermath of a recently terminated romantic relationship. Jess recalled that it was

her strong relationship with her mother that was able to help in overcoming these adversities. She described it nicely by stating:

My mom] was really good at saying ‘okay, let’s sit down and write out everything and keep control of these things and when things start to get overwhelming, to figure it out’. I’ve done it a couple of times on my own now being in college. There are times when it feels like everything is falling apart and everything isn’t going to be okay and my mom was good at teaching me how to make it okay (Jess, 2018).

This statement shows that the relationship with her mother was able to teach her self-regulation strategies when facing adverse situations that she was able to interpedently use on her own.

Jess went on to discuss her newfound independence once beginning college when she discussed various social pressure s that she faced. Jess described how for the first time, she was faced with pressures to join the college party scene and partake in underage drinking. She admitted to falling in to the party scene, but quickly realized the distraction that it caused and the various troubles it get her in. She described it as tempting because “everyone else is doing it”. She said “there are always going to be temptations in college. But you have to remember what you’re here for and what is important” (Jess, 2018).

This statement touches on some of the peer-pressures that college students are facing. Adding the student-athlete context on top of this makes for added pressures and consequences. Jess discussed how facing these pressures taught her how to navigate peer-pressure and to self-instill some personal values and morals that she did not have to consider before transitioning to college.

***Too Cool for School:*** Leslie is an outgoing women's softball collegiate student-athlete who lives and breathes softball. She started off describing her final year of high school by saying that she did not feel challenged in any way. School and softball were coming easy to her and she found herself coasting through. Leslie is from a small town in a Midwestern state and graduated with a class of 86. According to Leslie, being a Division I commit was "a big deal" in her town as not many athletes made it to such a level. Softball was a breeze for Leslie as she would game after game never seeing a challenge. Her dad influenced her to set individualized and challenging goals for herself so that she would be push herself further in games than she may have necessarily needed to. After her final year of high school ended and she continued the transition in to college, she soon realized that it would no longer be a breeze.

Leslie described how she initially thought the hardest part would be the difficult strength & conditioning workouts and the overall physical demand that softball would require from her. The biggest challenge for Leslie throughout her transition, however, was adjusting to the differences in academic standards from where she attended high school to where she attends college. She discussed how her grades took a hit early in her first year of college and how she was not sure how to fix it. She went on to discuss her academic challenges by saying:

[I was] not getting the grades I thought I would in college. I never really knew how to study. I didn't know how to apply myself to actually hard concepts. I think that was probably the hardest transition even with the hard workouts. It really strained me mentally and emotionally and making that adjustment athletically. I think academically is where I didn't expect to get hit so hard with learning how to study and form study habits (Leslie, 2018).

Leslie went on to say that although she endured a difficult first semester and year, that she is “on the rebound now”, utilizing the University’s study center and has now learned how to effectively study; setting herself up nicely for academic success as she continues to study public relations.

***Vaulting Towards a Career:*** Ben was a member on the men’s track & field at his university where he studies physical education. When asked to walk the researcher through his two-year transitional period, he immediately began to discuss how he performed at each of his track meets in high school; when he set a new personal record, where the meet was at, how he felt before and after the meet, and even interactions with teammates, family members, and coaches on the days of the meets. Ben played basketball and ran cross country most of his childhood, but did not begin to specialize in pole vaulting until his late high school years. He described how after he realized that he had a talent for this sport, he possessed an inner drive to continue to work hard at it every day. He described this motivation when he said:

I definitely think that my motivation came from the simple fact that I wanted to get better... it was so new to me and so much fun that I just wanted to get better at it and wanted to jump higher. It was just that internal drive, it’s hard to explain. There was just this fire inside that made me want to work super hard at it. Just keep going to get higher heights and keep getting better at it (Ben, 2018.)

Ben’s statement shows how his late start to the sport helped to provide that internal drive to increase sport work ethic. Continuing on the topic of work ethic, Ben explicitly discussed how work ethic as well as commitment learned from sport has directly impacted his work ethic in other areas of his life when he said:

I think commitment coincides with work ethic in the fact that if you truly want to get better, you have to put the time in and the work that is required to get where you want to go and get where you want to be. Not only in sports, but even in school. Say I had a class last semester that wasn't where I wanted it to be grade-wise, so I really had to put in a lot of time and effort into bringing that grade up so my work ethic has transferred in to my academics as well (Ben, 2018).

Continuing with work ethic and commitment, Ben also discussed how he has seen in an increase in self-confidence from sport that has manifested itself in his career choice of being a physical education teacher. When discussing his motivation to work hard and stayed committed to sport, he said:

[I have a] motivation to be the best vaulter, but also [motivation to be] one of the best PE teachers out there. Also, a confidence in the fact that I used to be, I wouldn't say scared, but I used to not be [confident]... I wouldn't want to go talk to random people. But now... I'm one of the first ones that will go up and talk to [a new teammate] and introduce myself and make sure they feel welcomed and know that they feel like they chose the right school. Also, I felt that that has really played a part in my classes. In some major classes for PE... I can tell the confidence that I have...I can really see the confidence in my lessons and that I'm not scared. I [now] have the confidence to go out there and teach a bunch of other college students that are even older than I am (Ben, 2018).

This statement shows Ben's perceptions of developed skills that he had acquired through sport and applied to non-sport.

***A Rude Awakening:*** Jerry, a men's golf student-athlete had an especially difficult first year of college golf. Jerry began his interview by recalling fun memories he had during his final high school year of golf. He reminisced on memories with teammates, making a run at the State tournament, and other various accolades that he received before graduation. He went on to discuss his decision to play golf in college and how his repeated sport success filled him with confidence, leaving him with the desire to want more success at the next level. He talked about a friend he made that was a then-current collegiate student-athlete and how this friend was a key influence in Jerry's decision to commit to the university he now attends. Not only was the social influence of Jerry's friend influential in the process, but the two played against one another for an entire summer with Jerry often winning. These results against a successful Division I collegiate student-athlete solidified Jerry's decision to commit. Jerry went in to his first year of college sport extremely confident in his golfing abilities. However, he was in for a rude awakening. In discussing college golf, Jerry said:

I feel like coming in here, I had such a good summer, that I almost expected it to be easier than it was getting in to that starting lineup... My transition of high school into college was not very smooth...there was a lot of pressure on myself and from the coach to play well. Because if you don't, you're just back out of the lineup (Jerry, 2018).

Jerry's underestimation of the level-of-play differences between high school sport and college sport made for a tough first college season. As if Jerry's situation was not hard enough, he suffered a back injury that sidelined him for a good portion of his season. He described the situation by saying, "[I] lost all credibility I had to myself of producing scores for the team that I had done [earlier in the season] (Jerry, 2018).

Continuing to discuss his injury, Jerry discussed how he felt under constant pressure from his coach to heal and to get back on the green. Jerry was very frustrated with the situation and struggled to keep positive. After several weeks of trying different treatment options, he was finally able to overcome the injury and return to play. In hindsight, Jerry learned a lot from his injury. Jerry described how because of his injury, his appreciation for sport is much greater. Jerry said:

It was challenging having that injury...I work so much harder now, outside of golf and in the classroom. They go hand-in-hand. My goal coming in to college was to play professionally...[but] after getting the injury, I don't know how certain that is. I work a lot harder in the classroom now in case that doesn't work out, I'll have a good degree in exercise science to fall back on (Jerry, 2018).

Jerry's account highlights some of the underestimation that student-athletes can have as they enter college sport. It is important, however, to note that through Jerry's adverse circumstance, he was able to develop an appreciation of a physically healthy body and was able to learn the importance of an academic work ethic.

***What Time Is It?:*** Ron was a men's golfer balancing sport and an ongoing political science degree at the university level. He described the beginning of his final year of high school as "frustrating", primarily due to the fact that he was uncommitted to a golf scholarship compared to most other collegiate golf-commits in his class. High school golf was fun for Ron, but he wished that the rest of his teammates and coaches took it as seriously as he did. He recalled not feeling required to put forth full effort because no one else did. He described some individualized goals that he set with a private coach outside of his high school coach, just to be able to add an extra motivator. Some of his goals were to qualify for an elite competition, place

in the top 5 in his state, and to sign to a D1 school. Ron finally made a commitment late in his senior year and continued with the transition in to college.

Once Ron arrived on campus, Ron described time-management as his number one challenge. He admitted to missing an entire team practice during the first week of preseason, because he had simply lost track of time. In describing this challenge, he said:

There's just so much responsibility that I never had [in high school]. 6:30 workouts Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Practices at 2:00 every single day. Classes [are] on top of that and studying. There's just so much going on freshman year that it's kind of overwhelming...that was just a life changer. I thought I knew what time management was until I got to college... When you have class and studying and team obligations, you have to make sure you get your stuff done. You don't want to slack off at times because then your whole day is messed up (Ron, 2018).

Ron's account shows how the difficult collegiate student-athlete lifestyle aided in his development of time-management skills.

***Competitor's Edge:*** April was a high-level volleyball student-athlete studying criminal justice at the university level. She began her narrative by describing how she played on one of the top club teams in her state as well as one of the worse high school teams in the state. This talent gap was especially hard for her as she transitioned from high school season to club season and vice versa. Similar to others' accounts, her recruiting and committing process was shaky as the coach that recruited her announced retirement from coaching, leaving April in a fog of her future college volleyball opportunities. Fortunately, the new coach chose to honor her scholarship and April moved to campus and began her first preseason.



As April endured preseason, she quickly realized that she would be a key starter on the team, rarely being substituted off the court during matches. Although she liked the responsibility, her position on the court required massive amounts of clear and concise communication. April was adamant that volleyball had aided in her development of communication skills. She described this perspective when she said:

I think one of the biggest things from [college] volleyball that I learned was communication and different ways to almost...[connect] people. Like if someone is not having a good game, the way you speak to them can encourage them or discourage them and I think in college it's one of the most important things since there's such high pressures in every single game. I definitely think communicating in general, especially depending on the personality of someone your teammate or people in the business world anything like that, can affect it...When I was younger and I would address an issue and I would be very direct with it. It would [often] get a worse response than even just a different tone of voice would've gotten. Now, I'll use a different tone of voice and get better responses out of that... If I'm in an argument with my parents or anyone, I'm able to realize what I'm saying and what they're saying and the differences in that. That's going to play off when I get a job and start my career eventually (April, 2019).

April's mentioning of communication going off the court to the "business world" as well as with interactions with her parents, showcases her perceptions of communication skills being acquired through sport and the potential to be applied outside of sport.

Continuing to discuss other highlights of her transition, April discussed her competitive mindset and how it has helped reach success in sport and life up to her current point in life. She also was a firm believer that this competitive mindset brought on through sport would be a skill

that would propel her to success in other areas of life, specifically a career path. April goes on to state:

I use that [competitive] drive more and apply it to everything. I want to get an internship now, so if I apply that too, then I'll be able to get the position that I hopefully want. It's little things like that. Almost using that competitiveness to take the initiative to do something in general (April, 2019).

April clearly believes that sport had instilled values in her such as communication skills and a competitive mindset that will help her succeed after college sport terminates.

***From Beam to Pool:*** Ann's story of her transition from youth sport to college sport was unique. Although a current member on the women's diving team at her university, she had never dived in to a pool until her junior year of high school. Ann's entire youth sport career was involved in competitive gymnastics. Ann's switch from gymnastics occurred for a few different reasons; mostly because the lifestyle that accompanies elite level gymnastics can quickly overtake the rest of a young gymnast's life. Ann realized that her enjoyment of the sport was no longer there due to its serious nature in addition to the gym's coaches and culture. She then decided to try out for her high school's dive team. She was immediately shocked at some of the sport differences, mainly being the more laid-back nature of her school's dive team versus elite level gymnastics. Ann described this difference nicely when she said:

I thought that was crazy that you could talk during practice and you didn't have to stand in line properly and you could mess around in the water a little bit in between turns. I learned to have more fun while doing a sport (Ann, 2019).

In reflecting back on gymnastics, she was appreciative of the life lessons that the rigorous sport instilled in her that she says she uses in collegiate dive now as well as in areas of life

outside of sport. Ann ranted about how in hindsight, she is so thankful for what gymnastics taught her. She eloquently touched on this topic when she stated:

I learned so much from gymnastics. I learned a lot about discipline from gymnastics. You could cheat during practice but you respected yourself enough, you had the discipline, I want to do it for myself. I respect my coaches. I would show up on time because if you didn't show up on time you would get a million rope climbs. They instilled 'don't waste other peoples' time', 'don't waste your own time', 'be there on time'. I really just learned everything in that gym. While everyone else was out having fun, we were in the gym... I think the best thing I learned from gymnastics was resilience and to never give up. I would literally fall of [the beam] twice in one meet and I'd still get back up and give my best effort which I think has carried on the most with me. Even if you're doing terrible or you mess up you have to get back up and try harder next time. I also feel like it taught me how to work together as a team (Ann, 2019).

Ann clearly believed that although rigorous, youth sport in gymnastics instilled in her valuable life and psychological skills to set her up for success as a collegiate diver.

***In The Business of Success:*** Tom was a high-achieving men's tennis student-athlete triple majoring in finance, insurance, and economics. Tom had much to say about his transition from high school in to college, specifically in the area of social dynamics. Tom started off by stating that his tennis teammates were his closest friends in high school and how that still remains true as he has now transitioned in to college, but with a new set of teammates. He described how a friendship with an older friend who went on to play collegiate tennis was a key influencer in his decision to pursue collegiate athletics. Additionally, he talked about his relationship with his coach by saying "my high school coach [was] one of the biggest reasons why I'm playing college tennis"

(Tom, 2019). His coach fueled him with confidence and praise and encouraged him to reach that next level.

Another key factor throughout Tom's transition, was his tendency and ability to set goals for himself. In sport, he set the lofty outcome goal of winning the state tournament. He believed that spending the majority of his life balancing sports and schoolwork, that setting goals was an effective way for him to succeed at both. He described his goal-setting ability when he said:

I'm someone who sets goals for myself and that's always been a big motivator for me.

Every step of the way I set a new goal and once I achieve one I just start another one.

That helps me stay motivated and feel like there's a meaning for all of it... I do the same thing with schoolwork, both academically and athletically (Tom, 2019).

He attributed his high standards for self to his parents. "My parents were hard on me and because of that, [I know] I won't be happy unless I do well... That's all that matters right now" is what Tom (2019) said when describing how his parents instilled values and expectations in him.

Tom is a firm believer that although challenging now, balancing and succeeding as a collegiate student-athlete will set him up for success as he enters the business world upon graduation. When asked how Tom so effectively balances all of his responsibilities, he replied by saying:

It's not really a thing I'm choosing to do it's more of a thing I have to do to be successful in college as a student athlete. I think that's a really big strength that will help me after college getting a job; knowing I played a college sport and having been successful with it. It shows that I have to be very organized with my scheduling... I have to have a better work ethic. I can't be lazy, because if you're lazy you'll fall behind and that's something

I've learned as being a student athlete and just being in college. It'll help me after college and outside of tennis and school overall (Tom, 2019).

Tom's perceptions of the important life skills that being a high-achieving student-athlete will instill in him are a motivator for him to succeed in not only academics and in sport, but also in his future career choice.

***The Land of Opportunity:*** Donna was an international student-athlete on the women's dive team at her university where she has chosen to major in psychology. For Donna, her transition was unlike any other as she not only was faced with the same differences as every other incoming collegiate SA, but also with the language and culture shock of moving to a new country by herself. Donna disclosed that one of the main reasons that she chose to leave her native country and pursue a collegiate diving opportunity was because the unique academic and athletic system that the United States offers with universities housing athletic programs. This is a trademarked opportunity to the United States that most other countries do not offer. Initially, Donna decided to stay in her native country and attempt to balance being a full-time college student while also diving for a club that was completely separate from her education. This became too difficult for Donna to balance as the two commitments were not made to intertwine.

Additionally, a deteriorating relationship with her club coach resulted in a decrease in sport enjoyment when she was training and performing. Donna was extremely nervous to move to another country and acclimate to a new country, team, and life. Donna believed that perhaps the most valuable skill that she has learned throughout her transition to college sport was communication. She described how sport was able to help her in developing her ability to communicate her current emotional and physical states when she said:

I would be tired [and] I would talk to my coach and be like, ‘hey I feel like today I can’t.’ So it [dive] helped me to express my feelings. Then when I would be with friends or other people in my life, I would know how to talk” (Donna, 2019).

Another key difference Donna described was the emphasis placed on team sport performance rather than individual sport performance, regardless of dive mostly being an individual sport. She highlighted this idea when she stated:

A big change I guess I would say would be the team spirit. Even in my club, we were a team, but we were not that close. We never did [team] bonding exercises or stuff together because it’s an individual sport. You’re not expected to be on a team as a diver. But that’s something I was looking for when I came to the US, because in my club everyone was kind of fighting each other and I didn’t want that. I wanted a team. So that was good. I really feel close to the team [in college] (Donna, 2019).

Donna attributed her transition to college dive as aiding in an increase her social support system compared to her team setting at home.