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Solidarity and camaraderie—A psychosocial examination of contact sport athletes' career transitions

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Abstract: When examining the difficulties contact sport athletes face in their career transitions, it is of serious value to investigate the unique role that the social experience of camaraderie and solidarity have had on the athletes during their careers. Consequently, the inability to recreate meaningful relationships after sport might play a significant role in shaping some of the difficulties—including psychological, motivational, emotional, and social struggles—that have been highlighted when considering the career transitions of this population. This paper examines the psychosocial dynamics of this loss by accessing qualitative research methods that evoke the subject experience of the athletes. When expressing accounts of their own lived-experience of this transition, participants often noted how difficult it was to recreate unique aspects of being a teammate—trust, sacrifice, resilience, fitting a specifically defined role, blunt honesty, and singular closeness—in their workplaces, life, and relationships after sport.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary Senecal received his PhD in psychology from the University of West Georgia in 2015. For the last three years, he has worked as a visiting professor of psychology at The College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA. During this time, he has taught courses ranging from Introduction to Psychology, History and Theory of Psychology, Abnormal Psychology, Sports Psychology, and Military Psychology—the Social Reintegration of Veterans. His research focuses on the social psychology of violence, the theoretical psychology of violence, and the career transitions of individuals who have retired from or been deselected from careers that exposed them to regular violent endeavors (in particular, contact sport athletes and military veterans). He is a current member of the Army Reserves and sports psychology consultant, as well as a former collegiate football player and former college football coach. He currently resides in Worcester, MA with his wife and two children.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Attention has recently been drawn to the difficulties former contact sport athletes make upon their retirement and career transition out of sport. A series of tragedies—arrests, suicides, and early deaths, among others—has opened space for personal testimony from former legends to candidly express the difficulties they face upon leaving sport. Research shows that many athletes struggle with the loss of strong relationships and support systems they experienced in team contact sports. This paper brings clarity to the nature of these social difficulties athletes may face with coworkers, bosses, and peers after leaving elite competition. Insights are offered to help the reader understand how athletes experienced relationships both in sport and after sport. Finally, analysis is offered on what healthy and functioning work relationships may look like for athletes, as well as how former athletes can assist in building teamwork, camaraderie, and accountability in the workplace.

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1. Introduction

Recent attention has been paid to the serious difficulties that former contact sport athletes may face in their career transitions out of competition. Much of the attention has been offered through the lens of neuropsychology and the discovery of the singular neuropathology chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in the brains of former contact sport athletes who have deceased (Stern et al., 2011). Beyond neurological research, there is a rather lengthy history behind the examination of athletic career transition and the psychosocial struggles that can be associated with this experience. A significant portion of this literature centers on the breakdown of an athlete's sense of identity in the midst of a career terminating (Beamon, 2012; Brewer, Van Raalt, & Linder, 1993; Petitpas, 1978; Whipple, 2009). Other psychosocial conceptualizations are offered that examine athletic retirement through the lens of aging (Rosenburg, 1981), dying (Lerch, 1984; Rosenburg, 1984), and factor analysis of subjective experience (Schlossberg, 1984). Despite the serious contributions of the research efforts in all of these fields, not enough weight has been placed upon analyzing the subjective lived-experience of contact sport athletes after athletic career termination. Accessing qualitative inquiry places the former athlete's lived experience at the center of the psychosocial lens of examination (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Giorgi, 1985; Hiles, 1999). In doing so, this research demonstrated that a significant factor contributing to the transition of leaving sport was the loss of camaraderie and solidarity with one's teammates had on one's career transition out of sport. This paper will explore the psychosocial effect that losing camaraderie can have on the career transition of former contact sport athletes by placing an emphasis on the lived experience of participants via the use of qualitative methods of analysis.

2. Relevant literature

2.1. Camaraderie studies

Research has investigated the psychosocial impact that the loss of camaraderie can have on former athletes during and as they transition from their athletic careers. Fuller's meta-synthesis (2014) of roughly 30 years of qualitative research demonstrates how, among several themes participants revealed as contributing to difficulties in career transition, the loss of camaraderie was difficult to manage for former elite-level athletes. Fuller cites several qualitative studies (Hinitz, 1988; Ingebritsen, 1996; Lally, 2007; Wilson, 2007) that speak to the range of difficulties athletes experienced and anticipated in their career transitions out of sport. He writes:

> Some athletes saw their retirement from college athletics as posing a threat to the positive feelings they experienced as being a part of a team. They feared that camaraderie felt with their teammates would not be repeated in other aspects of their lives. (Fuller, 2014, p. 6)

Specifically, athletes feared the loss of a unique connection that they had formed to teammates and attempted to be proactive in curbing any foreseeable deficit of solidarity. Now former athletes began to take explicit efforts to forge close bonds to a few teammates they did not want to lose contact with, acknowledging that the same level of connection to all teammates would prove too unwieldy.

Miller and Kerr's (2002) research demonstrates how student athletes often faced a triad of tension regarding the three facets of their life and experience: athletic demands, academic demands, and social demands. In this study, it was found that student athletes almost always first compromise social engagements for their athletic and academic requirements and that when a choice is to be made between athletic and academic demands, often athletic commitments will trump academic commitments. As a result of upholding sport over academic and social demands, a series of unintended consequences regarding the psychosocial development of the student athlete can occur. Most important to this study are how the student athlete might found his or herself with delayed identity development and a lack of role experimentation as a result of sacrificing academic and, especially, social demands. It seems possible that the social commitments and social cognition

demonstrated by the athlete as a result of univocal commitment to sport will continue to shape the way the individual perceives the quality of his or her relationships after leaving a career in sport.

Aquilina (2013) employs qualitative methods (life story analysis and a narrative approach) to examine the "decision making processes that gave meaning to the athletes' lives and how these decisions then affected the way these athletes viewed their world." The conclusions drawn by Aquilina demonstrate how athletes who limit their engagement in facets of their lives outside of sport—social and academic endeavors, in particular—fail to strike a balance that is essential for both successful athletic performance and healthy career transitions out of sport. It is vital that athletes acknowledge that there is simply more to life than sport and take responsibility for establishing a balanced lifestyle while competing. It is a false dilemma to suggest that athletes must choose between having social/academic interests and upholding their obligations in sport. Interests outside of sport are a support to one's career and, ultimately, to one's career transition from the arena of competition. The real detriment occurs when athletes uphold a univocal commitment to sport at the sacrifice of social and academic interests and, again, this detriment is both toward performance *and* career transition. This research dovetails with the conclusions drawn from this study by demonstrating the struggle athletes face when their commitments, relationships, and social cognition is only directed at sport. In this study, athletes whose primary or only friendships were with former teammates/athletes struggled in forming relationships and prosocial tendencies with coworkers, peers, bosses and even family members who had not shared in their athletic experience.

This literature demonstrates how published research has begun to speak to the demand for conceptualizing the psychosocial experience of losing camaraderie. Athletes described in strong terms a fear that they might be alienated upon their retirement. This is strong language from the participants, speaking potentially to major psychosocial difficulties the participants faced and/or feared. Ultimately, a continued and strengthened emphasis on the effect that the loss of camaraderie has in athletic career transition literature is essential.

2.2. Psychosocial support studies

Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, and Côté (2009) offer career-planning strategies in a cross-cultural meta-analysis of the literature on athletic career transition. First, it is clear that normative (predictable) transitions from sport offer significantly less tumult to the athlete. For these transitions to be predictable, the athlete must have a raised awareness of the immanent nature of the transition. This awareness is most effective when offered by a social support structure surrounding the athlete (e.g. parents, coaches, consultants, etc.). These supports offer space to plan for retirement from sport and facilitate the transition. Likewise, social support from the athlete's significant others can facilitate a more holistic, multidimensional view of the self, as well as general academic and vocational development for the athlete in transition. Furthermore, Stambulova (2010) offers a five-step career planning strategy (5-SCP) as a counseling framework to aid the transition of athletes from a career in sport. The 5-SCP was established partly to address that the lack of social support, among other resources, that athletes lack in the face of retirement or deselection from sport. The other major influence for the 5-SCP comes from Vygotsky's developmental perspective on lifelong learning and accessing zones of proximal development for future growth. Vygotsky's model for future development rests on the need for social support, dialog, and scaffolding strategies offered by peers. In the case of offering social support to enter zones of proximal development for athletes, Stambulova suggests that sports consultants offer this psychosocial support for athletes in discussing future goals and cultivating planning skills. In short, whether the social support structure is offered through coaches, parents, consultants, or peers, the research demonstrates clearly that these structures are imperative to aiding a career transition out of sport for athletes.

Park, Lavallee, and Tod (2012) provide a meta-analysis of career transition research. In this work, psychosocial factors represent a category related significantly to the success of the transition, as well as the health and well-being of the athlete in retirement. Out of 29 studies on athletic career

transition, 27 revealed that holding support from close relationships with peers, loved-ones, etc., all positively contributed to a healthy career transition.

The findings in this research project in many ways dovetail with the findings of this meta-analysis. For instance, several studies revealed the role that forming a coherent account of one's career and communicating that account to peers and loved one can play in supporting a career transition (Barnes, 2002; Lavallee, Gordon, & Grove, 1997). In this current study, it was also revealed that the perceived ability to communicate one's life-experience in sports with peers and coworkers supported and facilitated a pro-social transition. Most importantly, the meta-analysis revealed that six separate studies demonstrated how the loss of social connection and social networks after sports contributed to difficulties in career transition (Kane, 1991). On the other hand, athletes who were able to transition into careers and situations with a more solid social support network were able to navigate a less difficult transition (Schwendener-Holt, 1994). The results of these studies on social support networks in sport and after sport are in almost complete synchronicity with the findings of this current project.

At other times, the mate-analysis presents factors that either did not appear with our participants or, in some cases, where our findings could present a challenge to the meta-analysis findings. Studies that examined the role of mentoring relationships with athletes in transition found that athletes who had a strong relationship with a mentor prior to transition felt more supported in and experienced a less difficult transition. However, the findings of this project revealed that though many participants felt quite connected to their coaches during their athletic career, this sense of closeness to the coach actually contributed to a difficulty in career transition. Coaches are asked to move on from one season to the next, working with and mentoring a new crop of athletes as the seasons of sport turn. The participants in our study lamented the loss of what they perceived to be strong relationships with their coaches. Ultimately, participants felt difficulty forming new connections with their current bosses or individuals who would be placed in new mentoring roles in their career outside of sport. Though our sample is much smaller than the meta-analysis provides, deeper investigation of the nuances of and circumstances around the mentoring relationship may demand further investigation.

2.3. Athletic identity studies

Brewer et al. (1993) have provided a quantitative survey that is absolutely central to the field of developmental sports psychology and career transition for athletes—The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale. This scale has participants answer a series of questions that would calculate the extent of athletic identity demonstrated at that moment in their lives. This test becomes a barometer to predict the quality of transition for the athlete, demonstrating that there is an inverse correlation between the level of athletic identity and quality of transition. This has led many sports psychologists to argue that the key to career transition is a dissolving or diluting of athletic identity, preferably before the athlete's career has actually been completed (Brewer et al., 1993; Petitpas, 1978; Petitpas & France, 2010). In short, the more an individual still considers himself solely an athlete, the less likely a successful career transition out of the competitive arena will be. The concept of loss, as it applies to elite-level athletes, is examined in this chapter. The specific focus here is placed on symbolic losses experienced in competitive sport. Empirical and theoretical research that has been directed at exploring the losses associated with athletic injuries, performance slumps, and retirement from sport is reviewed. Inevitably, it is proposed that one's concept of athletic identity plays a central role in the experience of loss in sport.

Participants who demonstrate high levels of athletic identity generally experience identity foreclosure. Identity foreclosure, a term applied to the field of sports psychology by Petitpas by holding its roots in developmental psychology and psychoanalysis by Marcia (1966), refers to an inability or unwillingness of the individual to exhibit exploratory behavior and instead commit to specific and narrow roles of identity. Athletes who experience identity foreclosure make an unwavering commitment to sport to avoid identity crises. Their support identity—the singular and primary identity the

individual espouses; in this case, athletic identity—becomes the central component of their intra-psychic defense systems. Athletes experiencing psychological identity foreclosure view their sport successes as the only means of maintaining their coaches' or peers' approval and defending against any threats to their ego identities by avoiding people or situations that might challenge the salience of athletic participation.

Athletic identity studies certainly move close to the lived experience of athletes facing transition and open further questions to examine as a result of these findings. First, the question of *why* the athlete may feel so deeply tied to sport, even after one's career is completed, is of vital importance in assessing the nature of the athlete's athletic identity. For example, someone who feels like they cannot relocate identity from competition because they are afraid of letting down authority figures such as parents, peers, and coaches is experiencing one form of high athletic identity. A separate individual may experience high athletic identity due to the profound experience of camaraderie and emotional release that competing provides. Both of these athletes could very well score the same mark of "high athletic identity" on the AIMS scale because clearly competition is important to their life. However, it is quite likely the career transitions and social engagement patterns of both individuals could look quite different despite equally high scores on the AIMS. Qualitative research, when supplementing the valuable results of research projects like the AIMS, helps answer some of these further questions by adding subjective nuance to the participants' sense of identity and goal orientation in sport.

Suggesting that athletes dilute athletic identity overlooks the possibility that athletes could still successfully hold high levels of athletic identity in careers outside of sport, so long as that career supports the behavior. The results of this project demonstrate that some participants were able to see themselves as teammates in their careers outside of sport and find success in translating mind-sets and behaviors that cultivated camaraderie and solidarity to their career outside of sport. Ultimately, the challenge for former athletes became the ability to recreate a similar sense of solidarity and camaraderie in their workplace, home life, and relationships outside of sport. This involved either adapting their social tendencies and cognition to their environments or, in some cases, influencing their social environment so that others were inclined to engage in a more team-orientated relationship.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants
For this project, nine semi-structured interviews with former male team contact sport athletes were completed. The minimum level of experience for all participants was scholarship-collegiate and/or equivalent elite-level participation. The groupings varied from one to five years after their careers have completed, five to twenty years after their careers have completed, and twenty years or more after their careers have completed.

Potential ethical complications surrounded the fact that a significant percentage of athletes and former athletes are diagnosed with a diverse range of mental illness (Davoren & Hwang, 2014). A licensed mental health clinician was attached to this research project and participants were encouraged to contact her at any signs of distress from the interviews. Participants were told they were free to drop out of the interview at any time and could refuse to answer any questions that were uncomfortable to reflect on (see Table 1).

3.2. Procedures used
Semi-structured interviews soliciting open-ended responses allowed for the participants to engage a range of questions about their experience of transition from a competitive career. These questions attempt to evoke a type of responses that will describe in detail the "what" of the experience for the individual. Asking open-ended questions that evoke the lived experience of the athlete made it

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Table 1. Participant information								
	John	**Mick**	**Troy**	**Brad**	**Sean**	**Ryan**	**Paul**	**Ray**	**Henry**
Age	25	24	26	29	43	33	60	60	67
Sport	FB	FB	FB	Hockey	Soccer	FB	FB	Soccer	FB
Lev.	Col.	Col.	Col.	Amt.	Col.	Amt.	Pro	Pro	Pro
Job	Teach & Coach	Oil Rig Tech	Bio Tech	Army Sgt. & Sales	Fund-Raiser	Project Admin	Educat Admin & Coach	Sales & Soccer	Emerg. Mental Health Assess

possible to gather rich, nuanced, and detailed descriptions that ultimately gave rise to grounded codes and cross-data themes.

Interview candidates were selected based on only two criteria: first, that they performed contact sports at an elite level; second, that they were retired from their career in that sport. Open recruiting methods through word of mouth, social media, and snowball sampling techniques were all employed to gather participants.

3.3. Data analysis

The analytic methodology used for this project is a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) espouses a flexible and varying theoretical framework that acknowledges the need to let the data determine the themes that may arise. There is no master narrative approach in thematic analysis methodology; the data will always determine the theoretical construct that the analysis must develop. There are likewise very few, if any, theoretical presumptions made by thematic analysis prior to assessing the data.

The thematic analysis applied to this data-set can be broken down to a five-step process. First, the data were transcribed from the semi-structured interviews. After transcribing the interviews from recording, a line-by-line close reading of the data was employed, combing the transcriptions for the semantic themes that would arise in the specific descriptions of the participants' lived experience. Second, meanings were assessed as they arose from the themes. In short, descriptions of the themes were fleshed-out, detailed, and made clear. Third, themes were arranged into categories after comparisons were made among themes. In this step, themes with enough commonality were grouped together into categories. Fourth, higher order categories were formed from a comparison of the meanings that were formed from the themes. These themes served to structure a tree of the data analysis, filling in the branches of these themes with the elucidated meanings and supporting data. Lastly, a final review of the plausibility of the themes selected was assessed.

Thematic analysis ultimately allows space for flexibility in interpreting the data from the interviews. The initial coding phase of the data will espouse a, line-by-line and word-by-word, analytic and open-ended examination of the text. In this process, codes that arise within one interview and across several interviews will be tied into themes as they recur on a consistent basis, generally staying attuned to codes and themes that occur frequently and with consistency. Beyond only examining the consistencies in the data and naming them "themes," any unique phrases, inconsistencies, or unusual statements offered by the participant become open-game for thematic analysis as well.

With all research, in particular qualitative research, generalizability can be a difficult phenomenon to fully assess. Certainly in this project, the utilization of nine interviews was not intended to provide some consensus of generalizable themes. It would be consistent with the history and application of qualitative research to use restraint in presuming the possibility of generalizability.

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Table 2. Summary of results
1. Participants experienced camaraderie in the competitive process
2. Participants expressed a desire for a similar sense of solidarity in career after sport
3. Participants expressed mistrust of peers who did not compete in contact sports
4. Participants expressed a gap in the relationship between coach and boss
5. Participants expressed the satisfaction that could occur when a group of individuals worked in unison ("eleven as one") toward a tangible and desired end
6. Participants felt a sense of being "weirdly close," or by the participants' own words, connected without pretense and without judgment

4. Results

A consistent category of analysis throughout 8 of the 9 participant interviews was that participants found deep meaning in their relationships while competing in team contact sports. While competing, they often experienced closeness, honesty, trust, and a bond of solidarity with their teammates and coaches. Upon retirement, it was difficult for many to recreate the magnitude of these relationships in their lives and careers outside of sport. The following table reveals the specific themes revealed from the psychosocial examination of these former athletes' relationships with teammates and coaches, as well as the nuances regarding the difficulties many faced in recreating the strength of such relationships after sport (see Table 2).

4.1. Camaraderie experienced in the competitive process

Many of the participants expressed a unique, lasting, and profound impact that the experience of camaraderie has had on their lives while competing. In almost all of these cases, the impact of camaraderie has been felt well beyond the time after their athletic careers had been completed. In short, the data provided many passages from the interviews suggesting the unique nature of this experience on their lives, general sense of life-satisfaction, and the later-life development of the now-former athlete.

First, John expresses the difficult realization at the end of his career that the connection to his now former teammates was inevitably going to fade: "That was the toughest part about finishing. I loved football for football but the toughest part about finishing was knowing that I wasn't going to have constant relationships in the same way we had when we played." John expresses the sense that the most difficult aspect of leaving elite-level competition was losing the pervasive sense of solidarity and camaraderie with his teammates. Other aspects would be missed from competition—"I loved football for football (sake)"—but none were as significant as his relationships with teammates. Another idea added by John is the notion of the *constancy* regarding the connection to teammates and the inability to replicate this *in the same way*. Similar to other participants, John is expressing the reality that relationships formed in athletic competition do not simply dissolve instantaneously. Former athletes may stay relatively close with former teammates but any closeness after competition will always be on a relative level in comparison to the day-in-day-out experience of friendship in team sports.

Secondly, Troy articulates the consistent sense of satisfaction derived from working as a team toward a daily goal:

> I love the camaraderie. It didn't matter whether it was a win, a loss, a 5 am workout. Being with the guys, having a good time, you're all working toward the same goal 24-7. When you have a good team of guys, everyone just puts so much effort toward it, all day, every day. That's their life.

For Troy, similar to John, the experience of camaraderie was understood as its own unique facet of sport tied to the process of competition but not exclusive to the results of competition (e.g. winning and losing). Working toward a united goal was an intrinsically satisfying experience. Troy defines

what he terms as a good group of guys, but this definition is not limited to solely an evaluation of their on-the-field success. Instead, Troy measures a good group relative to the level of commitment to the day-to-day tasks and effort put toward regular training.

Lastly, Sean expresses just how unique the social experience of competition is in team sports versus individual sports. He articulates a craving for the singular experience of teamwork saying: "I was trained to play tennis when I was young, but ... after playing soccer, I dropped tennis completely and can count the number of times I have played (tennis) since on one hand." He goes on to express the reason for leaving individual sports for team sports and the feeling of camaraderie derived in the process. As a middle-aged man competing, Sean expresses the bond to his much younger teammates saying, "You know, I mean, I've got very little in common with these 18 year old kids. Literally, I could be their father. But we all love soccer and we back each other up." Sean also notes how conventional social norms are blurred in the experience of camaraderie found in his adult recreational soccer leagues. Ultimately, these are young men completely out of his typical social purview of friendship. Under many other circumstances outside of sport, it is at best inappropriate and at worst bizarre for a middle-aged married male to enjoy spending his leisure time with adolescent boys barely holding a high school diploma. Nonetheless, it is through sport that this relationship becomes both appropriate and deeply fulfilling. The experience of camaraderie evoked in team sports brings fidelity and solidarity. There is a felt sense of having one another's backs that is unique to this arena of social engagement.

For Sean, soccer offers a space to transcend social and cultural norms of friendship and social engagement. The experience reshapes traditional norms masculinity in that this is truly a friendship—a comradeship—between men of such disparate ages. In American culture, men of Sean's age should only have relationships to late adolescents that involve mentorship and guidance. For him to genuinely feel close to these young men, to feel even closer to them than his coworkers, is, at least on the surface, inappropriate and confounding. Yet, through sport, social engagements that were originally unacceptable and perplexing become suitable in the lived experience of team sport competition.

4.2. A desire for a similar sense of solidarity in professional career

The unique experience of camaraderie uncovered in team sports caused several participants to express a need for a profession that provided the same sense of solidarity with their coworkers. Participants in this study overwhelmingly articulated a desire to work in concert and communion with their peers in hope of obtaining some meaningful goal at work. Troy expressed how the best experience he had in his career working for a genetic engineering biotech company was when he was able to assemble a group of his coworkers to commit to solving a test problem occurring in one of their lab samples:

> In my job, we had a test that wasn't working well. We had 100 samples of tests to diagnose from people and it wasn't working good. I got a team of people together, had to prepare, and got to help all the patients out. It felt great. That was one of the biggest things since I've been there and that was similar to the same type of feeling (to football). It was nice because it was a group of people all working together, all putting in a ton of overtime to get it done. It was great.

The process of uniting, working over-time together, and sacrificing personal time throughout the week in order to contribute to the task of solving this problem provided Troy a sense of pride in his work and, consequently, an interpersonal connection to his coworkers. This is, in his estimation, a "similar type of feeling" to what was experienced in team sports. However, Troy also articulated how perplexing it was that such a common occurrence in his experience as a teammate—unity, sacrifice, and cohesion toward a goal—was so difficult and so rare to replicate in a professional career. When asked for any other examples of this level of cohesion and sacrifice among his coworkers, Troy was at a loss. When asked if he still experiences camaraderie with his coworkers—similar to the way he

experienced it with teammates—through commitment and sacrifice to a goal, he responds: "I really don't experience it. In small batches where something unusual comes up where we get a group of people together and work toward something and finish it. But it's rare and you're really not as close." Particularly bizarre about this experience was the fact that, in his case, sports are of no tangible significance when compared to the work a biotech genetic engineer does on a day-to-day basis. People's lives are at stake in Troy's professional career while in his athletic career the most that could be lost was money or coaching jobs. Save for one example, Troy ultimately experienced a gap in the level of motivation, unity, and sacrifice with his coworkers versus his teammates while the real stakes in his athletic career paled in comparison to the stakes in his profession.

Similar to Troy's desire to cultivate motivation and sacrifice in the workplace after sports, a notion of getting the group to work as "one" was echoed by participants. Sean expresses how he felt that his teammates were "(his) other half," and that he could tell them anything and that they would know him in a more personal and meaningful way than coworkers or other friends outside of sports. He expresses this gap in the level of honesty and openness between teammates and coworkers: "A co-worker you will only tell certain things to and you will always hold back. But I would say 90–99% of the time, players, they're your other half. You'll talk about anything, you'll even talk about things you won't talk to your own wife about." A sense of distrust around his coworkers' level of commitment, coupled with skepticism about being able to speak clearly and directly to coworkers, was a source of apathy in the hope of forming relationships at work that were analogous to relationships formed on the team.

Brad served in the military after an elite-level career in amateur professional hockey. He articulates how the skills, mindsets, and tendencies he acquired in hockey translated fluidly to his military career. He says, "It's that team mentality and, especially in the military, that's the biggest thing, knowing that someone is going to be to the right and to the left and to pick up slack. It's great." Brad expressed finding great satisfaction in his military career and a sense of satisfaction analogous to the joy he felt competing in hockey. Upon completing his military contract, Brad moved to a position in sales at a local medium-sized business and there were aspects of his sales career that provided a similar sense of satisfaction to his military and athletic career. In particular, Brad notes how during "busy season," it was enriching to have everyone had to "hunker down," "have each other's backs," "communicate clearly," and "work hard to get the job done." However, outside of this brief period of the year, Brad notes how his sales career just did not provide the same sense of satisfaction that his military and athletic careers did. He expresses how there was only a small amount of synchronicity between his sales career and his athletic/military careers. The primary quality that resonates between his athletic and military career that allows for the fluidity of transition between careers is this emphasis on the level of solidarity, camaraderie, the group sacrificing, and the level of clear communication both careers demand. Only during "busy season"—a few months out of the sales year—did Brad experience any career satisfaction in sales, but even this was a result of recreating conditions analogous to his athletic and military career.

4.3. Mistrust of peers who did not compete in contact sports
One of the psychosocial mindsets participants reported experiencing as a result of was a mild to severe mistrust of peers, especially coworkers, who did not compete in contact sports. John encapsulates this experience when he expresses deep distrust for any coworkers who "didn't line up":

> I definitely would prefer to work for someone who played football, and that might be like a very bad comment to say (laughter). We had a principal in high school and one of the things he would say is "so and so lined up" or "so and so didn't line up" and that was always his defense for a lot of things as to why a teacher was a good teacher or a teacher was a bad teacher or why someone made a decision. It's kind of funny he said that but I kind of agree. If you've lined up in the past and you've played football, you understand someone on a different level. But yeah, I would like it if there was someone who, like a coach, a boss that would get on me if I'm screwing up because I want them to get on me if I'm messing up. If I'm doing something right, I want them to let me know if I'm doing something right.

For John, there is clearly a gap between his social connection to former contact sport athletes and the rest of his coworkers. John is a teacher and he believes that individuals who did not play contact sports—or even just football—are actually deficient and/or inferior as educators. It is unfair to assess this as active dislike for the people he works with or an intentional seeking of hostility in the workplace. John describes his interpersonal demeanor at work to be relatively affable and easy-going. Nonetheless, for John, there is a gap in the value systems he espouses in his day-to-day behavior and interactions with others, especially his coworkers. This boils down to a difference in social engagement styles and the ability to make difficult and exigent decisions in his work environment as a teacher. John goes as far to suggest that merely being good at one's job or bad at one's job—in this case, teaching—can be marked in direct correlation to that individual having competed in contact sports or not. There is a perceived social, behavioral, communicative, and even ethical gap between himself and many of his coworkers. He attributes this gap to the difference between having had played a contact sport versus, on the other hand, some his coworkers never "lining up."

Sean expresses the distinct gap in feeling like someone "has his back" when clarifying the difference between his teammates and coworkers. As mentioned before, Sean has had the unique opportunity to keep playing in recreational but competitive soccer leagues after a successful elite-level athletic career. He is older, in his mid-thirties, and is often competing with young men, teammates who, he affectionately notes, "could be my children." Save the same love of soccer and devotion to the team, John has nothing in common with his teammates. Yet, he often finds himself willingly putting his body in harm's way to defend them, stating that he would willingly "go after" anyone who might harm them on the pitch.

Sean plays in a Sunday league and describes how when he wakes up on Monday, the recent feeling of devotion and solidarity slowly dissolves in relation to the individuals he works with. Describing his relationship to his coworkers, he says:

> I go to work, I do my job, and I don't socialize with anyone at work. Now, that may be a little unique. I'm sure in some situations they're all getting together and hanging out and socializing, but certainly where I work, I don't have any kind of relationship to them. When you compare that to soccer, it's totally different.

Sean's coworkers are adult professionals. They are people whom he presumably shares a legitimate common interest with. They are his own age and of his own professional and social class. Despite this, Sean feels little connection and commitment to his coworkers. Unlike his young teammates, he would not fight to defend or support his coworkers, he is steadfast in his belief that they would not reciprocate any support or concern for him if he needed someone to "have his back." Thus, there is only a diminutive experience of connection to his coworkers, as well as a general sense of apathy regarding where they would align if he, at some time, really needed their support.

Paul offers a similar sentiment to John in this sense of satisfaction in working with and for someone who knows what it was like to compete and "knows how athletes operate." He expresses how there is a form of knowledge and sense of acumen that athletes and coaches acquire in the experience of competition that those who did not compete can only stab blindly at through bureaucratic and organizational systems that dilute the real truth of these values. He says, "You take public education today – they are trying to do what ... coaches have been doing all along. They put fancy names to it and they think they've discovered something." For Paul, now an educational administrator, it is confounding that his peers and bosses wouldn't ask him to explain certain motivational and organizational concepts he is so intimately aware of from his playing and coaching experience. In his perception, being a former NFL linebacker has made him well aware of what it takes to bring himself and those around him to excel in their job on a regular basis. The attempts that bureaucratic systems in education make to conceptualize and train the nuances of specific phenomena—motivation, organization, preparedness, focus, working as a team, resilience—are at best only a waste of time and resources. At their worst, they do not get to the point of actually understanding and fully

detailing the lived experience of what it takes to achieve these standards of excellence in a school. Establishing proper organizational motivation among a group leads to values that cannot be obtained via the soft-mannered politically correct world of a professional bureaucratic work environment. Paul came to know how to live these values primarily through the suffering and tumult of managing his mind, body, and emotions in the rigors of the NFL. For Paul, the fact that his coworkers have not competed in contact sports at an elite level means that there is a deficiency in their level of awareness around specific values. These are organizational and motivational values that they hope to build in a work environment, but they do not have the means, structure, knowledge, or experience to actually do so. In his perception, he understands the nuances of these principles, and why his coworkers and bosses simply will not allow him to communicate these is perplexing.

4.4. A significant gap in the relationship between coach and boss

Participants noted a significant gap in the relationship between a coach and a boss, in particular when it came to the ability to directly communicate with their bosses. Several specific differences were expressed in the relationship between coach and boss by participants. These differences ranged from the intimacy of a father–son relation with a coach to the more impersonal and detached relation to a boss, as well as a difference in the honest and upfront face-to-face criticism offered by a coach juxtaposed to the more perfunctory and bureaucratic performance reviews offered by a manager.

Troy expresses his experience of the differences in communication styles between coaches and workplace managers when he states, "The benefit of the coach with the athlete is he can be as informal as he wants. He can yell at you. He can do anything. But as a manager, they are never going to be that blunt to you, even though I think it is applicable in some situations." Troy offers insight into how it can be much more effective to work outside of the social boundaries that are limiting and, yet, so often found in the workplace. The inability to speak clearly limits the relational potency between a boss and a worker. High-level athletes often become conditioned to day-to-day criticism. For instance, film study and review of practice and game performance are standard operating procedure for these individuals. Moreover, coaches are often harsh and pointed in these sessions and many athletes, though they may not enjoy it in the moment, have to find a way to embrace this level of daily criticism. Troy offers that insight, and how, in many ways, this blunt style can make for more clarity and effectiveness in both the individual and group accomplishing their goals. The biannual performance review or the coated and tempered critiques that managers of many workplaces are trained to offer can appear to be confounding and arbitrary to the former athlete. Inevitably, a majority of the participants in this study expressed that they missed the honesty and up-front face-to-face daily criticism offered in their athletic career by a coach.

Henry offers an illustration of how he used more a pointed approach with his boss and coworkers in his job after the NFL:

> We got a new chair of psychiatry who was of the school, but he controlled all the psychiatric stuff, and I went in and told him one day that that the nurses needed to pay more attention to what we were doing instead of dragging us through the mud. They needed to work with us instead of dragging us through the mud so that we could get these people out of the hospital because it's taking up beds and the nurses are standing around with their fingers in their ass is sort of what I told him. And that was … he didn't like me being that direct with him. So he saw that as a hindrance and shortcoming.

This passage offers insight into just how damaging some of the social behaviors, mindsets, and communication styles can become for former athletes in their careers outside of sport. For Henry, there is nothing problematic about being so upfront, direct, and confrontational with his boss and coworkers. In his eyes, there was a problem that needed to be fixed. In his athletic career, any member of the team that was seen as weak or holding back the group's success was called out and weeded out quickly. There is no time for bureaucracy and platitudes when it comes to fixing a problem in team

contact sports; a week of game-preparation in the NFL does not allot time for these liberties. For Henry, this abrupt and abrasive style is just how problems get solved and victories get accrued. However, when the social engagement style of teammates is applied to his coworkers, he clearly handles this situation in a way that is damaging, hurtful to his coworkers, and disturbing to his boss. This incident, and others like it, ultimately leads to the end of a career Henry had worked for roughly 20 years after his NFL career.

An important analysis of the intimate and even parent–child relation formed between athletes and coaches is of deep value to examine. Mick offers a description of the gap in these mentoring styles between his former coach and current boss:

> It was almost like an extended father. He loved me like I was his own kid. He thought highly of me even when I didn't think I deserved to be thought highly of. He cared about me more than just football and just his love for his players and his love for the game. It made you want to do better. It made you want to be better than you are, in a sense.

> What is your relationship to bosses and managers now?

> (Laughter) It's, it's just the opposite. They love me as long as I'm doing the job. I work in collections so it's almost like they love me as long as … It's not really a good relationship. They don't really care about me. They just want the job to get done, so we don't really have too much of a relationship.

For Mick, there is a clear gap in the level of emotional support and social connection offered by his current boss versus his former coaches. The distinction here is not uncommon in the literature on coaching. In particular, Ehrmann (2011) refers to this as the difference between a transformational and a transactional relationship in mentoring. For Ehrmann, the focus is on the mentoring role coaches take toward players and how destructive or nurturing these particular stances can become. With his coach, Mick experienced a transformational relationship, articulated clearly when he says, "… he thought highly of me even when I didn't think I deserved to be thought highly of. He cared about me more than just football." This is the definition of a transformational connection, one that is unconditional and consistent beyond the success of the player and one where the mentee is felt supported outside of consequences and results. The consequence of such a relationship for Mick is profound—"it made you want to be better than you are in a sense." Transactional mentoring is what occurs in his job now. By definition, transactional mentoring is quid pro quo, or, in his words, "they love me as long as I'm doing the job. They just want to get the job done." Similar to other participants, this gap in the relationship between his former coach and current boss provides for a confounding experience in the career transition from team sports to a professional career after sports.

4.5. Summary of analysis

The experience and impact of camaraderie and solidarity, as presented in these passages, is likewise apparent in some shorter pieces of data and one-off phrases offered by the participants. It is imperative here to pause and summarize some of the more general themes that resulted from the participants expressing their experience of camaraderie in their athletic career. Likewise, it is vital to reemphasize and rearticulate how the loss of camaraderie affected the participants' career transitions.

Participants expressed the satisfaction that could occur when a group of individuals worked in unison ("eleven as one") toward a tangible and desired end. In this sense, the common desire of achieving for oneself or accomplishing individual accolades was present but only alongside the desire to share in and sacrifice for a united and common goal; establishing a unified sense of team success over individual accolade. Secondly, a sense of being "weirdly close," or by the participants' own words, connected without pretense and without judgment. For these participants, the experience of camaraderie leads one to be able to accept others and be accepted by one's peers without judgment, pretense, or condition. There was no expressed sense of any daunting restriction when

reflecting on the radical interconnectedness to others that it is a burden of obligation that must be born out of duty to the team, despite the fact that individual goals and personal security were often sacrificed. For many participants in this study, the feeling was that without solidarity, without the sense that there was someone "to the left and to the right of me" that could pick up for where I lacked, the end would not be reached and the process would not be as secure. Ultimately, the participants expressed a real fear of not being able to recreate the experience of camaraderie outside of the context of team competition. Real difficulties were faced replicating any sense of connection to coworkers or peers after the athletic career was completed.

5. Concluding remarks and further discussion

This study demonstrates the profound impact that both relationships and social interaction styles formed in team contact sports have had on the participants in their career transition. Many athletes struggle in their career transition out of sports and, as mentioned in the introduction, a lot of light has been shed on these struggles for contact sport athletes in particular. In these interviews, the lived experience of the participants revealed a unique social experience of both being a teammate and experiencing camaraderie on a regular basis. This unique experience of solidarity in sport must be assessed in juxtaposition to what the former athletes' day-to-day relationships now look like after sports.

As demonstrated in several passages, participants simply could not replicate the feelings of solidarity, honesty, and support that were experienced as teammates in contact sports. Without trying to overstate the loss, the effect of no longer experiencing a day-to-day sense of closeness to the people in one's life can be somewhat traumatic. Couple this with cultural norms of masculinity around male contact sports and the stoic demeanor one is expected to take toward one's emotions and relationships and it is clear how a major psychosocial confusion can result. Part of this confusion may be just as simple as athletes experiencing something relationally profound and emotionally satisfying in their playing careers. Nonetheless, during their careers and via these experiences of camaraderie, no direct light is shed on this experience and no language is directed in a way that offers space to coherently articulate this phenomenon. Couple this with the fact that there are few if any major transitional programs in place for athletes during or after their careers and that coaches are paid to win and not to care deeply about informing their players about the difficulties they will face in their career transitions. As mentioned in the introduction, Stambulova (2010) addresses this deficit in her presentation of five-Step Career Plan for athletes. Her work and findings are decisive regarding the need for tangible social support systems for athletes from their mentors (e.g. coaches, parents, and consultants) and peers (e.g. significant others). However, to date, very few elite level programs have employed such a structure for their athletes and, as mentioned, the primary focus of elite competition still weighs heavily on performance enhancement and winning. Ultimately, it is possible that the whole social experience of support and camaraderie felt in an athlete's career may begin to feel like a remembrance of things past that cannot be conjured upon retirement and/or deselection from sport.

It is on this point that the discussion of further research and intervention should be directed. First and foremost, quantitative and qualitative studies should continue to investigate how athletes navigate the difficult contours of social experiences after their athletic careers. Understanding not only the difficulties athletes face in this experience but, likewise, making sense of the success stories of career transition and how relationships were taken up in healthy transitions is imperative. Beyond this, proactive steps of intervention should be taken to offer consultants, psychologists, and transitional programs for high-level athletes where some of these social and relational difficulties that may be faced in retirement can be addressed during the athletes' careers. It in no way deters from the organization's goals of success to offer its athletes proper psychosocial awareness on the meaning of their relationships in day-to-day activity as an athlete. An awareness of the lived experience of camaraderie and solidarity for the athlete, as well as all that may come with it—trust, emotional connection, the desire to sacrifice for another, blunt and poignant speech—can assist the athlete in fully acknowledging the impact of this presence in their lives. Moreover, it can assist them in

cognitively preparing for a life or career where these experiences are more difficult to replicate so readily. It may also provide the participant an impetus to try and manifest these qualities in their next career after sport, demonstrating the deep value of camaraderie outside of sports, as well as allowing them a social catharsis in reliving this sense of solidarity with coworkers, peers, mangers, their community, family, and friends.

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