

TRANSITIONS FROM SPORT RELATED ADVERSITY: INTERPRETING THE
ELITE ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES

BY

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A Thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
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**Transitions from Sport Related Adversity:
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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
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OF

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Abstract

Athletes competing at the elite level routinely are faced with instances of setback, and challenge. These experiences can pose significant obstacles to personal health and well-being. Research demonstrates that finding meaning in a difficult experience helps people adjust, and move forward from it. The purpose of this study is to describe how a number of elite athletes managed to progress from disappointment and chaos to meaning, following a critical incident of sport related adversity. Using the Straussian grounded theory approach, interviews were conducted with three elite athletes who have experienced a critical incident of adversity in sport and seem to have come through it well. That is, they have been able to make sense of the experience, learn from it and move forward in their lives. Data was collected using the responsive interview technique and analyzed in accordance with the three stage coding procedure consistent with Straussian grounded theory.

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To my wife Jennifer, for the love you give me and the patience and support you showed to me throughout this endeavor. It is high time you get your husband back and I look forward to spending a lot more quality time together.

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Dedication

To the participants in this study thank you for entrusting me the privilege to share your stories.

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Transitions from Sport Related Adversity:
Interpreting the Elite Athletes' Experiences

Specific Aims

The purpose of this study is to explore how a number of elite athletes managed to make sense of, and get through a significantly adverse incident they experienced in sport. Of interest is describing the process by which the participants progressed from crisis and dismay to meaning. An effort was made to develop a grounded theory derived from data that is representative of the participants experience with adversity in sport. Furthermore the focus is on developing a theory that will provide useful remedial and educational information for those parties living and working within the context of elite sport such as athletes, coaches, sport science professionals, and sport administrators.

Interest

I have always been fascinated by stories about people who have found the best in themselves amidst harrowing conditions. People who have faced significant challenge, change, setback and struggle and have come through the experience intact and in some cases, even better for it. People like Terry Fox, Nelson Mandela, Victor Frankl, all ordinary people whose stories are celebrated because of their capacity to endure, find meaning, move forward, and grow from adversity. Take the story of Lance Armstrong for example,

I won't kid you. There are two Lance Armstrong's, pre-cancer and post. Everybody's favorite question is "*How did cancer change you?*" The real question is how didn't it change me...the truth is that cancer was the best thing that ever happened to me. I don't know why I got the illness, but it did wonders for me, and I wouldn't want to walk away from it. Why would I want to change, even for a day, the most important and shaping event in my life...when I was sick I saw more beauty and triumph in a single day than I ever did in a bike race...(Armstrong & Jenkins, 2000, p. 4).

The words of Terry Fox offer another example of finding meaning in adversity, “That’s the thing about cancer. I’m not the only one, it happens all the time to people. I’m not special. This just intensifies what I’ve done. It gives it more meaning. It’ll inspire more people.” (Terry Fox commenting on the return of cancer and the end of his cross Canada trek, <http://www.terryfoxrun.org/english/marathon/timeline/default.asp?s=1>)

Each of these examples imply that there is another side to adversity beyond fear, hardship and struggle, and that even under conditions of severe difficulty it is possible to come through the experience and thrive. Further, that there may even be tremendous value in the experience. The key it seems may lie in finding meaning and purpose in the experience.

In the world of elite sport, cyclist Lance Armstrong is perhaps the most notable case of triumph through adversity. First he survived an aggressive and deadly form of cancer and then went on to win seven consecutive Tour De France titles in what has to be one of the most grueling and demanding of events in modern sport. To hear him tell it, the success he has enjoyed as a cyclist following his bout with cancer conveys only a small, relatively insignificant part of his story.

I want to tell the truth. I’m sure you’d like to hear about how Lance Armstrong became a Great American and Inspiration To Us All [sic.], how he won the Tour de France... You want to hear about faith, mystery and my miraculous comeback... You want to hear about my lyrical climb through the Alps and my heroic conquering of the Pyrenees... But the tour was the least of the story (Armstrong & Jenkins, 2000, p. 3).

Armstrong mentions in his book how significant the many “human moments” he experienced while dealing with cancer were to him. He describes them as more beautiful and inspiring than any sporting achievement he has ever experienced. I believe that these instances reflect part of a process of finding meaning in his experience with cancer. In fact the book by Armstrong & Jenkins (2000) is really about how Lance Armstrong made sense of his current realities, and how he slowly began to evolve as a person with new priorities, new values, and a new perspective because of his experience with cancer. His book is an autobiographical essay on how the self responds to, and is transformed by an adverse experience.

Certainly Lance Armstrong’s story had a strong influence on my desire to explore how elite athletes make sense of difficult events. It should be noted that a lot of the motivation behind Armstrong’s transformation came from facing death, not from crashing during an important time trial, or losing a sponsor, or working through an injury. The prospect of death is a powerful catalyst for self-discovery, personal growth and change (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2000; Yalom, 1980). However adversity comes in many other forms as this study will illuminate. Under the right conditions, the experience of adversity can be a stimulus for tremendous self-discovery and personal growth. I describe this as the “ugly duckling effect” in that something which appears initially as frightening, messy, and disappointing can evolve into an incredibly positive, rich and meaningful experience. I set out to learn more about how athletes make sense of and work through instances of setback and challenge in sport.

Key Definitions

The following terms figure prominently in this investigation. The purpose of this section is to explicate what these terms mean, as well as to describe how they are utilized in the study. A description of how the definitions fit into the context of elite sport, and the purpose of this inquiry, follows.

Adversity: A state or condition contrary to one of well-being and/or of continued difficulty. The word adversity conjures up images of events and experiences that are often difficult, challenging and unwanted. In some instances adversity may bring about intense physical, mental and emotional pain in people. Feelings of confusion, frustration, disappointment and despair are commonly associated with adversity. By extension adversity may pose problems to an individual's health, happiness and outlook.

In the context of elite sport we will refer to adversity as an unwelcome, unforeseen event that threatens that part of the self we identify as "athlete", and which may challenge core beliefs and assumptions we have about our self and the world as we know it. Assumptions such as the world must be fair, that bad things only happen to bad people; and that the world is just and meaningful come into question when we are faced with a significant challenge or setback (Anderson & Anderson, 2003; McMillen, 1999). Sport related assumptions may include beliefs such as, if I work hard I'll get the results I'm after, or if I take care of my body I will avoid injuries. Then something happens that challenges these beliefs (e.g., we perform horribly, we suffer an injury, etc.) and we are left dumbfounded and lost as to how to make sense of the situation. A serious injury, a marked deterioration in skill, a devastating performance outcome, battling through high

levels of fatigue, and feelings of overwhelming pressure to perform are some examples of sport related adversity.

It is not the event itself, but our reaction to it that matters most. That is, our perception of the significance and meaning of the event as it pertains to important goals and interests, as well as to our capacity to deal with it, determines whether or not we label the experience adverse. Reactions to painful and distressing events may differ considerably from person to person due to, among other things, differences in personality (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004) and perceived competence (Masten, 2001). It is useful to think of adverse events as occurring along a continuum of “more” or “less” adverse as opposed to “adverse” or “not adverse”. The more or less distinction provides a measuring stick to assess the intensity and severity of a difficult experience that can accommodate individual variations in perceived significance.

Resilience: An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.

Essentially, resilience is the skill or process of overcoming adversity. It is also marked by the ability to bounce back after a stressful event. Resilience is a central theme in this study. Each of the athletes I interviewed has found a way to get through a difficult sport-related experience. What remains unknown however, at least explicitly, is how they managed to get through the incident. That is, the process by which the participants made sense of the experience, adapted to it and moved forward is under exploration.

A strong case can be made that the context of elite sport is a training ground for testing and developing resilience. Success and failure are for the most part based on outcome measures, which often are separated by very narrow margins such as they exist in sports like swimming, track and field, and speed skating. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld

fittingly portrays this idea in one of his stand up routines. He suggests that while the difference between first and last place is often decided in some races by a few 1/100ths of a second, we nevertheless tend to only celebrate the achievements of the winner. Or as he puts it the winner is “the greatest guy in the world” while the other competitors “never heard of them”. Seinfeld’s observation supports the notion that the world of elite sport can be cruel and lonely at times. Added to the list of resilience testing realities in elite sport, is the tremendous pressure to perform consistently at a high level, and having to deal with failure and cope with injuries. Resilience in character may help athletes thrive as opposed to merely survive in their environment.

Meaning making: A process of interpreting the inner significance of an event or situation in a way that gives purpose and value to life. Meaning making is essentially about finding an answer to the question “why” (Anderson & Anderson, 2003). Why me? Why now? Why this? These are some of the questions people may wrestle with when trying to make sense of a difficult experience. The purpose of “why” questions are to assist a person in their search for meaning. As Anderson & Anderson (2003, p. 190) suggest, “Finding meaning is the process of gaining a deeper comprehension or understanding of events that are unquestionably aversive.”

It is this process that I have tried to illuminate in the study. Specifically I ask how did each of the athletes make sense of a distressful sport related experience?

Critical Incidents: Unanticipated, and often highly charged events or situations that pose a significant challenge or threat to a person, and which stimulate a period of self-reflection (Angelides, 2001; Herr & Anderson, 2003; O’Neill, Jones, Willis & McArdle, 2003). The moments of self-reflection following a critical event involve

making judgments concerning the significance and meaning of the incident (Angelides, 2001). Critical incidents have been described as events that serve as catalysts for change (Furr & Carroll, 2003) and which have tremendous potential for personal growth (Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985, as cited in Angelides, 2001). Moreover, the experience of a critical event may bring about issues related to self-identity (Measor, 1985, as cited in Angelides, 2001).

Athlete identity (or athlete self): Refers to the extent to which an individual identifies with the athletic role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993, as cited in Webb, Nasco, Riley & Headrick, 1998). Identity issues are noted as one of many psychological difficulties for athletes in elite sport (Brown, Cairns & Botterill, 2001). Problems may arise if a person identifies too strongly with the athletic-self at the expense of other roles and attributes that also contribute to their identity. In particular, events or situations that threaten participation in their sport may, by extension, lead to a significant loss of identity and perceived worth.

Elite athlete: Refers to athletes competing at the national and international level of amateur sport, as well as in the professional and semi-professional ranks (Brown, 2001).

Rationale

Why adversity, why elite athletes?

“There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning in one’s life (Frankl, 1984 as cited in Anderson & Anderson, 2003 p. 189).”

The environment of elite sport provides many opportunities for athletes to experience adversity. I have seen how adversity can be a major theme in the lives of elite athletes through my role as a performance consultant intern, as a student in sport psychology, as a former provincial level athlete, and as a fan of sport in general. Through these different perspectives I have observed athletes bounce back from failure, deal with getting cut from a team, suffer through slumps, have their role reduced, cope with injuries, battle through fatigue, retire without a plan, manage immense pressure to perform, fail to perform well, and make tremendous personal sacrifices (e.g., time with family and friends, pursuit of an education, and career opportunities put on hold, etc.) all in the name of "sport". Some researchers have described the world of elite sport as a demanding and at times brutal environment (Brown et al., 2001). It stands to reason that one's ability or inability to manage the effects of adversity in this context may partially determine how successful and content one feels about their athletic career.

Furthermore, odds are elite athletes will face some form of adversity in their sport through the course of a career, and this may pose significant problems for them. The list of problems may include strong feelings that are difficult to process (e.g., feelings of anxiety, fear, uncertainty or frustration), a loss of identity, and an erosion of ones health and sense of well-being. Some people it seems appear to be better equipped than others to make sense of, and adapt well to, situations and experiences of setback and challenge (Schinke, & Jerome, 2002). Researchers refer to this ability as resilience (Jacelon, 1997; Nettles, Mucherah & Jones, 2000). There are many other examples of athletes in the world of elite sport other than Lance Armstrong who have managed to deal with adversity well. Given the likeliness that an athlete will experience some form of sport

related adversity during their athletic career, it may be worthwhile to learn how others who have been through it, and have handled it well, managed to do so. Their stories may provide valuable insights that can be used to help educate other athletes about dealing with the effects of adversity in sport and life. Moreover, the findings may help to inform professional practice. As you will see in the next section very little research on adversity in sport has been done in the field of sport and performance psychology.

Few studies on adversity and resilience in sport

The constructs “adversity” and “resilience” are well documented in the fields of nursing (Jacelon, 1997; Tusaie, & Dyer, 2004), psychology, (Chaitin, 2003; Miller, 2003), social work, (McMillen, 1999), childhood development (Katz, 1997; Masten, 2001; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000), and education (Nettles et al., 2000).

Interestingly, very little research on these topics appears to exist in sport related literature. This seems surprising considering the range of difficulties athletes may be exposed to in sport. As a result it appears as though further research in this area within the context of sport is warranted.

Few qualitative studies

Only one of the research articles on adversity in sport reviewed for this study was carried out using a qualitative approach. Experiencing some form of adversity is a probable consequence of participation in elite sport as I have observed through my work with athletes and in conversations with colleagues. I am aware of athletes that have handled sport related adversity very well, and of others who did not. Research that will illuminate the process by which athlete’s have learned how to make sense of, and get through difficult experiences may provide useful remedial and/or educational information

which can be used to assist others. Questions concerning the meaning of experience are well suited to qualitative inquiry.

Value of interviewing

An additional consideration is the value of the interview process to the researcher and the participant. Done well, the interview can be a rewarding experience for the interviewer and the interviewee (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interviewer is afforded the privilege of the interviewee's time, and experiential knowledge pertaining to some topic of interest. The interviewee is given a forum to share and give voice to their experiences. This approach may lead to the interviewee developing new understandings about themselves and their experiences that were previously unknown, or at least unarticulated. Ideally, both parties leave the interview feeling good about the experience.

Benefits to finding meaning in adversity

"Going through hardship is like being in a rock tumbler. You're tossed to and fro and get bruised but you come out more polished and valuable than ever. You are now prepared for even bigger lessons, bigger challenges and a bigger life (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2000 p. 222)." Researchers have identified numerous psychological and physiological benefits to making sense of adverse experiences (Anderson & Anderson, 2003; McMillen, 1999). It appears that finding meaning in adversity can help people to adjust and move forward in their lives. Furthermore the experience may lead to tremendous self-discovery and personal growth.

It may be difficult for an athlete to recognize and appreciate the potential value of a distressful sport related incident, particularly if they have had little exposure to these kinds of situations or if they feel as though they lack the necessary skills and personal

resources to cope effectively. Learning from the experiences of other athletes who have been through hardship in their sport may sensitize the person to new ways of looking at and dealing with some of the challenges they face in their sport.

Background

Proponents of Straussian grounded theory--the method used in this study--recommend the researcher engage in a preliminary review of related literature before entering the field to conduct interviews (McCann & Clark, 2003a). A subsequent review is conducted following data collection and analysis to compare and validate the findings with existing literature. The line of reasoning being that overexposure to research in the area under study may contaminate and hamper the "analytic senses" of the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The question of how much material should you review in advance is largely at the discretion of the researcher. Given the lack of literature on this topic within the context of sport I broadened my search into other fields such as nursing, psychology, and social work to learn more about the concept of adversity and to better understand what has been done academically. Whether in the end I read too much, not enough, or just the right amount is difficult to know for sure. However I do know that I covered enough material to provide me with a sense of what the construct adversity means, how it has been studied, and whether my thesis topic had already been explored. Thankfully it had not been.

So my next question was how do I know I did not read so much that it influenced my approach to collecting and analyzing the data? The material I reviewed on adversity and resilience was completed six months before I began conducting interviews. In the year following my thesis proposal I purposefully did not refer back to any of the

adversity articles I reviewed until the latter stages of data analysis for the purpose of theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling involves looking at other sources of data such as further research that has been conducted in the area one is studying, as a means to stimulate new ways of looking at your own. All of the data for this study had been collected and all the categories identified at that point. For the reasons stated above I feel the initial literature review had little to no influence on the process of data collection and analysis.

Adversity

It has been said about trying times that while we are unable to stop the waves, we can learn to surf (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Every living person faces an array of difficult events of varying intensities and effect throughout the course of a lifetime. Our ability to make sense of, and cope with adversity has a significant effect on our state of health and well-being (Anderson & Anderson 2003). The ability to manage the effects of adverse experiences is influenced by a number of protective factors, examples of which include social support (Anderson & Anderson, 2003), perceived competence (McMillen, 1999; Masten, 2001), coping style (Chaitin, 2003), explanatory style (Martin-Krumm, Sarrazin, Peterson & Famose, 2003), and cognitive skill (Jacelon, 1997).

Protective factors function to lower the risk of harm for individuals in the face of difficult circumstances. They serve as buffers not as shields. That is, protective factors do not prevent against the occurrence of adverse incidents; rather, they improve one's ability to manage the effects of the experience and endure through it. Moreover they may reduce negative reactivity to stressful events.

Experience can also be considered a protective factor. McMillen (1999) points out that direct experience with adversity can produce an inoculative effect. However this only occurs if the person believes they are stronger as a result of their exposure to an adverse event. In some ways experience is the ultimate protective factor because unless a person has previously experienced considerable hardship they may not know whether their protective mechanisms (e.g., coping skills and sources of support, etc.) are sufficient or lacking. During periods of crisis and turmoil our protective capacities are brought out in full view and we may learn quickly how equipped we are to deal with situations of adversity.

Some studies described examples of the process by which growth occurs in response to traumatic events. Dewar & Lee (2000) interviewed people who have endured “catastrophic illness and injuries” to understand how they managed to cope and adapt to their circumstances. Three categories emerged. The categories are presented as stages, but the progression was not strictly linear. In the course of coming to grips with their situation, participants moved back and forth between the different categories at different times throughout the process of adjustment. The initial phase, “Finding out”, was described as overwhelmingly painful and in some cases, a relief. At this point the participants were unable to comprehend the reality of their circumstances. “Facing reality” followed, as each person “got real” and began to accept what had happened to them and acknowledge what the implications were. In the final stage, “Managing reality”, people began to assimilate the experience into their lives and move forward. That is not to say they were comfortable with their new reality, merely that they could no longer deny it. In addition, a process of emotional adaptation marked this stage. Coming to

terms with feelings of anger, bitterness and loss was evidence that they were beginning to deal with their current reality.

While these findings do demonstrate a process of growing through adversity, one is left with the feeling that these individuals have a long way to go before regaining some semblance of the quality of life they had before the incident. This is not at all surprising given the severity of their circumstances, but it leaves the impression that they are still early on in the process of transition. Finding meaning was still very much a work in progress for the research participants at the time of the study.

McMillen (1999) reports four additional pathways through which people can grow through adversity. The first pathway, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger (p. 459), refers to the way in which exposure to adversity may improve a person's ability to deal with future incidents of hardship. It is suggested that by effectively dealing with a difficult event, one's coping skills and sense of self-efficacy are enhanced and this may improve the ability of a person to handle future instances of adversity.

"Heeding the wake up call" (p. 459) is another of the pathways discussed. Basically, in some cases adversity may sensitize a person to what is really important in their life. After a period of reflection following a traumatic event an individual may come to the realization that they have been operating under a set of synthetic values and misplaced priorities. In this way adversity serves as a catalyst for making important lifestyle changes. Other researchers have observed similar effects of adversity serving as a stimulus to re-align a person's values and priorities (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2000; Yalom, 1980).

Adversity may also lead to “changed views of others” (p. 460). In this example people often come to appreciate how important supportive relationships are in times of struggle. Adverse events can illuminate for a person, who the people are that provide support to them when they really need it the most. This may open up a person to share feelings with others who normally they may have felt uncomfortable towards. Allowing one’s self to open up and be vulnerable may in turn make that person a better source of support to others. In the words of Nelson Mandela, “As we are liberated from our own fear our presence automatically liberates others” (Mandela, 1994, cited from Newburg, 1999). Moreover, just knowing that you have people in your life who provide you with genuine support may help a person cope with difficult circumstances more effectively.

Finally, growth can occur through an attempt to find meaning in the experience of adversity. The rationale being that once an event is perceived as having had some value and purpose it may be easier to live with. Author William B. Helmreich interviewed 170 survivors of the holocaust in an attempt to find out how they were able to “piece together the shreds of their lives to carry on” (Anderson & Anderson, 2003, p.189). Interpreting the experience in ways that gave meaning and purpose to their lives was mentioned frequently (Anderson & Anderson, 2003). In the words of Victor Frankl, “Suffering ceases to become suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning” (Frankl, 1962, as cited in McMillen, 1999).

Often the process of finding meaning involves cognitively restructuring the event, and assimilating it into a person’s worldview. Spirituality is another way in which people find meaning in adversity (Albaugh, 2003). Putting faith in the idea that things happen for

a reason as determined by a higher power than the self can lower stress and help a person find meaning in their struggles.

Several studies provide evidence that adverse experiences can lead to positive benefits. According to Anderson & Anderson (2003) research demonstrates that finding meaning after a traumatic experience is literally good for your health. Among the benefits noted is better adjustment for soldiers following combat. In addition, researchers have observed a lowering effect of stress hormones in cancer patients, a reduction in risk for recurring heart attack, and improved immune functioning and lower mortality rates in people who have suffered a significant loss. While none of these experiences are sport related, they do point to some general processes that athletes may be forced to deal with in sport such as stress, anxiety, and loss. Additional benefits reported include enhanced spirituality, greater appreciation for life, improved relationships (Anderson & Anderson, 2003), changed life priorities, and increased self-efficacy (McMillen, 1999). Moreover, Kerfoot (2003) proposes that valuable leadership skills, such as learning how to bring people together and reframing stressful situations, are honed in times of crisis.

However, other researchers point out that in some cases of hardship it is exceedingly difficult to perceive any benefits at all. For example, children who have been raised in environments marked by extreme poverty, violence (Katz, 1997), abuse and familial instability (Gartside, Johnson, Leitch, Troakes & Ingram 2003) are likely to suffer long-term psychological pain and difficulty. Furthermore, because these experiences occurred early on in development, people who have experienced these conditions are at an increased risk for mental and physical health problems in adulthood. Problems such as depression (Davies, Avison & McAlpine, 1997), suicidal tendencies,

anxiety disorders (Gartside et al, 2003), and frequent cases of somatisation (Schilte, Portegijs, Blankenstein, Latour, van Eijk, & Knottnerus, 2001) are discussed in the literature. Another study showed a link between cumulative adversity and drug dependence (Turner & Lloyd, 2003).

However, it should be noted that most of the previous examples of harm as a result of adverse experience refer to chronic, sustained conditions of hardship that have in some instances occurred during critical developmental periods in people's lives. Long-term, chronic exposure to traumatic events is presumably quite a different phenomenon than acute incidents of adversity, which is the focus in this study. Furthermore, even the most resilient individual would find it hard to make sense of and overcome the kinds of severe adverse experiences mentioned in the above examples. Whether an individual perceives benefit from a particularly adverse experience depends on the severity of the event, the type of event, personality characteristics, and the class and age of a person (McMillen, 1999). In some cases the severity of the event is so great that it is near impossible to work through and recover from.

Resilience

There is much overlap in the research literature on adversity and resilience. This is not surprising considering that resilience refers to the ability to bounce back from, and overcome adversity. In fact, for an individual to be considered resilient they must have previous exposure to a distressing event or situation, and they must have adapted positively to it (Luthar et al., 2000). There is some debate as to whether resilience should refer to a set of traits or to a process (Jacelon, 1997). According to Luther et al. (2000), from a historical perspective research on resilience initially focused on illuminating

specific personal attributes that were thought to demonstrate resilient persons. Further research, however broadened the definition of resilience to include the role of family and environmental factors indicating more of a process orientation. Some researchers describe resilience as a process and add that along with personality characteristics and environmental factors, experience with adversity also plays a role in determining a person's ability to rise above difficult events (Jacelon, 1997).

Others emphasize that the process of resilience is dynamic in nature. As Tusaie & Dyer (2004, p. 6) suggest, "There is a dynamic interaction of patterns of coping responses, personality characteristics, social support, and genetically determined biological reactivity with an individual's appraisal of a stimulus...". A key problem in viewing resilience using the trait perspective is it may lead people to believe that if they lack some of the qualities of resilient individuals they have little hope of overcoming instances of adversity in the present or in the future (Luthar et al, 2000). Examples of traits that are believed to indicate resilient persons include above average intelligence, a positive outlook (Jacelon, 1997), positive self-perception (Masten, 2001), strong support networks (Nettles et al., 2000), humor, creativity, and belief systems that provide meaning to life (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). Interestingly many of the characteristics of resilient individuals noted in the literature mirror the protective factors for adversity. In a study conducted by Jacelon (1997) these traits were demonstrated to be consistent in children, adolescents and in adults who have faced significant adversity.

Some researchers point to an inconsistency in the way the terms resilience and resiliency are used that adds confusion to the trait versus process debate. Luthar et al. (2000) assert that the term resilience should be used exclusively to refer to the process of

overcoming adversity, while resiliency should be reserved for describing particular personality traits.

Nettles et al. (2000) identify the role of extra-curricular activities as a means to develop resilience in students at-risk. Their findings suggest that in some cases school, sport, and church activities foster optimism, increase levels of competence and self-efficacy, as well as provide opportunities to develop supportive relationships with peers and adults outside of the family. Similarly, Crosnoe & Elder (2004) assert that close ties with a supportive teacher may buffer against a lack of support experienced at home. Moreover, support from a school teacher may promote confidence and improve coping skills necessary to handle challenges in the classroom.

As demonstrated, the constructs resilience and adversity are closely related. The majority of research literature on resilience reviewed for this study focused on developmental issues for at-risk children. Unfortunately, little research surfaced on the study of resilience in adults, which may have provided more applicable information with regard to the study I have conducted. Nevertheless, I was able to trace some of the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the construct of resilience and gain a deeper understanding of the process.

Adversity and Resilience in Sport

Brown et al. (2001) interviewed several elite amateur and professional Canadian athletes who appeared to have found a way to excel in sport while maintaining a healthy view of self and close ties to significant others. Furthermore these individuals made a concerted effort to find meaning and fulfillment in sport and life. The key it seems was the development of a perspective which comprised the elements of a strong multifaceted

identity, a solid support system, clear values and a personal understanding of what is important in their life. A strong perspective was demonstrated to function as a buffer against adversity in a variety of ways. For example, a broad definition of self was demonstrated to protect a person from over identifying with any one aspect of the self. In the case of elite athletes this may serve to prevent against internalizing the athletic self too strongly at the expense of other aspects of the whole self. When events arise that pose a threat to the athlete identity, the person who has a well-balanced perception of their whole self may be less affected than someone who identifies too strongly with the role of athlete.

Other researchers looked to describe how certain protective factors contribute to resilience in sport performance. It is suggested by Mummery, Schofield & Perry (2004, [np]) that:

A combination of psychological measures relating to self-concept, social support and coping skills can successfully discriminate between those who perform well initially; those who perform poorly initially and rebound to perform well, and those who display initial poor performance and follow that with subsequent poor performance.

The participants in the study by Mummery et al. were age level swimmers. The results demonstrated a notable relationship between the presence of protective factors and the likeliness a person may bounce back after a poor performance. Specifically, resilient performers appear to possess high levels of self-esteem and coping skills. Surprisingly social support did not contribute significantly to resilience in performance. However, the researchers point out that while resilient performers scored lower than the other groups on perceived social support it is not the case that these individuals necessarily lacked sufficient support. Considering the preponderance of research on resilience that

demonstrates social support to be central to the process of overcoming adversity, these findings are surprising.

In another study researchers demonstrated that explanatory style influences resilience in sport performance as well as success expectation and state anxiety. Participants with an optimistic explanatory style routinely showed improvement after sport failure while those individuals with a pessimistic style did not. Moreover the pessimist group experienced a greater reduction in success expectation and an increase in state anxiety following a poor performance compared to the optimist group. It appears that explanatory style may also distinguish between resilient and non-resilient sport performers.

Schinke & Jerome (2002) also discuss the influence of explanatory patterns on resilience in performance. They offer a more complete description, however, of the mechanisms of athlete's explanations regarding sport performance, such as locus of control, stability, and pervasiveness. Furthermore they describe three techniques that can be taught to athletes for developing resilience. First, the athletes are encouraged to identify potential sources of problems that incite unwanted thoughts and feelings. It is believed that acknowledging and monitoring problematic thoughts brings the emotions that typically follow under control. The next step is to challenge the validity and accuracy of negative thoughts a person harbors and replace them with more optimistic ones. The final step is to identify and prepare for worst-case scenarios, best-case scenarios, and most-likely scenarios that may occur in sport, as well as to evaluate the likeliness of each occurring.

As evidenced in this section, there is a dearth of research on adversity in sport. The lack of literature on the constructs of adversity and resilience in the context of sport, while prevalent in other fields of study, provides additional reinforcement for carrying out this study.

Method

Research Question

The research question that will guide this study is: How do elite athletes make sense of and move forward from a critical incident of sport related adversity? Participants were asked to describe a particularly difficult experience they have experienced in sport. The aim was to develop an understanding of how they have managed to work through the experience and to describe the process.

A Case for Qualitative Research

Understanding and describing the process by which athletes have learned to navigate through difficult sport experiences and find meaning in them is at the heart of the research question for this study. In keeping with the view that the research question (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002) should inform decisions about methods and methodologies (Creswell, 1998), it would appear that in this instance a qualitative approach is most appropriate. The case for the use of a qualitative framework is made by first elucidating some of the core characteristics of this particular style of inquiry, followed by a rationale to explain why it represents a good fit for this study.

Qualitative research has been described as an interpretive, naturalistic, inductive, process oriented mode of inquiry that helps to make sense of phenomena based on the

meanings people bring to them (Creswell, 1998). Strauss & Corbin (1998) add that the purpose of qualitative research is to discover concepts and relationships in raw data, which serve as the basis for developing theory. Qualitative research is an umbrella term that describes a philosophy of inquiry as well as a method for collecting data. There are many distinct traditions of qualitative research (e.g., phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, etc.) each with their own rich history and methodological nuances. The specific method that was chosen for this investigation is covered in the next section.

Creswell (1998) suggested that there are several reasons and/or conditions that indicate when a qualitative approach is appropriate. The first of these was mentioned earlier, that is the nature of the research question should guide decisions pertaining to methods. Inherent with the research question proposed for this study is an attempt to understand how elite athletes make sense of a specific kind of experience (i.e., sport related adversity) and then to describe this process. The information that informs this inquiry resides in the thoughts and feelings of the research participants and, as such, requires a method that can access and illuminate that information. This information is not readily observable. To access it we need to ask questions to people with direct experience with the phenomena of interest. Therefore, what is required is a method that allows for in-depth exploration of peoples' experience. Coincidentally, the need for an exploratory method of investigation that enables a detailed view of the phenomena represents two more reasons for doing qualitative research as proposed by Creswell. In addition, the inductive and process oriented nature of qualitative research fits nicely with the aims of this study which are to describe a process that is representative of, and grounded in, the participants' experience with the phenomena of sport related adversity.

Why Grounded Theory

The principal advantage of grounded theory lies in its utility for generating a model that is grounded in the everyday lives of research participants (Creswell, 1998; McCann & Clark, 2003a; Piantanida, Tananis & Grubs, 2004; Strauss & Corbin 1998). The practicability of grounded theory is what makes the findings useful. Recall that one of the goals of this study is to develop a theory to explain the process by which participants make sense of a particularly adverse experience. In fact, what distinguishes grounded theory from most other qualitative frameworks is the focus on constructing theory. The process of grounded theory goes beyond describing the significance and meaning of events and experiences to suggest relationships among concepts, offer explanations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and help guide action (Boychuk Duchscher & Morgan, 2004). The prospect of utilizing theory to inform practice and to provide useful feedback to athletes, coaches, and other individuals involved with elite sport is also mentioned as one of the aims of this study.

That the theory is grounded in the experiences of the participants is also of value and flows nicely with the objectives of this inquiry. A grounded theory refers to theory that has been derived from interviews with the participants which form the basis for building theory as opposed to making comparisons and drawing inferences from pre-existing theories or from apriori assumptions. It is the participants' experience with overcoming adversity that this study elucidates.

The contributions of Anselm Strauss to the development of grounded theory offer additional support for its application in this study. Among the beliefs that he wove into the fabric of the grounded theory approach were that people take on active roles in

response to challenging events, act on the basis of meaning, and that meaning is best understood through interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each of the athletes chosen to participate in this project has experienced a significant adverse incident in sport and has managed to come through it in good health. How they were able to rise above the challenge and find meaning in it is among the key questions this study sheds some light on. Questions that seek to unearth the meaning of experience are well suited to research methods that enable the investigator to tap into the thoughts, feelings and actions of the participants (McCann & Clark, 2003a; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, McCann & Clark state that grounded theory methodology is built on the premise that people are motivated to make sense of and provide order to their social world. Qualitative interviews carried out within a grounded theory design provide the researcher with the kind of in-depth look that can flesh out the meaning people attach to events and experiences.

A final advantage of grounded theory is the systematic nature of the process. The steps and procedures of this methodology are well structured and as such assist the researcher in organizing, conducting, and synthesizing large quantities of information that surface in grounded theory research. In addition, it is suggested that the emphasis on structure in this approach enhances rigor (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data Collection

The primary source of data collection was two in-depth qualitative interviews with three participants, modeled after the responsive interview technique. This style of interview is especially well suited when the goal is to understand and describe the meanings people attach to experience. The responsive interview method calls for openness and flexibility in its design whereby the analysis of data from each session

guides the line of questioning and the direction of subsequent interviews. It is acknowledged that each party has an influence on the process and product of data collection. The goal of in-depth qualitative interviewing, such as the responsive technique, is to collaboratively explore and record the participant's experience of some topic of interest to the interviewer (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Essentially, qualitative interviews are guided conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This approach provides the researcher with a degree of flexibility and latitude to explore new concepts and questions that emerge in the course of the interview, which may enhance their understanding of the participant's experience.

Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes on average and were audiotaped on a digital voice recorder. Following each interview the data was downloaded into a computer and then transcribed verbatim for data analysis purposes. It was anticipated that each participant would be interviewed 1 to 4 times and, in the end, two sessions were sufficient. The exact number of sessions is impossible to predict ahead of time because it is not until after the data from each interview has been analyzed that the researcher will know whether additional interviews are necessary. In fact, the suggestion that four interviews are sufficient to capture the phenomena is equally difficult to predict with any certainty. It is understood in advance that the number of interviews carried out may be subject to change once the analysis of data commences.

Interviews took place in a mutually agreed upon setting with preference given to a location where the participant felt comfortable. The start time and dates for each interview were determined jointly between the researcher and participant. The length of time between successive interviews is also difficult to predict in advance because it is

dependant on the researcher completing the analysis of data from the previous round of interviews. This is necessary because it is the analysis of data that informs the direction and focus of subsequent interviews. On average there was a three-month span between the first and second interview. During the initial interview, participants were asked to respond to the main research question outlined in the study. Topics for discussion for subsequent interviews were formulated after the content from each interview had been coded and analyzed.

The Process of Grounded Theory

Before detailing the process of grounded theory, a brief history lesson is warranted to highlight a critical turning point in the evolution of this methodology. After introducing grounded theory in 1967 the co-creators of this method, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, came into conflict regarding the direction the methodology should move in and, as such, severed their collaborative relationship. As a result, we now have two streams of grounded theory design and application, each with its unique epistemologies and properties (McCann & Clark, 2003b). The Glaserian grounded theory approach posits that theory must emerge from data directly, void of interpretation (Boychuk Duchscher & Morgan, 2004). It stresses the strict adherence to a systematic set of procedures for generating theory. Barney Glaser came from a predominantly positivistic research environment, while studying at Columbia University, and this setting strongly contributed to his conceptions of grounded theory.

Anselm Strauss was schooled at the University of Chicago, a setting with a long history of doing qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The Straussian method of grounded theory is steeped in social constructivist philosophy (McCann & Clark, 2003b

& c), which holds that each individual creates their reality as they interact with and interpret the world they live in. Moreover a single and absolute reality does not exist “out there” to find (Lomborg & Kirkevold, 2003). Rather each person constructs a view of reality that is his or her own. As Ludwig Binswanger puts it, “ There is not one space and time only, but as many spaces and times as there are subjects” (Yalom, 1980, p. 17).

Generating useful knowledge is the goal of grounded theory as opposed to uncovering truth (Annels, 1996, cited in Brown, 2001, p. 14). Strauss’s model of grounded theory posits that theory should emerge from interplay between the researcher and the data. The Straussian approach places emphasis on interpreting the participant’s experience. This method also acknowledges the subjective nature of social science research and attempts to account for the biases and assumptions the researcher brings into the investigation. It becomes paramount then that the researcher engages in a process to identify and flush out any thoughts, beliefs, or feelings they may have in relation to the phenomena, as these may restrict their ability to be objective and influence the final product. On that note, we will now describe the process by which the researcher accounts for his or herself in grounded theory research.

Unpacking my conceptual baggage

There may be some potential baggage the researcher brings into the research arena. That is the values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences of the researcher may influence the way in which the data are understood and perceived if left unchecked. Rather than assuming these factors will not have an effect, it is important for the researcher to make explicit some of the feelings and ideas they have about the topic they are studying. Moreover, because grounded theory involves the researcher in constructing

the concepts and categories that will come to represent the participant's experience, steps must be taken to ensure that their interpretations are accurate and grounded in data.

I was a fairly successful athlete myself and have personal experience with failure and struggle in sport. I have also been exposed to instances of elite athletes struggling to cope and work through difficult sport related experiences, through my work as a sport psychology intern, through dialogue with colleagues and mentors, and as a fan of sport in general. To think that I do not have some pretty strong thoughts about how it is elite athletes manage to make sense of adverse experiences is unrealistic. I certainly do not claim to have all the answers, but I do have some ideas and these need to be accounted for and recognized. Rather than deny the existence of preconceived beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and values I have about adversity, and the process of finding meaning in it, grounded theory research acknowledges the researcher's history with the phenomena under study and weaves it into the design. It provides the researcher with a reference point when analyzing data to help distinguish between concepts that emerge from the data versus concepts that we think have been informed by the data, but are actually derived from our own experience.

Bracketing

Bracketing is a process that qualitative researchers engage in to identify presuppositions they may have about the phenomena under investigation, prior to data collection and analysis (Ahern, 1999; Ashworth, 1999; Gearing, 2004). The source of our assumptions may be external (e.g., history, context, class, etc.) or internal (e.g., experience, values, knowledge, scientific orientation, etc.). The researcher's task is to reflect on their beliefs, values, attitudes and experience with the topic under study in an

attempt to locate and bring to light any conceptual baggage (Kirby & McKenna, 1989) they may be harboring which might obscure or influence their understanding of the phenomena.

LeVasseur (2003) provided a useful analogy to describe the purpose and the value of bracketing. Imagine an object that you have come across before; the example used in the article is that of a bird. Our ability to generate new ideas and understandings about this object may be obstructed by our assumptions of, and experience with it. It may be difficult to see past what is already known and understood about the object and, as a result, we are closed off to new conceptions and possibilities of what it could be, or mean. In the same way, our preconceived ideas, beliefs, and experience with the topic we are inquiring about may cloud our ability to stay open and true to the data that emerges.

To address this problem, I kept an audiotaped journal to record my thoughts and impressions about adversity, and the ways in which people work through and overcome it. In addition I made detailed memo notes during the transcription and analysis of data to raise questions and to stimulate different ways of looking at what was in front of me. In this way I have tried to account for my personal experiences with instances of sport related setback and challenge as well as the influence of research literature on my view of adversity.

The Circular Nature of Data Collection and Analysis

One of the more distinguishing characteristics of grounded theory is the circular relationship between data collection and analysis. Following the initial interview session and after the data has been transcribed the researcher begins analysis looking to identify concepts and categories that appear to be significant and which may contribute towards

understanding what is going on. This process is referred to as conceptual ordering. The information that emerges from data analysis guides subsequent data collection efforts. That is, the goal of ensuing interviews is to test the accuracy of the categories and to illuminate the properties and dimensions of them in greater detail. The process continues until all categories are thoroughly developed.

Once I had identified what I felt were the key themes in each participants' data I met with them to discuss what I had come up with. I shared with each person what the categories were, how I had come up with them, and what each represents. Through these discussions the participants were afforded the opportunity to clarify, change or omit elements of my interpretations of their experience where it did not fit or it was lacking. Having a mechanism in place for the participants to check the accuracy of the researcher's claims helps to validate the categories. Moreover it provides the participant a layer of protection against misrepresentation or from the researcher taking too much liberty with the data.

Conceptual Ordering

Conceptual ordering refers to the systematic process of identifying and classifying data into concepts and categories and then developing these further to reveal their unique properties and dimensions. The aim is to describe what the characteristics of each category are and are not, as well as to illuminate the range of variation within and between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example the properties of an apple may be established by color and taste. Apples range in color from dark red to green and in taste from very sweet to very bitter depending on what kind of apple one is referring to. Classifying an apple based on its properties and dimensions provides a composite picture

of what fits in the range of possibilities concerning an apple and what lies outside. The same logic applies to classifying aspects of the participant's experience. Clearly established and well-defined categories are the pre-cursor to developing a quality theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A grounded theory is established by demonstrating statements of relationships among categories to explain "who, what, when, where, why, how, and with what consequences an event occurs" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Conceptual ordering is accomplished through use of three distinct coding procedures inherent to grounded theory research.

Concepts and Categories

Concepts refer to events, happenings and objects that share certain properties. Because concepts consist of like properties they can be grouped under broader headings or categories. This is a particularly useful way to manage and pare down large quantities of information into smaller blocks while still preserving the defining qualities of each concept. It thus follows that categories are comprised of concepts that have been identified as potentially significant to the participants. Well-developed categories provide a measure of explanation as to "what it is going on", i.e., they represent and describe specific phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Categories are further divided into sub-categories, which describe the conditions and circumstances in which a category occurs.

The properties and dimensions of the categories and sub-categories I have identified are described in detail. A summary of each is included in the storyline and represented visually through a series of figures. The boxes in the figures represent the properties of each sub-category as they relate to the main category they inform. The range of variability between categories is represented on either side of the figure. For

example, the main category “Striking the core” is comprised of the sub-categories “Support system audit” and “Depersonalization and “Re”-personalization”. The properties of the latter sub-category are laid out in a top down manner while the dimensions are represented across each property. In this case variability is accounted for by describing how the self is lost and how it is regained. The same organizing principles apply to each of the figures in the study that represent key sub-categories.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling is another tool that grounded theory researchers can use to identify and develop properties and dimensions among categories. It involves the researcher looking to sources outside of the researcher-participant context to provide a means for comparing emergent themes, concepts and categories in the data. The investigator may look to research literature on the topic they are studying or perhaps talk to people in a different setting who have some experience with the phenomena. It is important to note that information obtained from alternative sources is merely meant to provide the researcher with a different way to look at the data that is surfacing in the study. They are not a source for generating new data, only new ideas that may assist in understanding the phenomena more completely. That is, the information may stimulate new ways to think about and compare the categories that are being developed.

Coding

Open coding is the first of three coding procedures in grounded theory. As the name suggests the aim is to “open up” and disassemble the data into units that can be described along properties and dimensions. Similarities among concepts enable them to be grouped into categories where they are developed further in axial coding, another of

the coding techniques. Open coding highlights another central feature of grounded theory research, and that is constant comparison of data. Throughout the process of generating grounded theory the data are subject to intense scrutiny by the researcher who compares themes, concepts and ideas that emerge from the data to identify and refine categories. This requires the researcher to immerse him or herself into the data in order to detect subtle nuances that may contribute towards new or deeper understandings.

In axial coding the goal is to continue developing categories, but also to relate categories to one another. Whereas data was disassembled in open coding, it is now reassembled to demonstrate the ways in which categories and sub-categories are linked. Part of this process is identifying the conditions under which the category occurs, as well as the process by which the participants react to the category. Strauss & Corbin (1998) provide a framework that can be applied to the data to uncover these themes. Recall that categories represent phenomena. Essentially the researcher compares the data to try and identify the conditions or circumstances in which the category occurs, the response of the participants when those circumstances arise and finally, the consequences of their response. Collectively the answers to these questions describe the structure and process of each category which is a leap forward in terms of understanding what the properties and dimensions of the categories are as well as how the categories are similar and different. Ideally at some time during axial coding a point of saturation will be reached. That is, no new information emerges that would contribute further to the development and understanding of each category.

Reaching saturation is another consideration that is largely left to the discretion of the researcher. The question "how did you know you had reached a point of saturation" is

an important one to address. In this study key themes and categories were identified following analysis of the first set of interviews. This information was taken back to the participants for the purpose of clarifying, modifying or omitting themes that did not represent their experience justly. This process left me with a clearer picture of the categories and sub-categories as well as how they should be represented. At this point I set out to further develop the categories, which was the emphasis of the second interview. Participants were asked to expand on or comment further about some aspect of their experience that was now being represented in a category. Once the second interviews were complete I had sufficient information to fill out the categories and describe the process, which is the idea of saturation.

Selective coding refers to the process of putting together and refining the theory. The first step is to decide upon a central or core category. The core category is to be representative of all other categories that have been developed, and should provide a clear sense of what the findings are about. In addition Strauss & Corbin (1998) assert that this main category must appear in the data often, it must be logical and consistent, and it should also account for variations in the data. Once this category has been identified the researcher prepares a storyline for the purpose of relating each category to the core and therefore bringing the data from the level of abstract description and conceptualization to theory.

Sampling

Purposeful, criterion sample

Research participants were purposefully selected based on the criterion sampling technique. According to Patton (2002):

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry (p. 230).

In some ways this approach is the antithesis of the aims of random sampling. Random samples are generated to remove the possibility of selection bias and to generalize findings to a broader population. Conversely, purposive sampling targets individuals who have specific experience related to the aims of the study, and the goal is to comprehend and illuminate not generalize the participant's experience (Patton, 2002).

With criterion sampling, participants must meet certain standards or conditions for inclusion. Participants in this type of sample have been selected because they are exemplars. The criteria, which are established prior to sampling, should fall in line with the purpose of the study. Critical incidents can be used as a means for establishing what the criteria need be (Patton, 2002).

Participant criteria

First and foremost the participant must have direct experience with the phenomena of interest. In this case that would mean having experienced some instance of challenge, setback, struggle, or difficulty in their sport that had a profound effect on them. That is the incident may have posed a threat to their continued participation in sport, to their athletic identity, to their enjoyment of sport, and/or to their overall sense of happiness and contentment. Moreover, the precipitating event may have caused some confusion and dissonance within the person because of being confronted with information that runs counter to core beliefs and assumptions about the world as they

know it. For example the belief that the world is supposed to be fair, or that bad things only happen to bad people, etc.

Examples of sport related incidents that may present such problems include serious injuries, immense pressure to perform, role reduction, getting cut from a team, a devastating performance and/or result, and dealing with the sacrifices that are necessary to be an elite athlete. Please note this list is not meant to be conclusive. There may be additional events or experiences athletes are faced with that meet the criteria for inclusion. What matters most is how the individual perceived the event. If it is believed that some other sport related event not mentioned in this section posed a significant challenge or problem for an athlete and their attempt to make sense of it and move forward was successful, then they would have been considered for participation in this study.

The ability of the participants to articulate their experience with adversity clearly and intelligibly is an important consideration as well. I was aware of a few people in advance who I felt would make exceptional participants because of what they have been through and because I was confident that they could communicate their story well. One of these individuals I know personally, while the other I have learned about from colleagues who have had direct experience working alongside the person, or know of other professionals who have. Both people agreed to participate in the study.

Locating and accessing participants

In this study the choice of whom to interview and why boiled down to convenience and accessibility. This being my first foray into qualitative interviewing I felt it would be important to conduct in-person interviews as much as possible to aid in

the development of a working relationship and to get a feel for the more subtle kinds of information such as non-verbal communication that is absent in telephone or e-mail interviews. Non-verbal information further contributes towards understanding the participant's experience more clearly and accurately. Furthermore I am more comfortable working with people one-on-one and in person through my work consulting with athletes, and this factored into my decision as well. These ideas, combined with fact that I lacked the time and funds to travel very far outside the city, limited the pool of potential participants I could recruit. In the end I wanted people I had ready access to, who were referred to me by respected colleagues, who fit the criteria I was looking for and who were willing and able to share their story. For those reasons I chose participants in Winnipeg. An argument could be made that I chose participants from a relatively small pool. However my counter argument is that there is no guarantee I could have found better participants elsewhere, particularly since all three participants I recruited were very gracious and open about sharing their story with me. Furthermore each person articulated their experience in great detail, which is precisely what the researcher is looking for.

As mentioned I called upon a few close colleagues to help identify potential participants for the study. Calling on others who may have access to people or information about potential participants is consistent with the purposive criterion sampling technique, which is the approach that I used to inform participant selection decisions. Moreover it provided me an element of control I felt would be necessary to ensure the participants would be reliable, open, and at ease discussing a very personal challenge they have been through. Researchers Chiang, Keatinge, & Williams (2001) suggest that in grounded theory research, control over the composition of the sample is

essential because the researcher needs to ensure the participants meet the criteria they are looking for and that they are willing and capable of contributing to the project as it has been outlined. Because I had informed each of my colleagues about what I was looking for and because I trust their judgment, I had total confidence that the people they suggested would be a good fit for what I was trying to do.

The participants were contacted initially by phone and through e-mail. Each person was given a letter (Appendix A) that contained information about the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement, as well as a consent form (Appendix B) that provided detail about how the interview material will be used and protected. Signed consent was received from all three participants prior to their participation. The pseudonyms A, B, and C were used to protect the identity of each participant and an effort was made to omit material that could potentially identify each individual. For example references made to the sport they are involved with, friends and family names, etc. has been altered.

Sample size

It should be noted there are no concrete guidelines for sample size in qualitative research. Essentially, the choice is left to the researcher who takes into consideration what they feel are a useful and credible number of participants based on the purpose of the study, and available time and resources (Patton, 2002). I interviewed three participants in the study. I learned through my literature review that the number three has the advantage of being readily triangulated across participants, which has been shown to improve the accuracy and depth and quality of the data, in qualitative research (Begley,

1996). Furthermore seeking out multiple perspectives can be an effective means for verifying the consistency of the findings (Patton, 2002).

It is important to remember that the goal of purposeful sampling is in-depth description and understanding and not representativeness to broader populations. The number of cases is less important than the quality of each case. Furthermore, openness and flexibility in design are defining characteristics of the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore if information had emerged during analysis that warranted being looked at through a different lens or from a different perspective, which might contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomena or if a participant resigned I would have looked to add another participant to contribute to the study.

An additional consideration is time and human resources, specifically with regard to managing large quantities of data. Three cases produced a significant amount of data to be transcribed and coded and, as a result, required a considerable amount of time and energy. A sample size of three, while demanding and time intensive, is still acceptable and manageable for the purpose of this project. More participants would mean either investing more time and energy, which may be difficult, or sacrificing depth of understanding and therefore the quality of the findings.

Validity Issues

There are a variety of means by which to establish validity of results in a qualitative study. For example researchers may look to verify whether results are credible, reliable, and trustworthy. Essentially the purpose of confirming validity in qualitative inquiry is to answer the question: "Are the interpretations of the findings accurate and representative of the subject's experience"? Establishing validity in

qualitative research requires that the criteria for making judgments about quality and credibility be made explicit (Patton, 2002).

Straussian grounded theory is shaped by social constructivist philosophy, which posits that truth and reality are socially constructed. An absolute, single reality does not exist “out there” to find (Lomborg & Kirkevold, 2003). Rather each person creates their perception of reality through interaction and experience in the social world. Moreover, validity in qualitative research is thought to refer to knowledge as a construction of reality, not a mirror (Kvale, 1996). From this perspective, claims about validity are mostly concerned with whether the researcher’s interpretations are congruent with the participant’s experience of the topic being studied. As Kvale (1996) puts it, the issue is one of whether the results represent knowledge claims that are defensible as opposed to absolute.

With this in mind the question that follows is: “What steps have been taken to build towards establishing congruency”? This question refers to some of the more practical issues for verifying results of the study such as, is the method a good fit for the research aims? Furthermore, has there been an attempt to account for researcher effects that may contaminate the findings? Have multiple data sources been considered? Finally, have the findings been checked for accuracy? Each of these concerns has been accounted for in the present study. A description as to how follows.

Methodological Fit

The aim of this study is to illuminate how elite athletes find meaning in adversity. A key assumption of the Straussian grounded theory method is that people take on active roles in response to challenging events that they act on the basis of meaning, and that

meaning is best understood through interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A grounded theory approach is useful for getting at questions concerning the meanings of experience. Furthermore qualitative interviews provide the researcher with an effective means to access the thoughts and feelings of the participants, which hold the key to understanding and being able to describe their experience with adversity in sport.

Another reason why grounded theory is an appropriate method for this study lies in the systematic nature of the process. The principles and procedures of the grounded theory approach are well defined and structured. While it is inaccurate to state that the procedures follow a step-by-step format, a general sequence is provided. However, flexibility is allowed in the way the steps are followed. The researcher can go back and forth between procedures as often as is necessary to develop categories more thoroughly. The systematic nature of generating a grounded theory is thought to contribute to rigor, which is noted as a means for establishing credibility in qualitative research (Patton, 2002).

Researcher Effects

The researcher in qualitative inquiry plans and carries out the interviews-- which are the primary source of data collection—and analyzes them as well. Steps should be taken therefore to identify and make explicit the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences which the researcher holds concerning the topic of interest. Ahern (1999) describes bracketing as a means for confirming the validity of the research design and the results of the study. This process is thought to account for the researcher by making explicit the conceptual baggage they carry with them into the investigation and that doing so contributes to the credibility of the findings.

Accuracy of Claims

There are efforts to assess and verify the accuracy and credibility of findings built into the process of grounded theory research. They do not exist as separate steps. Rather, the data is confirmed in an ongoing basis through actions such as the constant comparative technique, member checks, and through theoretical sampling. Researchers suggest that the constant comparative method is designed to ensure credibility, and trustworthiness of the findings in grounded theory research (Lomborg & Kirkevold, 2003). Emergent themes and concepts are checked for accuracy and further developed through subsequent interviews and by immersing oneself in the data. In essence the concepts are returned to the expert on the subject (i.e., the participants) to gauge and confirm whether or not they indeed represent what the person has experienced. If they do, then the goal becomes to illuminate them more completely. If they do not, then they are modified or discarded altogether. This sequence is ongoing throughout the duration of the study. Knowledge is created through an ongoing dialogue between participant and researcher. Essentially the research participants provide experiential knowledge; the researcher interprets this information and sends it back to the participant for further clarification and conceptualization.

Multiple Data Sources

Triangulation between sources is another quality control check that has been employed in this study to gauge whether the findings are accurate and credible. Triangulation is a valuable tool used for comparing and contrasting emergent themes and categories across different perspectives as well as for developing a deeper understanding of the participants' experience with the phenomena (Begley, 1996). Obtaining data from

a few different respondents on multiple occasions enables the researcher to check for consistency in the interpretations they have arrived at as well as to explore alternative explanations for events (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Triangulation is one of the ways in which congruence of findings are established in qualitative research.

What's In the Data

The participants describe a process for getting through sport related adversity that begins from the initial reaction of finding out the situation is serious, through to a point where they have found meaning in the experience and achieved a sense of closure. The language used by the participants' supports the claim that indeed it is a process they are illuminating. Webster's (2004) defines "process" as a series of actions or operations marked by gradual changes that lead towards a particular result or end. The people interviewed make reference to different stages and phases along the way to getting through the experience. Phrases such as "at that point", or "initially...and then" suggest the process is marked by different transitions and that there is a sense of temporal sequencing, but which is not in a linear, step-by-step manner. People go back and forth within and between categories and sub-categories as they move through the experience. Furthermore, the length of time it took for the participants to reach certain points on the journey was different from person to person.

Moreover while each person expressed that they had indeed "got through" the experience, that is not to say they "got over" it. Significant personal challenges like the ones these people have been through are bound to stay with you in some way. What mattered in the end is that each person found a way to accept any remaining uncertainty or unresolved feelings and move forward in their lives. Here then is my interpretation of

the participant's process as informed by the data. What follows is a detailed analysis of that process.

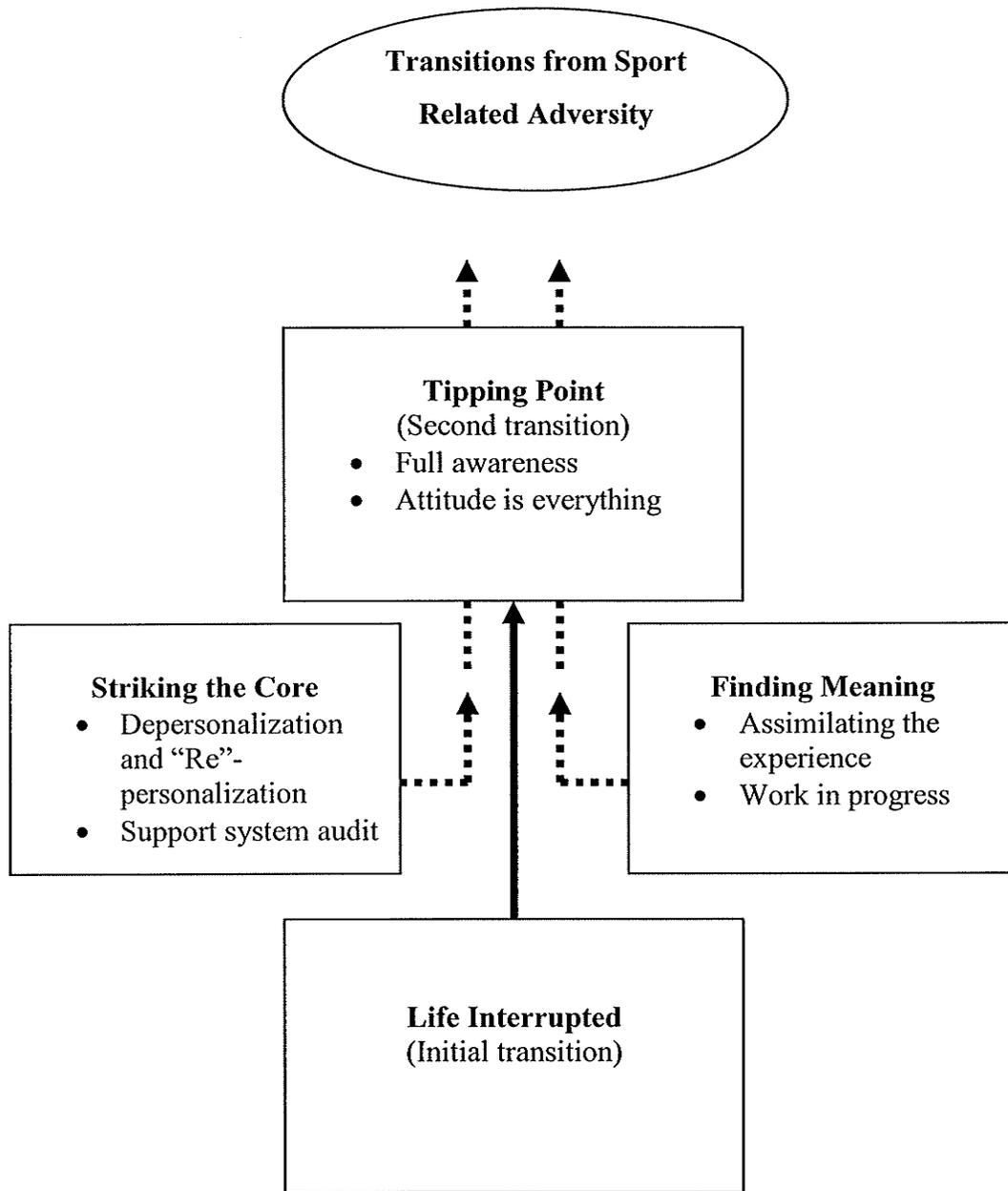
Adversity Biographies

Participant "A" has been a member of a Canadian National team since 1998 and is a World and Olympic champion. In Fall of 2004 while training for the upcoming season, this athlete suffered a freak concussion after colliding with another player. It was the first concussion, and first serious injury this athlete had faced in sport to that point. The symptoms, which were quite pronounced, prevented this athlete from engaging in any physical activity of even moderate intensity and lingered for several months before they began to subside. At this point participant "A" resumed sport and continues to compete for the national team at the time of completing this study.

Participant "B" has been a member of a Canadian National team since 1997 and has competed internationally in sport as an amateur and professional. This athlete was diagnosed with an arterial blockage in the lower leg, which caused intense pain and limited this person from training at a level of intensity necessary to compete at the elite level. Complicating matters for participant "B" was that the condition—while common to this athlete's sport—was rather unknown to doctors and other sport scientists here in Canada. As a result participant "B" endured through multiple misdiagnosis over a period of several months while traveling across Canada in search for an answer to explain what was happening. Once the problem had been properly diagnosed surgery followed to correct the condition. Participant "B" returned to competitive sport in spring 2006 without complications.

Participant "C" competed at the provincial, national and international levels for twenty-four years prior to retiring from competition in 2002. The opportunity to represent Canada at the Pan-American Games in Winnipeg in 1998 was the highlight of this athlete's career. In preparation for the Olympic trials in 2000, a routine drug test came back positive for the steroid agent nandrolone, which resulted in an automatic two-year suspension, which was subsequently raised to four years ending any hope of competing at the 2000 Olympic Games. For the next two and a half years this athlete fought to have the suspension overturned and their name cleared. In 2002 a review board overturned the suspension and granted participant "C" full reinstatement. This athlete, whom had planned to retire after the 2000 Olympics before the incident occurred, did so shortly after the decision was rendered and has not returned to serious competition.

Figure 1.



Life Interrupted

The process of getting through a significant sport related challenge begins when something unexpected happens (e.g., an injury) that disrupts the normal flow and routine of life as an elite athlete. As a result the first transition the athlete must work through is the initial shock of what is transpiring. Because the experience is novel and far reaching, it can be quite overwhelming to comprehend and accept initially:

C: I felt as though there was a rock in my stomach. I don't know how to describe it but it was just awful. I've never been through anything like that in my life. It was awful. It was really bad.

Denial, downplay, and even self blame were strategies used to make sense of what was happening early on before the full ramifications of what they are dealing with were known:

B: I had been to the Commonwealth Games in 2002 and so the Olympics were the next step. So in training-- in fall 2003-- things were going great. I was going faster than I'd ever gone before, I was stronger than I'd ever been before, so the Olympics were looking great. And then I started feeling this little twinge in my left leg... And I chalked it up to one of those "overuse" things. That it's just weaker so I've just got to make it stronger, or get more massages, or stretch harder, stretch longer -- those sorts of things.

I (interviewer): So your thinking it's not a big deal?

B: No it's not a big deal and so I just kept working at it and kept pushing it away, pushing it aside... I would just lose power all of a sudden. And so we kept going, I kept plugging away. I went to the first Olympic qualifiers in Moscow, Russia and I

didn't qualify, and it was really tough. And I still felt this pain in my left leg but I still didn't think anything of it. I just thought, "I suck, what's going on"? I was really struggling with the fact my performance was decreasing but there was no real explanation. I didn't know why, but at the same time I am thinking "It's something that I'm just doing wrong". I was blaming myself mostly and that was really tough.

Denial and downplay soon give way to the realization this experience may be more of a challenge than first thought:

A: Initially I didn't think it was a big deal when I first got hit. I remember thinking my jaw just hurts but it's not a big deal and then throughout the next week, and a couple of weeks after, I realized it was a little more serious than I had initially thought. So I think when it started to sink in that maybe this was going to take a heck of a lot more time than I thought initially I was just hugely disappointed and sad.

Complicating matters for the athlete early on is that they may only have partial awareness of the full implications of what they are going through:

I: What was the hardest part early on?

B: Not knowing. Not knowing and meanwhile the harder I went the slower I got—that's tough.

It was difficult to make sense of what they were going through, and what it all means, without more knowledge of the situation. The lack of awareness invokes strong feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and disappointment, which the following participant indicated was the hardest part to deal with in the beginning:

A: I think the hardest part was probably at the very beginning where you just suddenly realize I wasn't going to be okay in just a day or two... so I think the hardest part for me was just the initial time frame of being sort of frustrated and uncertain because it probably took me a couple to a few weeks to get to the point where I was accepting and being like, "Okay, I just need to relax and let myself rest and heal and recover, and do all of those things" ... So that was the hardest part for me was the fear of not knowing how bad it was or if it was minor.

One athlete admits their initial frustration from not knowing more about the situation turned to anger and resentment towards sport:

C: And for me I was just so angry and bitter at my sport and even just sport in general. I was just so frustrated...I can't describe how I felt because it was so bad. I've never cried so much.

Another describes the difficulty of giving in to the idea that the situation is beyond their control. There is a sense of helplessness to alter the course of events in the beginning:

I: How would you describe the initial period before you knew what was going on?

B: A journey. And I say journey because you don't have an ultimate destination. You're just kind of going through every day, every challenge and meeting it and you don't know where it's taking you. I would also say adventure... Adventure in the sense that there are ups and downs when you don't know [what's happening to you], and there are many valleys.

Allowing themselves to feel and honestly express whatever emotions came up, though often painful is described as a natural part of the process:

I: Initially, how did you deal with the emotions you were feeling?

C: I cried lots. I wasn't eating. I was just trying to figure out what has happened. I had no clue and was just always crying. I didn't want to go out. I didn't want to go to work.

I: Obviously then though, you allowed yourself to feel, you know. I mean if you felt like crying, you cried.

C: Yeah, and I cried a lot.

According to the athletes, masking how they felt and looking too far ahead only created problems and slowed down progress. Honest self-expression and avoiding the temptation to repress emotions that came up helped this athlete:

I: Initially, before you knew full well what your condition was how did you deal with the emotions you were feeling?

B: By just taking it day-by-day because I didn't know what I was dealing with and as such you couldn't look too far down the road...you were looking in the moment when you were dealing with it. I also realized that it's important to go through the emotions. So when I was sad or if I was frustrated by things I wouldn't try to repress those feelings because it's important to go through those emotions...I knew that I would have lots of emotions sort of brimming at the surface.

I: But that was okay. That was part of your process?

B: That was okay yeah, oh definitely. And it's so important to realize that it is part of the process.

I: You didn't fight it.

B: You can't fight it. If you fight it that's when things go wrong. That's when you don't let yourself just go through the emotions, you don't let yourself just feel how you do, and I think that's just part of dealing with situations like this.

I: Almost like to do that, you'd be getting in the way of your process?

B: Completely. And it will prolong it, making it a longer process.

Once the initial shock and frustration has been processed the focus shifts from a sense of "what is going on" to "what can I do to move forward". This shift marked the end of the first stage of the process for this athlete:

A: I think definitely the hardest part was the initial stage of frustration probably before I got to a point where I said, "Okay, lets turn it around and make the best of the situation".

Another athlete also makes reference to the transition from the initial stage to a new one. Having dealt with the initial loss of sport, the athlete began to look at the situation as an opportunity to engage in activities that were impracticable while immersed in elite sport:

B: I think for me there were two different phases. The first phase was, I didn't do anything. Again in the process in terms of dealing with the sense of loss, I had just lost a huge part of what I do in my life. And a lot of the time you deal with it in a way that you almost make it worse by not doing the things you love. I definitely went through that phase where I wasn't exploring the things that make me feel happy and that I love. Then, after I got out of that phase and I just said "No, what am I doing, I'm making myself more miserable", I started exploring some wonderful things. I mean they were things that you don't get to do as an elite athlete because your so tunnel focused on the one goal whereas now I'm getting

to explore so many different aspects of life, and aspects of myself I was never able to explore like being creative, and just doing so many different things.

Before the following athlete turned things around, feelings of guilt, frustration and loss of purpose prevented this participant from feeling joy and embracing possibilities besides sport:

I: Just to add to that then, why did you feel in the first phase that you didn't want to do anything?

B: It was during phase one where I didn't know what I was dealing with. So in some ways that can be tough because you don't know, you're so frustrated that it's kind of like you're punishing yourself in a way.

I: Almost like I should be competing and,

B: Yeah, I should be doing all this but I can't.

I: And if I can't do that I'm not doing anything else.

B: Yeah and I'm not going to call anyone, or do any other things that make me happy.

I: Almost like you felt guilty?

B: Yeah. And that happens a lot I find when we're trying to find explanations for things and either when we're feeling sad, or we feel as though we've done something wrong, or something not right we'll almost punish ourselves more and more, as though we should feel guilty of something.

A shift in focus from what you cannot do, to what you can helped participant "C" to regain some control of the situation. This athlete learned quickly there are a lot of things they can do and need to do to in order to move forward:

C: We were thinking "Well how are we going to deal with this, what's our next step" and you know we had to look at who we can talk to, places we can go to, things we can do and so... I just had to sit down and think what was the next thing to do.

As bleak as things seemed in the early going there was a belief that things will be alright regardless of the outcome:

I: When did you know you were going to be okay?

B: From the beginning...

I: So despite all the doubts, deep down...

B: Deep down I knew.

I: How did you know?

B: Because I have confidence in that I can tackle anything. There's a strength there that's just, I don't know it's hard to articulate but I feel it... I just think that the environment you grow up in is a big part of it. And also knowing that my parents would always be there is huge.

Early access to people and information that can help make sense of the situation coupled with a belief in their ability to endure setbacks reduced anxiety and helped the athletes move forward as participant "A" explains:

A: I don't think I'm a person that dwells too much on any negative thoughts so I always felt I was going to get healthy... Sure right now [then] I wasn't feeling quite myself, or quite as energetic but I always felt I would still be human. So the only doubt was whether or not I would play [sport] again. So it was just coming to terms with that and being okay. But I feel that phase was very short. There

were lots of doctors and people who knew something and pretty quickly they were able to say you're going to be fine. So I feel that was a really minimal stage because I had access to people right away and so there was never any panic or anything. I mean yeah I was upset but I never felt as though my life or anything in terms of my life skills was at risk. So I didn't know how it was going to go take but doctors were so reassuring that "You're going to be fine, completely, it's just that we can't tell you how long". So it was just the uncertainty of knowing how long as opposed to if I was going to be okay.

I: Right. You believed you would.

A: Yeah. I really knew that I would.

Having only partial awareness can erode the belief one has in their ability to overcome the challenge in front of them:

C: I didn't feel real confident at the beginning when all of this happened. I knew of my innocence because I did not take steroids but I didn't know how to explain it until we started to get the information.

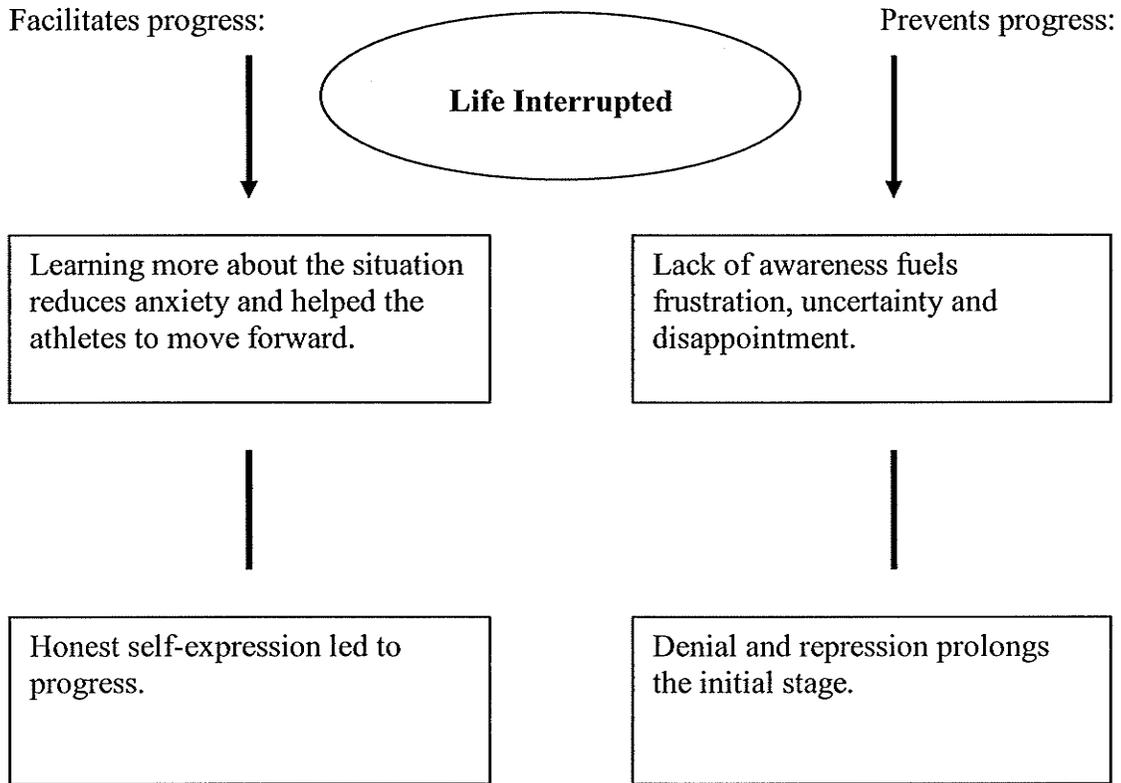
I: You don't know what you're up against yet.

C: Yeah and sometimes people would come ask me to come out and speak and there definitely was none of the confidence then because I would be thinking "Do they want me to come and talk" do you know what I mean? So I did feel negative to a certain extent even though I was confident I had nothing to hide but yet because this still happened to me, and I didn't have any answers and I didn't know what was going on I wasn't feeling too confident.

To summarize, the athletes described the initial period of "Life Interrupted" as the first stage in the process of transition through sport related adversity. The initial reaction is one of shock and confusion. Denial and downplay are temporarily effective strategies for dealing with these feelings. However, as the athlete learns the situation is more serious than first thought strong feelings of frustration, helplessness and disappointment emerge. These and other feelings such as guilt, anger, and loss of purpose came to the surface as the athletes began to acknowledge and come to terms with the fact they are unable to --at least temporarily-- continue participating in their chosen sport, and by extension return life to normal.

Contributing to the strong emotional reaction early on is the fact the athlete may only have partial awareness of what has happened, what the implications are, and what, if anything, they can do to change things for the better. Learning more about the situation reduces anxiety brought on by the uncertainty of what they are dealing with. Honest self-expression (i.e., feeling and expressing whatever emotion comes up) leads to acceptance, which enabled the athletes to shift their focus from ruminating about the situation to taking action to change it. A comparison can be made to the process of grieving. Once the athlete comes to terms with the initial loss of sport they are more likely to feel ready to move forward and commit to turning the experience around. Continual denial and repression only compound the problem and get in the way of progress. The shift in the athlete from feelings of frustration and helplessness to a commitment to turning things around is empowering. It helped the athletes interviewed to regain some semblance of control over the situation, which until then, was perceived as being largely beyond their control to change.

Figure 2.



Striking the Core

This major category is thought to represent more of a sub-process. Whereas the participants refer to the transition from “Life Interrupted” into “Tipping Point” as distinct stages in the experience, the category “Striking the Core” does not have a discernable point of departure. Issues relating to a loss of self and social support surface early on in the process and remain throughout. There is no end point if you will. The category is reflective of how deep and how personal the experience strikes into the core of the person. It deals with questions about things of central importance like one’s personal identity, the strength of support network, the level of trust and belief in the self and coming to terms with losing out on important dreams and goals

The adverse experience the participants faced tested their personal strengths and challenged core beliefs and assumptions they have about themselves and others around them. The challenge, as the athletes interviewed have described, is to re-establish a sense of self that encompasses the whole person, not just the athlete self. Maintaining a more balanced identity is thought to safeguard the individual against experiences that threaten the athlete self, such as the loss of sport for example. Furthermore, the athletes explain how having key support people present and being in a supportive physical environment also helps reinforce a stable sense of self in times of turmoil. Collectively, these factors reduce anxiety and facilitate forward progress.

Depersonalization and “Re”-personalization

It stands to reason that being an elite athlete requires the ability to do certain physical activities well. The inability of an elite athlete to exert himself or herself physically contributes to a significant loss of self because being physical is a big part of their day-to-day lives and a pre-requisite for remaining an elite athlete. The incapacity to physically perform at a high level not only takes away a large part of what athletes do, but also by extension who they are (i.e., their identity). For example:

I: You mentioned that the experience “struck the core” of who you are. Can you expand on that?

B: I think because in sport, there is no holding back. You give one hundred percent of yourself; it’s all heart, body and soul. So to have an injury where you don’t know what’s going on and your performance is decreasing. It’s reflective of who you are and your heart, body and soul. So all of a sudden when you can’t perform and you’re giving so much of yourself, it’s like a slam on your character...you feel like there is something wrong with you. When I say “you” I mean everything.

I: Beyond the physical.

B: Yeah. And I’m the type of person who absolutely loves challenges and I always said that the harder it got the more I loved it. And I love pushing the limits, pushing my limits, and all of a sudden it felt like my limitations—because I kept pushing the barrier and my times were getting faster and faster—and then all of a sudden it felt like there was something stopping me before I could even push those limits. So that was really tough for me as an athlete because I couldn’t push those

physical boundaries anymore that I had been testing so often. So that was again hitting the core of my physical self as well.

Accepting that you are unable to engage in physical pursuits is difficult to admit for someone whose passion and routine revolves around it as the following athlete explains. Again we see how a lack of information—in this case, why bodies are failing—can make matters worse:

B: Well it affected me in the deepest way because it was what I knew, because it was something that I was putting complete trust and faith into—my body—and all of a sudden it was failing me and I wasn't sure why. And also, again with the people around me, the support structure, simple things like trust in people, trust in my body, trust is one of the biggest things in life. We put so much trust in everything—walking down the street, driving in our cars—that when that gets shaken you feel like you can't trust anything. It strikes deep into the core.

Going from a very busy and physically demanding existence to one of little activity requires a major adjustment. Physical withdrawal symptoms posed a challenge for some athletes, as one participant explained:

A: I feel as an athlete you're just so used to being active, and with some injuries you can work through it, like if you have a shoulder injury or something at least you can still ride the bike, or workout, or do certain things, and with so many other injuries it's just with one specific part of your body that's affected but you could workout the other parts of your body but with concussions and headaches and stuff you just can't do anything! You have to just rest and for me that was just

so different. And I feel like you get so used to the high of exercising and working out and then you just don't have that anymore.

One athlete endured a physical loss of self by being temporarily banned from competition. This added to their frustration because while physically capable the athlete was unable to do what athletes do, which is participate in sports:

I: What was it like to not be involved in the sport that you love, that you've done since you were young?

C: I started playing some baseball, which was good. I haven't done that in a long time. But again if we went to the provincials I wouldn't be allowed to play.

I: So it was everywhere. Your world of sport was on hold much like your life in many respects.

C: That's right, yeah.

However, the repercussions of being physically unable to participate in sport (as opposed to being banned from sport, but physically able to play and compete) transcend the athlete self and can effect the whole person:

B: During that month I really asked myself what is quality of life? Is quality of life something that everyone says is just living life or is it actually doing something, doing things you love to do, and I love to be active. I've always been active—I've been involved in sport since I was eight years old. I had ten years of figure skating and ten years of [current sport] and maybe I didn't know at that point whether I wanted to get back into competitive sport but I knew that I still wanted to get to a level where I could still just enjoy being active, feel my body, go

outside, go for a run do things like that. And I couldn't do any of that at that point.

For the above athlete an additional cost of being unable to participate at a high level meant coming to terms with missing out on important dreams and goals:

B: It was hard because it was the year leading up to the Olympics, and earlier on in my journey I had to face the fact that I wasn't going to make the Olympics. And then at that point, once I had said "Okay, I'm not going to make the Olympics, I'm just going to keep [training] with my professional team" but then when I couldn't even do that it was just like the injury kept whittling away at the strengths that I had as an athlete and you kind of have to keep reassessing your goals while thinking "What's going on".

In the case of an injury, the physical symptoms can have an effect on the mental and emotional capacity of a person, which further exacerbates feelings of a loss of self:

A: With a concussion I think it's hard because at times I didn't feel like myself and that was one thing that was awful scary because it [concussion] does affect you, your emotions and everything. And so that's why I think it probably took me longer than usual to turn it around. Initially I felt the disappointment and the downside of it because the fact is with a concussion you may not have the same emotional capacity, or the same feelings you usually experience so that was a big challenge in it to as well as just feeling so sad and that this isn't me you know. This isn't what I'm about or how I usually feel...

I: And don't know how to turn it off, or change things?

A: Yeah, yeah. So I think that was one part that was also very disappointing.

The self is compromised in other ways as well beyond the physical.

Simultaneously the athlete must deal with forces that challenge the non-athlete self. That is the whole person, of which the athlete self is a part of, is also affected when the athlete identity is too strong, or when the actions of other people such as coaches, teammates, friends and family reduce the person to an athlete identity only:

B: You really have no idea until you've been there. And again, I mean you do expect sometimes that your reputation is what precedes you and is a big thing in that people who don't know you very well and hear something like "Oh, she's you know, look at her results". They are the ones to kind of quickly dismiss you [the person] as well because they don't know who you are and what you encompass and what you embrace as a person. They don't know you as a person, just as an athlete. Which is—I mean that's one of the things in sport is that you're an athlete—and you're just an athlete often, you're not a person underneath. And so I believe that you're a person first and foremost and then you're an athlete. It's the person who is successful because it's the person underneath when you encounter challenges and I think every athlete will encounter challenges that enables athletes to pursue success and achieve success. The athlete, who isn't a strong person, will crumble in facing adversity.

The following athlete distinguishes between people in sport who know and support the athlete and those who know and support the whole person. The former scenario was a difficult realization for this athlete to accept:

C: People that really knew me, knew that it wasn't true [doping charge]. When they saw it in the paper, they were thinking "Oh my gosh something obviously went" ...

I: It's a mistake.

C: Yep. People that knew me knew. But the people that didn't and just knew me as an athlete thought "Oh, she's saying that she doesn't know how it came about" and all of this well, that really hurt for even people to think that, but that's what I had to deal with.

It is important to recognize the athlete self as one of many roles in life. Too strong an attachment to the athlete role comes at a cost to other important aspects of the self. As one participant explained, a person-first mentality in sport may minimize the effect of setbacks on the athlete self:

B: I also have learned I think—through this challenge and some other challenges—that you can get lost in that role [athlete identity] and you can start defining that person by that role. And that's when it becomes dangerous because all of a sudden, when you encounter challenges, you're no longer a person, you're an athlete. And so you define your self by your results. That's when you run into trouble.

I: And then when something happens that threatens your athletic career it's really threatening to your whole identity?

B: Your being.

I: You went through some of that?

B: Definitely at first, yeah. Because I mean, when you're going to the Olympics you're putting everything out on the line and you're doing everything to be that top athlete, to be that elite athlete. You're not really thinking about that "person", and that's what I mean by the academic void [school], in my life that I hadn't fulfilled. I wasn't thinking about that I was only thinking about the athlete. And so in some ways, one of the most important lessons I've learned is that, if I was to go back to elite sport that person comes first, not the athlete... And also that you need to surround yourself with people who support that person, not just the athlete. That's a big one.

The actions of others in sport such as coaches, teammates and administrators can contribute to the loss of self, particularly when their actions fail to recognize the person and focus only on the athlete. Participant "C" explained the emotional and psychological challenge of trying to call attention to themselves as human beings:

C: I couldn't believe that they didn't believe me because I know who I am and I know my situation. But I guess they [sport administrators] deal with this on a daily basis and a lot of athletes have ruined it for others...But I phoned the Canadian Olympic Center, I know some people in there, and I wrote them all letters and just said " I can't believe you don't look at me [the person]". That was really hard for me to understand that they wouldn't look at that.

I: It's as though all of that gets erased?

C: Totally. They didn't even look at it.

This same athlete comments further on how total the sense of depersonalization is felt when the person is dismissed or relegated to the background by others:

C: I was so frustrated that they didn't you know, they treated it as every other case. It was not personal whatsoever. The hard part is that I was treated like a number.

Further still there were constant reminders that the above participants' status as an elite athlete had been revoked:

C: [A former coach] phoned me up to see if I wanted to come to an all-comers meet and I couldn't. I wanted to just because there were still some athletes I knew that were competing, but if I would have competed with them they would have been disqualified and suspended because they were competing in the surroundings of a druggy athlete who had failed a drug test... So that's what I had to deal with... You know, I competed for so long, represented my country, been on the podium watching our Canadian flag rise and this is how they treat me-- like I'm a criminal. So that was just really hard to deal with.

The reactions of others in sport should be tempered until there is enough information available to make accurate claims about the source of the problem. In this case the doubting and questioning by people in sport can make athletes feel as though their character is being attacked. One athlete expressed how it felt to be the focus of negative attention:

I: Day by day in the early going your condition was getting worse and you still had no answers. What was at stake for you?

B: My reputation and my integrity. Just because of the nature of the injury it looked as though I had stopped trying which was really hard to deal with because I'm a person that gives one hundred percent in whatever I do and always gave

one hundred percent in my sport. And I felt like suddenly this was being challenged, because it looked as though I couldn't do that [give full effort], but yet I was [to the best of their ability]. That was the hardest thing just dealing with the perceptions of what people were seeing but at the same time I was giving everything...

It is tough to separate the athlete identity from the person when others challenge your core attributes and what you believe in:

B: What was different about this experience is that people challenged whether I was committed, and through that, actually challenged who I am as a person. Again it comes back to that person-athlete, as in the person I am. That was the hardest thing.

Conversely, the athletes interviewed in this study found ways to regain or offset the loss of self they were experiencing. For one athlete, it was a matter of remembering there is more to life than what one does as an athlete:

A: I don't want to sound repetitive, but for me it is not just being defined by one moment or one incident. I can play my sport and love it, but I want to be the best [family member] and friend and student and everything that I can be all in one, and knowing that people don't think of me any less for one certain moment. That's something I want to do [be in competitive sport], but not something I have to do to define my worth as a person.

Going through a difficult experience can serve as a catalyst to remind athletes who they are and what is important in life:

A: I pride my self on being really balanced and having all these other aspects of my life. I think that with everything that happens to me, I look at the person first and then the athlete. And so, for me, it is such a reminder of all the other things I want to be in life. And certainly, my little saying of pursuing excellence—I want to pursue excellence in everything I do and being a good athlete-- an excellent athlete is one part of that but I take more pride in being a good person and being a good friend and family member. And so I think it's just a good perspective reminder of what really are the most important things to you, and how do you want to live your life. So, I think it was good for me as a person to look at all those things and remind myself of how I pride myself on that balance.

Bringing “all of yourself” to whatever you do including sport and maintaining a balanced identity by making time for other important roles in life helps a person to appreciate any one role even more:

A: I want to be a great athlete, but I'm all of these other things at the same time. When I'm an athlete all of those other [parts of me] aren't forgotten. And I think it just makes me feel my little saying “moments of appreciation”. I feel so fortunate for what I get to do and the position I am in. It's just another reminder of how lucky I am and how much I enjoy sport. And also, that I am all these different things, but I can be a little bit of all of them at the same time too.

I: And this reminded you about the value of bringing them all under the same roof?

A: Yeah. Certainly.

The value in maintaining a balanced identity was further emphasized by the participants. Doing so helped put them at ease with the idea that things will eventually work out fine, as one participant explained:

A: I think it was so important for me to be around friends and family and just truly relax and know that I have this balance. When I was younger I learned that I'm more than just an athlete. I love playing my sport and it's fun for me, but I take pride in being an overall human being and not just an athlete. So I think for me that [having balance] just helped me realize that you know what, it's okay. This is okay, and I'm going to be better because of it in the long run.

The experience reminded these athletes that while sport is an important part of life, it is only a part of the human experience. As the following participant suggested, the window for participating in elite sport will inevitably close some day and keeping this perspective will only help smooth their transition away from competing in sport when that day comes:

A: I think one thing to that helped is, I remember having a chat with my dad and he just sort of made a comment, "Well, I mean this isn't the case for you but if for some reason that this were that serious that it would end your career you could still look back and know that you've had a great career". And I remember just sort of smiling and saying "You know I hadn't really thought about it". But I think that also just made me more relaxed with the recovery knowing that, yeah, I want to recover, and I will eventually be healthy, and I would like to play sport again. But if for some reason I don't, I'm still okay.

Being physically active, if possible, and doing other activities that bring enjoyment and facilitate recovery helps to fill the void of participating in elite sport and restores a sense of personal well-being:

B: One of the things that I've changed is I'm doing a lot of other sports as well to diversify and to meet other people but also just to keep—I think it's good for the body to do a lot of different ranges of motion and it's good for the psyche to get a little break from just doing one thing all the time...

Moreover engaging in other leisure activities and pursuing other interests brings meaning and purpose to life, which may have been diminished somewhat by the loss of sport:

B: It helps you get your mind off it. It serves as a good distraction, but at the same time doing other things gives meaning again because it gives you a sense of purpose and also that you are exploring other things, at least in my case anyways, that I wasn't able to do before.

Engaging in activities outside of their sport also provided some respite from the feelings of loss and served as an opportunity to explore other interests, which may not be possible while participating in elite sport as the following athlete explains:

C: I started doing things. I started playing baseball and other stuff that I hadn't been able to do for a long time, so that helped a lot. And also because the people didn't know me—I only knew one person on the team. These people weren't in my circle and didn't know the whole story. They just knew me, here [in the context of baseball].

I: So it was like having a fresh start with no baggage if you will?

C: Yeah, that's a good word for it. As much as it's good to talk about it sometimes you just don't want to.

Taking time to reflect on the situation also facilitates coming to terms with the loss of self brought on by the experience. Because the life of an elite athlete is very hectic and regimented it is rare that one takes pause to assess who they are and where they are at in life. It takes something significant to disrupt their routine and force them to stop and reflect, as one athlete describes:

B: The injury forced me to take a step back...

I: Let me see if I understand you correctly. What you are saying is the rhythm of your life prior to this injury revolved for the most part around training and competing?

B: Yes. I was so focused on this one thing that I couldn't step out of it. And forced is a good word in the sense that it did—it forced me to go a completely different way that I may not have... The thing is this was a "physically forced", in that it forced me to actually physically stop because I have been active all my life. So it would take something like a physical ailment to stop.

The subject matter of the participant's reflections dealt with many existential concerns relating to their personal identity and what they value for example. This exercise reminded them about what is important in life within and outside of sport:

I: Is it safe to say that because of this experience, it made you look back? As opposed to, I mean, I don't think it's something that most people do normally?

A: Yeah.

I: I mean we'd like to think we do.

A: Yeah.

I: But this really forced you to?

A: Definitely it did. I'd taken little breaks once in a while but not a significant time I guess to really-- again, a situation like that just makes you be grateful for everything else in your life-- and I think that's what helped me through every major or minor setback that I've had and also to have that balance in your life. So that experience really did force me to stop and look back at past experiences, and who I am today, and what I'm about. And I think staying grounded and maintaining that balance for me is always one of the most important things, if not the most important thing for me.

Another athlete used the time away from elite sport to get clear on life's purpose as they see it:

I: It sounds like this was a real soul searching time for you. What kinds of things did you reflect on?

B: Purpose, priorities, perspective, support I mean, friends and family and importance. I mean [specifically], what's important.

I: That's a big one for you?

B: Yes.

I: What do you mean by purpose? I have an idea but...

B: I think when I say, "purpose" I am referring to the purpose of my journey through life. More to do with the purpose of what we do everyday in life, and the purpose of doing the things that make us who we want to be. And how can we be that person at the end of the day.

In the absence of information to help understand the situation better one athlete found comfort in reflecting on and sharing their experience:

I: It sounds like this experience led to a lot of soul searching, obviously. What kind of things did you think about?

C: I don't like confrontation and I would think about what other people might be thinking about me. Some people would ask me to do speeches and I'd be thinking, "Do they really want me"? It was a bit of a down time for me. I never doubted myself. I just felt uncomfortable because people did not understand how I didn't know what caused the failed drug test...

I: So what changed? Was there anything else that led to you becoming more comfortable with your situation other than learning more about it?

C: Just thinking about the situation and talking to other people.

The question "why did the experience force them to stop and reflect" warrants some discussion. It appears it is largely as a result of opportunity and time, which there is an abundance of with the loss of sport. Busy lives were cited as an obstacle to reflecting on life on a more regular basis. However a significantly adverse event can be a strong enough catalyst to make reflection a top priority:

I: Why did this experience force you to stop and reflect?

A: Because it was an injury where I did have to take time and slow down. It was a change of pace. But all those things turned out to be very valuable for me because it's a situation where I really had no control over what my brain was doing right there in terms of I couldn't play my sport. I couldn't control that, but I could control things in terms of my recovery. So that's how come...I feel like on a daily

basis my life is real busy and there are a lot of things going on and it's all stuff that you absolutely love doing and so, yes, you enjoy it but you don't necessarily have the hours or even minutes in the day to really stop and reflect on where you're at right now, or where you've come, so it was a chance to do that.

Going through a difficult experience may lead a person to lose sight of what really matters (e.g., balance in life). Taking time to reflect helps to put things in perspective and reminds the person how important those things are:

I: What gets in the way on a regular basis of when we are not suffering through setbacks what gets in the way of doing that kind of deep, introspective reflection?

A: I think busy lives...and I think that again, people are so driven and focused.

And I think those are such good attributes for success but—and I think I

mentioned this in our previous interview—one of my favorite classes at

[university] was the Psychology of Business. It was partially about how little

people actually took the time to reflect, but yet how valuable it was [to reflect].

We do live in a busy world where there is always more things to do on your list of things to do, but eventually things always get done. I think there is a definite value in taking a minute or two to stop and reflect and to appreciate where you are.

I: Do you do that more now after the experience?

A: Yeah, I do. I think because it showed me the importance of all the balance and

things that I take pride in, in life but even more so I think there are even more

moments of appreciation. I think I've always taken them, but maybe I take a few

more now.

One athlete took advantage of the time and space afforded to them with the loss of sport to reflect on and get clear about the significance of sport in their life. While it is common for this athlete to spend time thinking about what they want to do in sport (i.e., their goals) the reasons why the goals they have set matter to them received little consideration in comparison prior to being injured:

I: So, is it a matter that because there was this drastic change in the rhythm of your life, you had all this time and space now that it naturally led to asking the questions you did?

B: One hundred percent. Totally, because it's true. Every year comes [and goes] and another one starts and you don't take that time and say, "What is the purpose"? Every year you sit down and write your goals out, such as I want to go to the Olympics. But really, you don't ask yourself the question, "What is my purpose for going to the Olympics" or "Why do I do what I do"?

I: "Why is it important [i.e., sport, the goals she has set, etc.]"?

B: Why is it important, yeah. And I don't know if it's enough to say I love what I do. For others, that could be enough. But for me, I think I love so many other things in life, and so what is it about sport for me? What is it about making the Olympics and those kind of huge experiences? And maybe I'd lost a sense of what that was.

I: You asked those kinds of questions?

B: Oh, for sure. For sure.

The participants made reference to the rhythm of life as an elite athlete acting as a barrier to engaging in periods of self-reflection, despite the inherent value of doing so:

I: What gets in the way of stopping and reflecting on some of the things you did on a more regular basis when we aren't forced to stop?

B: Everyday life. Especially when you're an athlete because your training is so monotonous that you just get stuck in the same rhythm every day, and every year, and every two years.

I: It's like tunnel focus?

B: Yeah exactly. You don't step outside. You don't have a chance to step outside or you may feel as though you'll get lost in the rain, that you may get left behind if you start asking those questions. And yet, ultimately, I think it's the people who do ask those questions who do the most amazing things.

The topic of rhythm surfaced frequently in the interviews. The rhythm of life as an elite athlete revolves a great deal around training, traveling, and competing. Routine is what they are used to day in and day out. All of a sudden, for these athletes, their schedule is free, their routine has changed dramatically and they are forced to establish a new rhythm. Coming to terms with that reality was the first step for the following athlete:

A: So, it was just take a deep breath, your life is going to be a heck of a lot slower than it's ever been pace wise and it was a good reminder for me to just take time to think and reflect.

Finding meaningful activities to fill the day helped the following athlete adjust to life without sport:

C: I was expecting [a baby] at the time, and I spent a lot more time doing stuff with my daughter. I tried to look in other areas for things to do. I didn't want to have anything to do with my sport.

For another athlete, the opportunity to establish a new rhythm enabled them to commit time and energy to other important pursuits that had been put aside because of the amount of time and energy that sport demanded:

B: But it also forced me to step back and complete my education, which was always something in the back of my mind going through sport. I grew up in a household where academics were very important and were very focused. And because I had put academics on the side and pursued sport, I always had this little nagging voice in my head that said, "You still have academics to do, you still haven't completed that side of things". I've had some people, such as some coaches and a sport psychologist I was working with, say to me, and talking about that issue, talking about that feeling that I haven't accomplished myself in that aspect of my life.

I: Sure, there's still a void.

B: There's still a void. And maybe I could never fully commit to sport because I hadn't fully finished that. And so in some ways I was thinking that, it [the injury] made me step back! Now I have I graduated [college]. Throughout that whole process I finished my university degree. So now I've completed it, and now I'm physically better. So in some ways the injury really coordinated with some of the things that were a void in my life that now are opportunities for my future.

To summarize, this subcategory describes how these athlete's dealt with the perception of a loss of self (depersonalization) brought on by the loss of sport. Moreover it details the steps that were taken to regain a sense of self ("re"-personalization) that transcends the athlete role. The term depersonalization refers to a sense of loss of one's

personal identity. Moreover it accounts for the act of reducing a person down to one of the many roles that they may identify with, such as when a coach or teammate gives consideration to the athlete only, not the whole person. Each of the athletes interviewed dealt with having their personal sense of identity challenged by the experience itself and through the actions of others. The sense of loss affected the athlete self as well as the non-athlete (or whole) self.

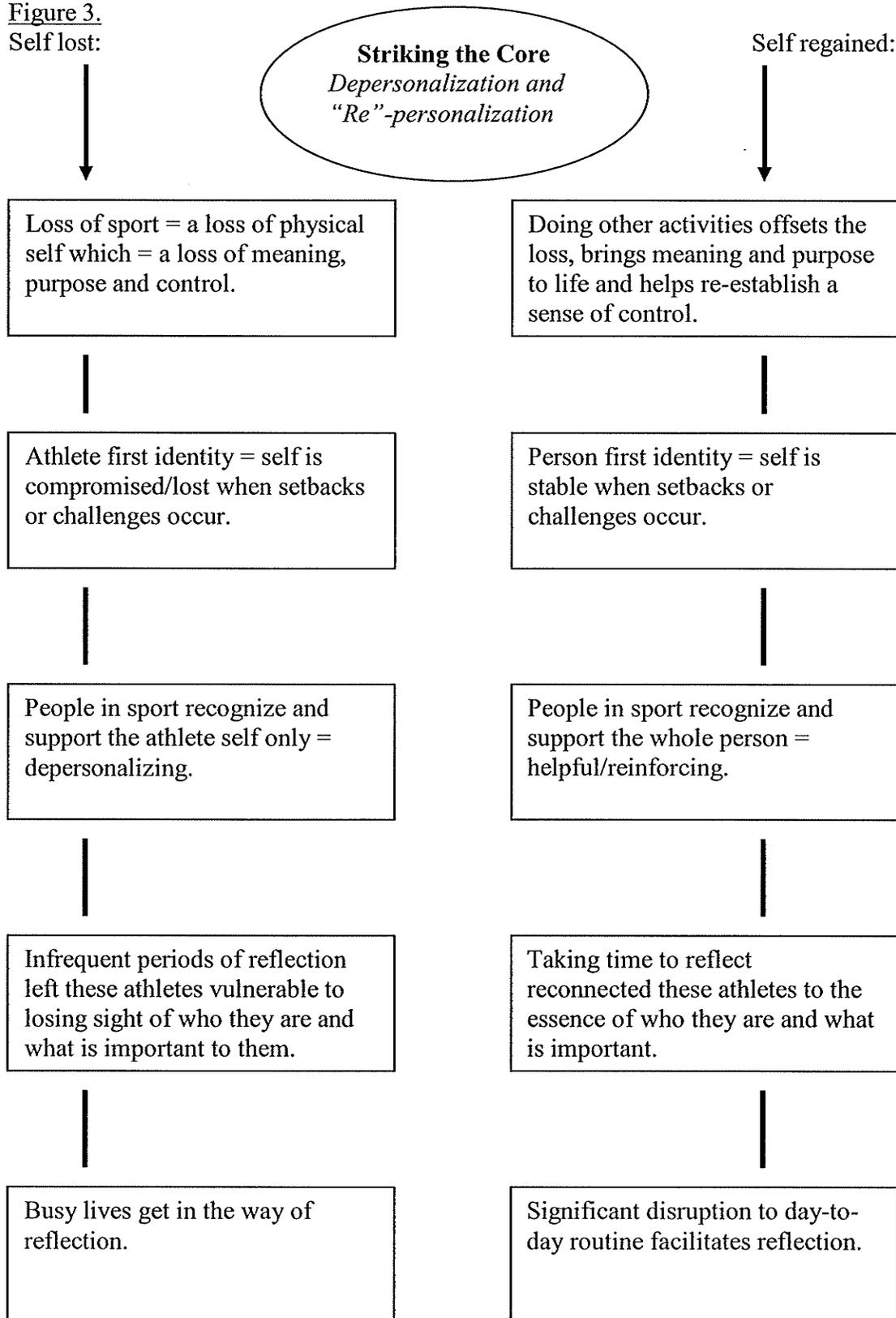
Being physical is a big part of what elite athletes do, and it is often a big part of who they are (i.e., their identity). When something happens that takes sport away it has an effect on things of central importance to the athlete, like their identity, their passion, their dreams, and their well-being and requires that they make adjustments to their daily routine. The person must deal with being physically inactive, which can be a major transition for someone whose passion and occupation revolve around being active. Now, they must adjust to having a slower, less regimented routine, which is opposite to the hectic pace that elite athletes live, and they must find something to do with all the time and freedom now available to them. These athletes derive a considerable amount of value and purpose from their participation in elite sport. Engaging in other meaningful pursuits, and doing what they can physically, helped to offset these feelings and reestablished a sense of purpose in their day-to-day lives.

In addition to a physical loss of self these individuals experienced what is perhaps best described as a personal loss of self. That is, the effects of not participating in sport go beyond the athlete self and affect the whole person. The participants explain how identifying too strongly with the athlete role left them vulnerable to losing sight of the whole person, i.e., the many other roles and attributes beyond athlete that comprise the

self as well. Recognizing that being an elite athlete is one of many significant roles in life and making time for other important aspects of the self helps alleviate the feelings of loss and fosters a broader sense of self that transcends the athlete role. Moreover it reminded these athletes about the importance of maintaining a more balanced identity when or if they return to elite sport.

A personal loss of self also occurs when other people fail to acknowledge the person within the athlete, as in the case of someone making subtle accusations or questioning the character of the person for their inability to perform at a high level. These actions leave the individual feeling as though the people around them only care about the athlete, not the person. Doing other things and taking time to reflect on the situation, and on a holistic sense of self, and what is important helped the athletes to deal with the loss and put things in perspective. As valuable as it is to take time to reflect on these and other existential concerns, the participants admit that were it not for the experience disrupting their routine and freeing up time they probably would not have reflected on issues pertaining to their sense of personal identity, and the value of sport. Busy lives get in the way of reflecting on a more regular basis and it takes something significant to force the athlete to stop and take stock.

Figure 3.
Self lost:



Support System Audit

The participants described how facing adversity provided them a clear picture of who in their support network they can and cannot count on for support, which captures the essence of this sub-category quite nicely. Feeling genuine support from people inside and outside of sport was a key contributing factor in the participants getting through the experience. Conversely, the withdrawal of support from people whom they were counting on to be there was one of the more difficult aspects of the experience that the participants dealt with.

The presence of key support persons was of real benefit to the following athlete while they were going through a sport related challenge:

I: Where did you draw the strength from to get through this thing?

C: Umm just all my friends, family and even the media. The media backed me up one hundred percent, which was so good because if you're dealing with the media and they are against you it just doesn't help.

Support persons helped this athlete most by simply "being there". The participants described "being there" as being present, caring, empathetic and understanding.

I: You mentioned that you drew strength from family and friends. What was it they did or said that helped?

C: Just being there to talk to you. They would ask me if there was anything they could do, it was just total support. Whether I needed to call to talk to them or cry to them...

I: Just being there for you.

C: Yeah, they were always there.

The experience reminded the following athlete how fortunate they are to have such a broad, solid support network in place. Genuine support from key people in sport reduced feelings of pressure or guilt and helped this person to relax:

I: What did you learn about your support network as a result of this experience?

A: I learned that I am very fortunate and that I have a very good support system.

And its good because it reminds me of not only all the people that I have met in sport but also all the people I knew from say growing up, or school or anywhere and how all of them came to support me. They really were there for me...and just to have so many people that I feel I could turn to. And even everyone in sport being, "No, take as much time as you need. And obviously we would love to have you back, but do whatever you need to do" and so it just relieved me of any of the silly pressures you might feel where "You should be there" or "Should be doing that". So for me, with my family and friends I don't think I could be more fortunate in terms of my support network. So that was hugely helpful for me.

Though it is painful to experience a lack of support from people who are expected to be there when needed, strong support from even a small group of people helps to offset the problem:

I: What did you learn about your support team through this experience?

C: That I have a huge support team. There were some that shocked me by their lack of support, but I had great support. Obviously my partner was the biggest support but also my parents and friends were really good...

Real support can come from a variety of sources as the following athlete demonstrates:

C: I work at Safeway and I've been there twenty-two years and a lot of the customers that knew me, they were just so disgusted, and some people asked, "Can I write a letter"? They wanted to prove my innocence and clear me just by telling them who I am, who they know I am. And I was thinking, if only we could do it that way. But so, I had a lot of support...

One athlete extols the value in being around people who they feel know them well and remind them where they are from:

I: You mentioned support people. What was it about the support they gave you that really helped?

A: Well, I think just showing that they were there for me, and just coming home to a familiar environment where I grew up, and going for a walk in my neighborhood...it reminds you of the days when you grew up and why you are the way you are. And so I think just being around those kind of people is naturally relaxing. And for them to be encouraging me to rest, and take as much time as I need, and doing the little things like going for a stroll in the park, or going out for dinner, or and just doing all of those things—the little things that probably end up making a big difference.

The athletes I interviewed had clear conceptions about what kind of support is helpful and what is not. For example:

I: In terms of attributes, what makes a support system solid for you and what makes it weak?

A: I just think caring and understanding and being there for you. I think that that could be in so many different ways—obviously there are so many different

personalities in life—but it's people in their own ways showing their support for you and being caring and compassionate and understanding, and just showing that they are there for you in their own way.

I: And how about in terms of a less than ideal support person? What could they do or say that would not be helpful?

A: Withdraw or question or criticize.

One athlete commented on the importance of being supported unconditionally:

I: What in your opinion makes a support system solid and what makes it weak?

What do you look for?

B: Unconditional support. Support to pursue anything.

It was of great personal value for the following athlete to have people around who believed in them. Conversely, people who doubted or questioned this athlete caused them considerable hurt:

I: What do you feel makes a support team solid and what makes it weak, because you had examples of both. So on the solid side, what was it about people that helped?

C: They just really listened to me and helped me out. And they just really believed in me. You know they didn't know any of the answers either but they didn't need to. In fact it was probably me who needed to know the answers more than them because they knew—they knew me. So that was the good part.

I: And the bad side?

C: I couldn't believe that these people that I had known, you would never think that they would doubt you, and they did. So that made me angry, and that's not me, that's not in my character.

There were instances where people who were being counted on to provide support actually withdrew it and this was hard for the athletes to accept. In times of challenge the participants realized quickly who supported them and who did not:

I: There were people who didn't provide you the kind of support you needed. What was the effect on you?

C: I didn't talk to them for a long time, and it even made it hard for the family because there was one person in my family [who withdrew] and the rest were all supportive. So it was uncomfortable at family gatherings, though never to the point where I wouldn't go, but there was just no communication. We would say hello and that would be the extent of it. Now things have changed. They've turned around totally. But you sure find out who your friends are when something like this happens.

While it challenged the following athletes faith in people, the athlete still saw another side to the issue of people pulling back when they needed them. It helped illuminate who the people are in their circle that provide true support when it is needed as well as whose support is provisional. The reactions of others around this athlete in response to the situation brought this issue to light in a hurry:

I: There were people who did not provide you with the kind of support you needed during that time—doubting you, questioning you. What was the effect of that on you?

B: You lose faith in your support network. You lose faith in the people that you trusted prior to that event. I think that's the biggest thing, is that you just lose faith in the people around you. And in a sense it's negative because you start to question everyone in some way and that's the consequence of it I guess. But you also are fortunate to realize that the people who stick with you through it are the real deal.

I: And they've now been battle tested.

B: Battle tested, right, exactly.

I: How did you deal with the fact that some people who you were looking to for support withdrew it?

B: In some ways I think you realize that their support you didn't even need anyways. Because if it wasn't true support then good riddance.

Ideally, the good supporters outweigh the bad, as one participant suggested:

A: I think because I have such a strong support network and everyone that's been a part of my life for longer than [their friend] was there for me.

I: And that outweighed the fact your friend pulled back?

A: Yes. I don't think it [withdrawal of friend] in any way burdened me or hindered my recovery or anything like that.

I: If I could ask you about that effect though.

A: Yeah, go ahead.

I: When you say your friend withdrew, is that the same as saying when you needed this person, they were not there?

A: Yep. And who knows why it is. Maybe I needed people who had been there by my side before. Maybe I didn't need that [support from friend]. Maybe I needed all these other people who have been a part of my life so much longer and have seen me through a lot of different things in the past.

I: Bottom line, your support system is way more slanted to the good side?

A: Oh for sure. And that's why I don't even know how much you could even count that because, as I said, I feel the rest of my support network was so strong that I don't feel that it deteriorated from it at all.

It is possible that an overemphasis on performance and results leave athletes at the elite level vulnerable to fluctuations in support. Once again the value in ascertaining the state of ones support network is emphasized:

B: Yeah, I think the hardest part is that sport can sometimes be fickle. In that people support you when you're successful, when you're on the top. When you're struggling, you find out who the individuals are that stick with you and who doesn't and that's difficult. But at the same time it's a good lesson. In some ways again you're confronted with a force in that those that don't [support you], that challenge, it is good to learn and to find out who when you're struggling won't follow you, won't support you, and who will. But at the same time it's tough because you get disappointed, you don't want to find that out... It kind of goes back to putting yourself in a vulnerable position as an athlete in that by putting yourself in the public eye you are going to face more adversity because you are more vulnerable.

Another athlete who initially tested positive for a banned substance and was later cleared, felt betrayed and depersonalized by the leaders in their sport. At issue is that this athlete's history and character did not weigh more heavily into the decision on the part of people in sport to withdraw their support:

C: They didn't want to listen to me. It was very difficult to get a hold of them...they didn't want to work with me and it was just really hard. And of course, when you're innocent you want results right away. And they just didn't want to give you the time of day. And that was really hard as an athlete trying to deal with that [the withdrawal of support] when you've been on the national team representing their country. I wrote letters to the Canadian Olympic Association within the Olympic committee in Canada...I am not a troublemaker. I've been an athlete's representative in the past. I don't have a bad reputation. There's never ever been any questions. And so it was just really hard to deal with.

The difficulty these athletes experienced dealing with the perception that people in sport have abandoned them highlights an interesting paradox about support. It often takes something bad to happen for a person to get a true feel for how strong or weak their support system actually is. The problem is that athletes need support more than ever when something bad happens, and that is a less than ideal time to find out their support system is not as strong as they thought:

B: Again, it's that support structure around you that you think is so firm and so solid around you. And then all of a sudden, when you are facing a challenge, that firm, solid base just keeps crumbling underneath you, and you just keep trying to step on stones but you can't find your footing.

Repeated questioning from people in sport about the athlete's level of commitment and character further fractures the trust the athletes have in those around them:

B: So finally, in July, I said, "I quit, I just I can't handle this anymore, I'm starting to doubt myself and I know it's not me". At this point I was convinced it wasn't my will or anything like that. Because people at that point had started questioning my desire and my commitment to sport.

I: Mental toughness?

B: Mental toughness, right, exactly. So that was really difficult because I knew at that point it wasn't me.

One athlete explains how frustrating it was trying to defend themselves against the criticism of other people in sport without knowing the cause of the problem that had been limiting their ability to perform at a high level:

B: There was questioning by people. I remember at one point somebody said to me, "Why are you going to that race anyways" implying—and this is right before a World Cup event—implying that "What's the point, you're not doing well". That lead to one of the hardest conversations I had throughout that whole time because I was trying. It wasn't a matter of me not trying. It was just that I couldn't explain it [the problem] and I couldn't do it [perform well].

In the absence of information to explain why the following athletes performance was dropping off some people in sport assigned blame to the athlete, which was hurtful as well as being imprudent:

B: And people around me...there were certain people who were starting to say things like, "Well, what are you doing? Your performance is so bad". That was really hard to deal with.

The following athlete was made to feel like an outsider in their own sport because of the intense questioning and scrutiny they experienced on the part of sport administrators:

C: The [sport governing body], they were really difficult to deal with. Especially at the beginning. Even half way through was still really hard. Their way of thinking, and the way that they operated was, "A cheater is a cheater"... We met with the [sport representative]. He came to Winnipeg and we sat down and his way of thinking is that obviously athletes feel that when they first fail a drug test they fight it but then it fades away. That was what he told us. We asked if we could put us back on the supplements and be drug tested again and he said no, that he was scared I would cheat. So this is what I was dealing with, was that they just totally felt I was lying.

The withdrawal of support from people in sport may have additional residual effects on the athlete. In this case significant expenses were accrued as the athlete was forced to look elsewhere for the needed support:

C: We found more help from out of the country, in terms of doctors and people that would help us and that was really offensive, really hard. And the cost—that's the thing—it's at our cost, at the athlete's cost. So here I'm innocent and I'm trying to prove it and I have to pay for everything myself. And the lawyers that I had and the doctors they were absolutely great but still. It was over ten thousand dollars to prove my innocence.

The question is raised, how did the athletes deal with the fact people around them pulled back when they needed them? A few different strategies came up in the interviews. In the following example, the discovery of the physical problem that had been limiting performance brought relief and helped change peoples perceptions. The lack of support from people in sport tested this athlete's resilience. In the end this person was able to stay focused and remain on course by trusting and believing in themselves when others would not. Moreover the following athlete's testimony lends additional support to the importance of gaining full awareness of the situation. If the people around this person who jumped to conclusions and made wrongful judgments about character would have exercised more caution in terms of what they said and did, and waited until they had more information first, a considerable amount of disappointment and misunderstanding could have been avoided:

B: I remember getting the results and walking out of the hospital with the results in my hand crying.

I: You felt vindicated?

B: Oh completely vindicated. I mean, I just sat in my car and cried. I cried because I felt vindicated feeling that I fought so hard for something I knew. I knew, but yet I had to prove it to everyone and to myself because I had this little sheet of paper that showed a little graph, that explained what was happening to my body and what wasn't making me go fast...

I: You mentioned you felt vindicated by the results. Could you expand a bit?

B: For never losing the course, for not swaying from the course, and for the months of taking the wrong road and then coming back to the main road that I

was on. And that's not to say that all the people along the way didn't have my best interests in mind. I mean they were trying to help, but a lot of times it wasn't the right thing. As with any exploration you may go off course, but you can come back onto it. Also vindicated knowing that I was right all along, that I knew something was wrong.

I: And that it wasn't you?

B: It wasn't me, yes. And I think that's something big I've taken from that experience is at the end of the day it's really important to trust your own self, your own instincts.

For this athlete, it was more a matter of being reminded about the kind of person they are and by believing in themselves that helped deal with the withdrawal of support by others:

I: How did you deal with the fact that some people you would have expected to be there for you and support you weren't, and in fact actually withdrew their support?

C: I found that really hard. I believed in them and gave them all my support through all my years competing so it was really hard and frustrating. I had a family member who also questioned me and that hurt even more than [people in sport].

I: So when those people are making accusations or questioning, doubting you, etc. And these are people who you have said are very close to you--how did you get past that?

C: I just had to remember who I am, and that this will all work out.

Recognizing and accepting that the support of some people in sport may be conditional is seen as a reality that some athletes might face. The kind of person you are may not be as important as how you are performing in the eyes of some. While this is difficult to acknowledge, doing so helped the athlete below to identify who in their circle supports the athlete, and who supports the whole person:

B: I think after reflecting on it for a little bit, it's the people that knew me the best as a person and appreciated me as a person versus appreciated me as an athlete, that stuck with me throughout. Because really it was the people who to some degree were only with me because of, or through sport [that withdrew their support]. It's the people like my family and really close friends, and also there were certain people in sport who kept their support going and were amazing in helping me get through this difficult time. But there were people who were just in it for sport.

I: That was a real eye-opener...

B: It was a real eye-opener.

I: To realize that there are people out there that function as though who you are as a person doesn't get as much consideration or importance as...

B: As who you are as an athlete, exactly.

The importance of clearly communicating to others what you need from them to help you get through whatever challenge you are facing is implied in this passage. It may be the case that people are not that interested in who you are as a person and/or it may be they just do not know how to provide the kind of support that is helpful to you:

B: I learned that there are some people who will be there and stay with you and there's some that won't. That you truly find out who your support network is through challenges as big as these. And you also find out in some ways—I don't want to blame completely the support network because I think sometimes we all deal with things differently. And so in the sense that some people may react differently, such as if you tell me something you may not mean what you say or you may be sarcastic because that's how you're dealing with it. But I may interpret that a completely different way and so there may be a miscommunication. So you learn not only who your support network is but also who understands you best. Because there was one instance where I think someone was trying to be negative in a motivating way, and to me, at that point, it just came across wrong.

I: It wasn't what you needed.

B: It wasn't what I needed, yes. And whether or not that was intentional, or whether or not that was how that person was dealing with it, it just wasn't helpful.

I: It's how you perceive it that matters?

B: Yes, and I think that's really important.

In addition to having key support people around in times of adversity, the physical environment the athletes find themselves in can play a major supportive role as well. As one athlete explains, getting away from the training environment reduces feelings of pressure and guilt the athletes may be placing on themselves:

A: For me coming back to Winnipeg and having a little change of pace was huge. Whereas if I stayed in Toronto I think there was just so much pressure to just get

right back into your routine. Even if I wasn't playing, I felt like I should be going to the [training site], or doing certain things. Whereas coming back home and reconnecting with family and friends who have been so important to me throughout the years just reminded me of that balance in my life. And so I think coming home and having all that support network it helped me gain that outlook on the injury.

Furthermore, the same athlete commented on how coming home and gaining a little psychological distance from sport enabled them to relax and recover more readily and completely:

A: By continuing to talk to people and being in environments that were good for me, I could feel a difference in—like we talked about earlier—in Toronto with pressures and stuff. I was there to train and do this and do that. Whereas if I could get somewhere else and just relax, and just be, I felt like that was just better for me.

I cannot help but be reminded of a line from the theme song for the television program Cheers, “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came”. Home is often where you will find the people who really know you, care about you, and allow you to just be yourself. Home is where things are familiar, safe, comfortable, and feel right. Home is full of symbols that remind you who you are and reconnect you to where you are from. Home provided a peaceful setting for the participants to recover and to get clear on what they wanted to do:

B: And then another Olympic qualifier came and again I didn't qualify, and again my performance was getting weaker. So I didn't actually make qualifying. That

was now, I guess, about March. So I came home and trained for a month just by myself. I just needed to get away from it. So I hadn't qualified for the Olympics at that point. I was just dealing with my disappointment.

I: You mentioned that you came home to get away from "it". To get away from what?

B: To get away from the frustration, the unknown. Coming back to home is a place of comfort; it's a place of safety because it's familiar.

I: A sanctuary.

B: A sanctuary, exactly. Whereas everything else is unfamiliar, especially when you're going through a hard time and you're in unfamiliar territory and you don't know what's happening. To come back to this sanctuary where it's safe and comfortable, is ideal.

I: Could you have recovered or progressed as well as you did in another setting, or was home the place you needed to be?

B: I think home is an important place. I think you deal with the cards your dealt and, fortunately, I was able to go home and have that option. I mean some people might not, but I did and that was really important to me.

It is interesting to note that the following athlete believes they would not have got through the adversity they faced as quickly as they did were they to have remained in or around the training environment. It is common practice in sport to request the athlete to recover and rehabilitate in the training environment which may not be the best option in every case as this athlete suggests:

I: What specifically about being home contributed to your progress?

A: The comfort of it, and that it's familiar, and soothing and supportive. And I think I've been so lucky with where I grew up and my family, that home is just an environment where I feel safe and comforted, and it's cozy. And I think that's good for me that it's so familiar. I just needed a place to relax and just...

I: Be you?

A: Yeah, and so it was perfect for me.

I: Could you have recovered as well as you did in Toronto or some other place?

A: I actually don't think so. I feel like you can be a lot of places in the world and always make it work. And eventually I would have been fine had I stayed in Toronto. I certainly think though that it helped my process to be at home, to get fully healthy. I think maybe it would have just taken longer in a setting where...and maybe had I spent more time in Toronto I would have forced myself to get away [from sport]. But that is the thing with staying in an environment where it's busy, and that's what I'm there to do is be busy and train and work and do all those things. So I think it was real helpful and that it speeded my recovery definitely to be home, be away, and it be quieter and more restful—it helps your recovery.

The familiarity and comfort of home—both the people and the sense of community it brings—was also an essential part of the following athlete's process for getting through the experience:

B: It's more the relationship you build with being near people in your hometown and the people around you and your support network. I mean that was one of the

reasons why I moved back to Winnipeg after being in Victoria for six years. I moved back for that supportive friends and family network which I just think is so important.

I: How did it make a difference?

B: Because it was leading up to the Olympics actually. I moved home in fall 2003. It matters to me because I feel support is a big thing you know. When you're putting yourself out there constantly day in and day out it's just that familiarity is real important and it was to me. I grew up in a family where family was a very important, critical aspect of life, and that sense of community within your family was really important. And my parents are great. They support my participation completely, and that support really helps.

I: And this was different? You needed support on a whole new level?

B: On a whole new level, yeah, exactly.

I: And the support was there at home, and that was where you needed to be?

B: Yeah, for sure.

To summarize, the athletes who were interviewed referred to the important role that support played in their process for getting through their adverse experience. Experiencing what was a considerable personal challenge provided these individuals with the opportunity to observe their support network in action. This in turn enabled them to assess the relative strength and utility of their current support structure. As a result they learned quickly who supports them and who does not when facing a considerable sport related challenge. Genuine support from friends, family, and people in sport reduced anxiety, and reminded the athletes what is good about themselves and about life. Support

people helped most by being a steady, caring presence, which helped the athletes to process what they were feeling.

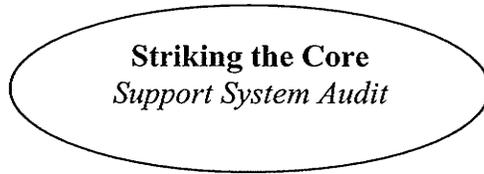
Experiencing the withdrawal of support from people they were counting on posed considerable difficulty for some of the participants. However the initial shock and disappointment was eventually outweighed by the sum of strong support they received from others around them such as close family and friends. Additional strategies for dealing with the withdrawal of support that were mentioned include believing in themselves when others might not, accepting that some people's support may be conditional, and clearly communicating what they needed from people to help them get through the situation.

The physical environment also plays an important supportive role. The participants described the value in removing themselves from the training environment and being around people who know them well, care about them and allow them to be themselves. Being home where things are safe, familiar, comfortable and peaceful provided an optimal setting to relax, reflect and recover. Remaining in or near the training environment was thought to invoke feelings of pressure and guilt, which makes recovery more difficult.

Figure 4.

What helps:

What hinders:



Key support people are present in times of adversity = beneficial to recovery.

Key support people withdraw their support in times of adversity = problematic to recovery.

Support from sport reduces pressure and guilt = puts the person at ease.

Lack of support from sport leads to feelings of bitterness, and mistrust = heightened anxiety.

Support people are caring, present, believe in you and are unwavering in their support = optimal support.

Support people withdraw, criticize, question and provide conditional support = poor support.

Being home, away from the training environment brings peace and comfort.

Remaining in or near the training environment invokes feelings of pressure and guilt.

Tipping Point

This category describes the next major transition in the process of getting through an incident of sport related adversity. Once the initial shock, disappointment and uncertainty have been considered, the athlete is ready to shift their attention and efforts towards doing what they can to get through the experience. This was accomplished first by learning as much as they could about what they were dealing with, including what the ramifications are. Gaining full awareness leads to understanding and acceptance. With acceptance came piece of mind and energy, which facilitated a seismic change in attitude from frustration, uncertainty and helplessness to optimism, belief and trust. The change in attitude mobilizes the person to take ownership of the situation and get busy seeking out people, resources and experiences that can help them deal more effectively with the challenge in front of them.

The term tipping point comes from the novel by Malcolm Gladwell (2002) and refers to moments of great sensitivity when things can change dramatically. Recall from the first main category "Life Interrupted" that the prevailing uncertainty of the situation (i.e., what is happening, what the implications are, when this will pass, etc.) was a significant source of stress for the athlete's early on and led to feeling frustrated, sad, and helpless. Developing full awareness seemed to reduce these feelings by filling in the informational blanks. Now the athlete's had a better understanding of what they are dealing with, what the implications are, and what they can do to change things. This enabled them to accept the circumstances they found themselves in and get excited about making things better. At this point they began to look at their situation differently. It was no longer as bad as it seemed, there was a lot of things they could do to improve the

situation, and there was reason for hope and optimism. Learning more about the situation, committing to an outlook that was helpful, and getting busy doing what they could to remedy things sparked considerable change. In other words, they had reached the tipping point of the experience wherein the worst of times were behind them and the prospect of getting through the experience became a matter of when, not if. The road ahead was still long and daunting, but now there was a sense that things were improving for the better.

Full Awareness

Recall from the section “Life Interrupted” that the uncertainty of the situation early on was a considerable source of discomfort for the athletes. Not knowing what they were dealing with, how serious it was, when or if it would pass, and what they could do to expedite the process led to feelings of frustration, disappointment and helplessness. In the sub-category “Full Awareness” we see how learning the answers to these questions can help reduce anxiety and get the athlete focused on turning things around.

Developing a greater sense of awareness about the situation was a major turning point for the following athlete. Learning what they are up against--and by extension what the implications are—reduced feelings of uncertainty and frustration and freed the athlete to focus on what needs to be done:

I: You still do struggle with it in some ways; yet, you feel you're at a point where the worst is over and you're through it. How do you know?

B: Emotionally, I think it will always be there but I think I'm over—much like we were talking earlier, it's as though there's a tipping point of an awareness and I think it's that awareness once you've gained it that you're safe, that you're on your way to recovering. So even though there are some things that come up from

time to time and there will always be raw emotion about it, I think that because of that awareness it makes it okay.

Learning more about the situation also buoys the spirits and creates energy. It helped the following athlete turn things around:

C: At the beginning, until I understood what it was, I remember talking to my mom and I couldn't give her any answers.

I: Because you didn't have any.

C: No. And she's asking me "Why" and "What happened" and I couldn't answer. Until my partner looked up what nandrolone metabolite is, until we started looking up all the research, until we found the test that had been done in Germany that found all of those other supplements that were contaminated—eighteen percent of them until you found out there were three hundred and eighty seven people in the world that year who tested positive for nandrolone, did I realize that I wasn't the only one...

I: That sounds like a pretty big turning point for you?

C: It was.

I: And it sounds like—correct me if I'm wrong—that once you learned more about your situation that it did in fact change things for you. Or, at least your attitude may have changed in the sense that you're no longer alone and you know there are mistakes that can be made—that was a turning point for you?

C: It was. It really was because at the beginning I didn't know. If somebody asked me "What happened" I really didn't know. The first thing was to get my supplements back [from testing] and I was expecting they would find

contamination and they didn't. So I'd just got over the initial shock of testing positive for a drug test and I was confident they were going to find contamination and they don't. So now I'm back to—I hit a low point again.

I: Peaks and valleys?

C: That's right. And then obviously things came back up as we were finding more research and information, but yeah, that's totally it—it's up and downs.

I: So when you began to find out more and more about it and began to sort of realize that you have a case here, and that this problem is a lot more widespread than you may have realized, what did this do for you?

C: It was like a kick-start to get going again...the more information we were getting all the time would keep us fueled and keep us going.

I: And that's how you turned it around?

C: Yep.

Getting informed helped reassure the following athlete that a full recovery was likely.

Receiving that assurance from their doctor marked a real turning point in the experience.

Learning more about what they are going through and how it may play out can help offset any lingering uncertainty (e.g., how long it is going to take) and lead to acceptance:

A: But then I went and saw a specialist and realized that it wasn't the worst case of concussion and she reassured me that I was going to be fine. She just couldn't tell me how long. And, so once I got to that point, it was okay because I'd gotten to that point where I have the patience and I'll give it the time I need. And it's so reassuring to hear someone say, "You're going to be okay, you're going to be

totally fine and normal. I just don't know how long it's going to take". That was very reassuring.

Feeling more at ease now, this same athlete set out to turn around how they were feeling and how the experience was affecting them:

I: What was the effect once you knew that you were going to be okay?

A: I think it put me at ease...and I don't know when I said that earlier but again I think I was so fortunate that I found that out pretty early...it was just the uncertainty of not knowing how long it was going to be. But pretty much from the get-go I was reassured I was going to be okay. So I don't think it was ever a question for me of "I'm not going to ever be okay" but more "How long is this going to take"? But it definitely was reassuring and put me at ease to know that I'm going to be fine. And I knew it was going to test my patience, but I just had to turn it around as a time for me to grow and do all these other things. It's just that I didn't know how long it's going to take.

Learning to accept that there may be uncertainty with the situation is also mentioned as an important part of this same athlete's process:

I: How did you deal with the uncertainty, the frustration, and the disappointment in the early going? What was it that you did to get past that period?

A: Just talking to people, and talking to my support network, and getting informed about it. Then you sort of have all the information that you need to accept it and then just to realize that there is uncertainty with this type of injury and there are no set answers. So, for me, I think it was just talking to people whether it was doctors or trainers or family or friends I think talking it through with other people

who knew things about it. Then I just feel like I had all the information I needed and it sort of put me at peace with it knowing that I couldn't control it.

Another athlete draws a link between understanding leading to acceptance, and acceptance leading to progress:

C: I think accepting it is all a part of getting over what has happened, and that it could happen to anyone. At the beginning you're thinking, "I could never fail a drug test using supplements", until you understand it more. Once you understand it more you realize that it can happen to anyone and that's part of accepting it as well. To understand it and to be able to explain it to others to help them out you need to understand it yourself.

Learning more helps a person to better understand the full ramifications of the situation and instills belief in their ability to get through it. Simply put getting informed makes things better as one athlete explains:

I: A shift occurred in you from feeling bitter and feeling angry towards your sport to loving it once again. What led to that?

C: Having closure on the case was a big thing, and then just learning more about what happened. At the beginning you didn't understand what happened, you don't know why, and once you find out more and understand it more things just get better as time went on...And so when my partner and I started to find out more information and contact more people, it started to get better and better as time went on.

I: What got better?

C: Well, when the first research came out in 2001 that was big...

I: Getting that research—what impact did that have?

C: Oh, it helped a lot.

I: How so?

C: Well you are confident and yet you still doubt yourself so the research just gave me that assurance that it was going to work out.

Becoming informed does not immunize a person against experiencing subsequent peaks and valleys along the way. However, it does appear to represent a significant leap forward in the process of getting through adversity:

I: Was there a point at which you felt you were beginning to surge forward, make sense of this thing and get past it—was there a point?

C: Yeah, as I said just to get over the initial shock of the positive drug test and there were other stepping-stones along the way. Some things bring you up and some down but I always knew there would be some closure I just didn't know when or how long it was going to take and I think it changed when the research started coming out.

Coming to understand and accept the situation was a gradual process. However once the participants got to that point they were able to relax, let go and feel more comfortable with what was happening. Learning more about the situation reduced anxiety brought on by all the uncertainty, let the athletes know what they are up against, and provided them with some idea about what it is going to take to get through:

A: I don't know if there was one specific moment but I think it's just a gradual process from gaining information and awareness so that when you do just come to terms with it and give into it that would help the healing and recovery process.

So I think it was a turning point just feeling like you know what, just make the best of the situation and then your recovery will likely be quicker as opposed to trying to force something.

Through a gradual process of gaining more information the following athlete experienced a resurgence in confidence and as a result felt increasingly more comfortable sharing their story with others:

I: Was there a moment where you feel you moved from the anger, frustration, the disappointment to where you're at now?

C: It was a gradual thing. And when all this happened I couldn't talk about it. I didn't even want anything to do with sport. So I couldn't talk about it before, but as time went on and I could understand it I could.

I: So learning more about it enabled you to open up more about it?

C: That's right.

There is a sense that momentum is generated once the person understands and accepts what is beyond their control. Developing full awareness of the situation frees the athlete to concentrate efforts on turning things around. The idea of finding meaning is also touched on in the following passage as the athlete begins to make sense of what is going on:

I: There seemed to be a shift in your outlook once you were fully aware of what was going on after talking with doctors and such. How did things change?

A: I think it just put me at ease. And then I wasn't fighting it any more, and I think there was a few weeks where it was hard, and there was a few weeks of uncertainty where I thought " Okay, this is just going to take a short amount of

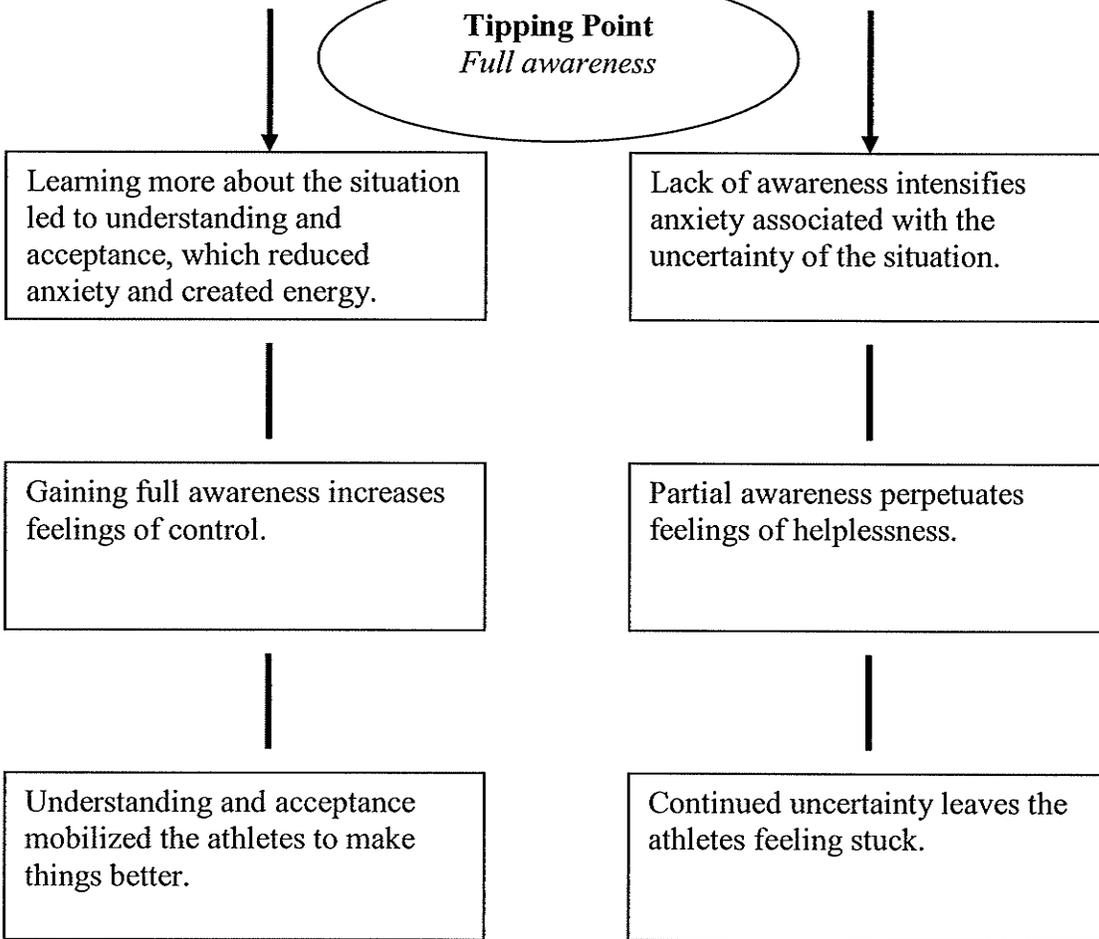
time” to then “Okay, this might take a lot of time” and not really knowing. And I think finally when you’re just patient with yourself and you know it’s going to take time, and you don’t know how long and...it just puts you at ease so that instead of fighting it you’re listening to your body more and giving it what it needs as opposed to fighting it, or trying to struggle, or thinking that you know what’s best and you just have to give it up... I just feel it’s a matter of giving in to it. Accepting it as opposed to--because again it’s just a matter of turning it around where yeah, it is tough, but in the grand scheme of things--and now when I look back, you know sure it was tough but in the grand scheme of things we are all going to have times of illness in life and what seemed so long then really is not that much time.

To summarize, one of the most difficult aspects of the experience for the participants was dealing with all the uncertainty surrounding them. The athletes struggled with not knowing the answers to questions like “what is wrong with me”, “why is this happening”, “when will it be over”, and “what can I do to change things”? Learning the answers to those and other questions put people at ease. Once they could understand what had happened and what the implications were it reduced much of the uncertainty that had been a source of anxiety, and led to acceptance. With acceptance came peace of mind and energy as the athletes began to get excited about turning things around.

Figure 5.

Generates momentum:

Blocks momentum:



Attitude is everything

There is a noticeable shift in the participant's outlook once they know what they are dealing with. Here we see how the athletes are able to build on the momentum that comes from accepting the situation, and letting go of what you can't control. This sub-category describes how a change in attitude helped these individuals go from surviving to thriving in the midst of adversity. By attitude the participant's are referring to a state of mind, a disposition, or a way of looking at things. The change in attitude fosters optimism, belief and perspective all of which energize the person as they move forward. The combination of gaining full awareness and a change of attitude marks the beginning of the second transition in the process for this athlete:

B: I think stage two definitely came once I gained perspective and stepped back—after the canoe trip—because all of a sudden you're saying "You know what, you gained perspective, you've answered some of the questions" and you're able to move on because you realize its not the end of the road, its okay, and there is a lot more road to go. And there is also a lot more of you, and a lot more that you can explore in yourself and aspects of yourself that you haven't yet tapped into.

Looking at things optimistically helped the following athlete:

A: I think it's because I learned when I was growing up how helpful it is to look at things in the right way and to see the good in things. For me I'm just so lucky that's just part of who I am and how I like to view those situations so that was certainly a big help to me.

Alternatively obsessing about things you cannot change, and being pessimistic does not help the situation. This same athlete made a conscious decision to change their attitude

and commit to a more positive way of viewing the circumstances because they believed it would help them get through the experience. By attitude this athlete is referring to a particular outlook, or disposition:

A: Well the other option would be to stay negative and to fight it or dwell on it but I learned from a young age the power of belief and what a difference attitude can make. And I'm a firm believer in what the power of belief and the right attitude can do for you and so for me it was going to help me and so that's why I did it [chose to stay positive] because it was helpful. I don't think I stayed negative for too long. There were moments that were really difficult for me but I was able to look at it in a new light and see the potential good this experience could have. I was missing out on some things but I might be gaining so much more. So for me I just chose that outlook because it was helping me and I think that was good for me, and everybody around me to look at it that way.

Prior experience getting through hardship is an asset. Applying lessons from previous challenges helped refine these athletes process for getting through adversity. It also serves to instill confidence in the person about their process knowing that it has been battle tested, and that it works for them. The idea of choice appears again in the discussion. How the person chooses to perceive the situation matters a great deal. The effect is different if you view the situation as an opportunity to learn and grow versus an overwhelming disappointment:

B: I've faced some pretty strong adversities prior to this experience not of a physical nature, but that really rocked the roots of who I am. And for this experience it more confirmed how I process things, and how I go through

adversity and it was interesting because when you have experienced this sort of thing you can actually—I mean every adversity is different-- but you can kind of look at yourself from a birds eye view and watch yourself go through it-- the process...

I: So then part of your ability to get through this experience can be attributed to the fact that you've experienced ups and downs in the past that were fairly significant and you've learned a process along the way that works for you?

B: Yeah exactly.

I: And it involves much like you've said before looking at these kinds of experiences as opportunities, as things to grow from, learn from etc?

B: Yeah and you learn that it comes back to attitude! It comes back to how you see adversity. Do you see it as an opportunity? Opportunity in the sense that you can face it, and yeah it is a challenge, but you know that you can overcome it and your better off in the long run because you've learned from it. And that's a key thing is learning from adversity and making sure that in your future, and in future instances of adversity that you--it's like a building block-- you build, you draw lessons...you draw lessons from all your experiences.

Drawing from the experiences of others who have been through similar setbacks can also be of value. Once the following athlete realized how their current attitude (i.e., anxious, impatient) wasn't helping their recovery they proceeded to identify a new, more helpful attitude (i.e., patient, positive) and committed to it:

A: So initially I know I was just really disappointed, and then, I mean I'm really lucky that I have such a great support network in my life, and talking to people

that helped me through it. And there was a phase where I stayed in Toronto and I kept thinking, "Oh it will be better in a couple of days" or "If I just take it easy for a few days", but the more I started talking to doctors and realizing that you know, this may be something that requires a little more patience than I might be willing to give it right now. So then I started realizing that no, I do have to be patient and this is something that might just may take a lot of time. And I talked to my brother a bit too who has had some concussions, and my parents are helpful, and doctors I had access to and then over the next couple of weeks it was just a matter of turning that around. And I'd be talking to me like "Well, in terms of the timing, maybe this is perfect timing", that I have a few weeks or a month and a bit to rest, and or at this point I really didn't know how much time I had.

I: Right.

A: An undetermined amount of time to rest, and to recover to get back to being healthy. So I had to turn it around that it's good that this is happening now and not in a year and a half from now you know. And so I guess it was just a matter of putting it into a new light.

For another athlete a change of scenery (canoe trip) and a powerful reminder about how precious life is (loss of a loved one) helped facilitate a change in attitude. Both experiences helped this person shrink their situation down to scale, regain perspective and fully commit to an attitude that is helpful:

B: So finally in September I stopped looking for answers. I just said "All right you know what that's it, I'm just quitting sport—I've quit". But then I went for a two-week canoe trip, got out of the world and came back rejuvenated and said "

Okay, I am not giving into this. I know there is something wrong and I want to—not just prove to myself—but I want to prove to everyone else as well”... [What happens is] you come back [from the canoe trip] fresh, you come back with a new perspective, and you come back with a new rejuvenated outlook. And almost like a full glass. You come back as a fighter whereas you may have gone out in the last round...

I: You get a second wind?

B: Yeah, a second wind.

I: What about that canoe trip led to the change in outlook?

B: I think it was multiple things. It was the canoe trip and also that two weeks I spent with my grandmother when she was passing away... spending those last few weeks with my grandmother as well as the canoe trip gave me perspective on life again and on what's important like for example the people around you and when I could see my grandmother clinging to life in the last few days and savoring a raspberry. Being able to eat a raspberry and just, she wanted to live every moment to the last. She wanted to be around her family and again it just exemplifies for me that I can still walk, and yes my Olympic dream might not come true but look at the amazing people around me. My grandmother had given me so much she said thank you up until she passed away. Those were her last words. And with the canoe trip I was able to get away from things and also think about what had happened to my grandmother and put everything in context, step away from it and be able to I guess...

I: Shrink things down to scale?

B: Yes definitely to the real building blocks of life...I think that time period of my grandma dying and the canoe trip built the foundation again, and built again who I am and what I stand for and being able to say "No, there is something wrong". And being able to look inside myself and basically turn inside almost and say "Okay I'm not going to listen to anything else I'm going to find the reason" ...

A change in attitude from focusing on what you cannot do, to what you can do helped the following athlete regain some control of the situation:

B: And so again it comes back to "Use it, don't let it use you", taking it as an opportunity rather than saying "What do I do with my time now" and focusing on what I can't do and not doing anything else rather than saying "Now I have all this free time look what I can do".

I: So you focus on what you can, not what you can't do?

B: Yes.

Letting go is a useful mindset when dealing with something that is for the most part beyond the person's control. As is looking at every experience as an opportunity to grow as one athlete explains:

B: I allowed myself just to be, rather than force things... And I think also to look on anything as a learning experience whether it be a challenge, whether it be a success that everything you do is a learning experience.

Support from others also helps foster a change in outlook:

A: I went home and I visited friends and family, and instead of working out I'd go for little strolls with my parents in the evening or go for a walk through the park...that was definitely an adjustment for me but I had so many people to help

me through it and I realized okay, just put it into perspective. In the grand scheme of things I have been so fortunate with injuries that this has really been my first serious injury that I had to deal with. I mean I've been out for maybe a week or two with muscle strains or something but this is the first thing that really set me back. And so to just realize that I mean, for me this was like an eternity, but really it's not that long. And to realize if this takes me two weeks, or two months, or six months that's its really okay. That I could just give it as much time as it needs.

Staying committed to the change in attitude is how one athlete dealt with additional setbacks along the way. The idea that people chose to change their attitude because the old one was hampering progress is a consistent theme. In this way a change in attitude helped people get through the experience:

I: How did you manage to stay the course when setbacks occurred?

A: I think just knowing in the end that it's going to pay off, and that this is what's right for me right now. And yeah it definitely took longer than I ever initially thought it would but—and I don't mean to sound repetitive—but just in talking to people, and having my support network there and reassuring me that this is the best thing for me and I think it was that I had put myself in a mind frame where you know I do need to take as much time as this needs. And I think I just knew that despite minor setbacks along the way—like that it took longer—I could still see at the end it was going to be worth it. I just knew at the end it would all be worth it... If I had done it another way I think it would have taken longer or if I had gotten negative or something. So I don't know if it's that I had to do it that way but

rather I think that was the way I wanted to do it. And I believe that was the best way.

For another athlete, maintaining the change in attitude was a matter of reminding themselves they are doing all they can:

B: Partly it was a process of elimination just by saying I am doing everything I can possibly do even though it's still not explaining what is happening so that's a big part of it.

The following athlete reminds us that attitude is more than simply what you think; it is also about what you do. It was important for this athlete to demonstrate to others how committed they were to getting through the experience:

C: I wanted to be there in person so they could see me, who I am. We would meet with anybody. I wanted communication and I wasn't scared of talking to anybody such as the doctors. I wanted to meet and talk with all the people who were involved with my case. So I think for me meeting with people in person was important.

I: It was important for you to share your story personally?

C: That's right, personally. I wanted them to see me, they didn't know what I looked like they didn't know me, who I am. If I wasn't there and it was just my partner they might think "Why is [name of athlete] not here, does this person have something to hide"? So that was a big part of it, being there in person.

I: It shows how committed you are?

C: That's right to show how committed I am I wanted to be there in person for everything and anything I did.

A final comment on how a change in attitude is all about choice:

B: But it's like anything if you look hard for the negatives you can find a ton of negatives too. If you look for the positives you can find a ton of positives so I choose to see the positives in everything.

In terms of the kind of outlook that helped people, being positive and optimistic has been noted. Trust and belief are mentioned as key factors as well. Though an experience like this tests the level of trust and belief a person has in their process there is faith that eventually things will rebound:

I: You've mentioned a few times the importance of trust. How have you learned to trust in your process for getting through a difficult experience, through this experience?

B: I've always trusted that there would be sunshine on the other side. I think every time our trust is somehow tested we go through the same experience of all of a sudden not trusting things. But I think I've learned that it is an important experience to go through [i.e., temporarily not trusting] and that I will trust again it's just a matter of time.

I: So even though you have been through some very difficult challenges in sport and life each time you go through it as a new one emerges, that even though you have those past experiences to fall back on and draw lessons from, initially it's natural to have periods where you don't trust your process?

B: One hundred percent!

I: But what you've said is that deep down perhaps you know that in time you will?

B: I just think life wouldn't be very fulfilling if I didn't. It's just such a gut, deep feeling the trust I have.

A case is made for trusting one's intuition more in times of setback:

B: As an athlete your goal is to know your body inside and out. And I guess there was always a big part of me that felt that I knew that something was wrong. And so part of it is that whenever I was seeing all these physicians and doctors with specialties in different areas, part of it was that I was going on "gut feeling" a little bit. I mean when I'm sitting in the doctor's office in Toronto and having a pelvic examination I'm thinking like what the heck. There were certain things that just did not feel right and a lot of time it was that people didn't focus on why the leg was losing power. I didn't either, because you're going around and believing in everyone at that moment. So it was partly that.

Trust in others, particularly with resource people whom are working with the athlete to make things better, is also an important part of the process as one athlete describes:

A: You just have to trust that your body is going to heal, you have to trust the people on your team in terms of resources you know, and I went to see a lot of specialists...And you just have to be proactive in finding everybody that can give you the best advice, and then yeah, just taking away from that the trust in what they're saying and that this is something that just takes time...So it was a matter of trusting everybody that had good things to say, and trusting that what I was doing was what needed to be done.

Belief is a powerful concept for people facing adversity. Because the following athlete believed in themselves and in what they were fighting for they endured:

I: What were some of the ways you managed to deal with this thing, to come to grips with it, to make sense of it?

C: I guess for me the biggest thing is I know I'm innocent... So I guess I just have enough self-confidence in myself and I know I didn't cheat and therefore that helped me to get over all the people who were difficult and all the things I had to deal with. I mean I know that I'm innocent so that helps a lot...

I: Why did you never stop believing?

C: Because there was never any doubt. I never had any doubt. I knew there had to be something; I just didn't know how long it was going to take.

As mentioned earlier attitude is expressed in actions as well as thoughts and feelings. What these athletes did once they committed to make things better is an important part of the discussion as well. Taking ownership of the experience was of benefit to the following athlete who did so by getting informed, and being pro-active:

B: I remember actually the first time I started calling doctors across the country and saying, "I need to do a VO2 test, who can get me in the quickest". And I found one in Ottawa that got me in right away.

I: No one was going to do that for you.

B: No. Or it would have taken a lot of time and I wasn't willing to wait. I was sick of it and wanted to do away with it... And up until that point, after I had missed out on the Olympics and I kept racing with my team and I remember the race that finally broke me. It was early on in the race and I got dropped, I got left behind by competitors that I generally do well and strong with and it was that race where I really just said "Okay, that's it"...

I: I got to figure this out.

B: Yeah I can't just keep entering races thinking that I will be fine, thinking that everything will be okay and then get disappointed again. I'm just sick and tired of that. I don't want to be disappointed anymore.

I: So you got busy?

B: Yes.

Getting busy is partly out of necessity because often there is not anyone available or willing to do the work for the athlete:

C: If it wasn't for my partner and I we wouldn't have any of the research to pass on or any of the information you know so thank god we did that. We became very knowledgeable.

I: You got busy.

C: Very. My partner has been in the sport longer than I have and he just found out things that he had no idea about himself. And so it was a huge learning process for both of us and I would say that my partner is even more knowledgeable about the information than I am. He was even telling some of the doctors about some of the tests that were found that they didn't even know of yet.

Furthermore, getting busy seeking out information about the situation helps enhance the athletes understanding of what they are up against. Recall the significance of the athletes learning all they can about what they are going through; it leads to acceptance and sparks a shift in attitude:

I: How did getting busy help you?

C: Well for both my partner and I, he didn't know what nandrolone metabolite was and neither did I. So just learning about what nandrolone is, what causes a positive nandrolone drug test, and just finding out all the research that was out there and there wasn't much... so it was really hard. But we had to keep busy though; there was no such thing as stopping because we had to find out. We had no idea what caused it so we met with lots of doctors and made lots of appointments, made lots of phone calls and we were always going on the internet and phoning to places like Germany and South Africa.

I: So it's almost like there are two reasons. Number one you had to because no one else was going to do this for you.

C: Nope, right.

I: And number two it helped you get further along, as far as you knew what you were then up against when you started learning about what nandrolone and all that other stuff meant.

C: Yeah, for sure. And for us to understand we had to do the research ourselves. We had to understand what we were trying to fight.

Taking charge and becoming more actively involved in efforts aimed at getting through the experience had a positive effect on the emotional state of the following athlete. This they suggest made a big difference in their recovery:

I: It sounds like being proactive and taking ownership of this experience was an important part of your getting through it. In what ways did you do this?

A: I think for me it was just getting as many opinions as I could, and getting away when I found that was beneficial, and doing all those little things I found could

make a big difference such as instead of staying in one city and seeing just one specialist I saw a lot of different people—different doctors, neurosurgeons, trainers, concussion specialists—and I took a trip to Montreal to see someone who is renowned. So it was just being pro-active and getting all the information I could, and all the research, and that all was very reassuring to me. [name of specialist] was her name in Montreal and again, to have a conversation with somebody who--this is what she does is see people who are suffering from this—people like that were a big help to me. So yeah it was being pro-active...

The efforts of another athlete were rewarded with the discovery of what had been limiting their performance. Had this athlete not been pro-active in seeking out people and information that could help shed light on their situation, the frustration and uncertainty may have lingered longer:

B: So I went and called around Canada asking sport physiologists whether I could see someone. At the time I was down in the States and the quickest that someone could see me was in Ottawa so I went there. And I remember it so vividly because it was this VO2 test where you jump increments by thirty watts, every three minutes. And at a certain point this pain just became so bad that I had to actually stop. My heart rate was low, lower than it ever had been. My lactate levels were at 4.00, which is not at all high and so at that point I just knew it was something in my legs, I just knew it. And so at that point I just decided I had to figure out what was wrong. And for the next three months I went across the country.

Reaching out to many different sources of information in a variety of settings is one of the ways the athletes took charge of their situation. It is interesting to note that before these individuals knew what they were dealing with they felt helpless to change things. Once they understood the situation and changed their attitude suddenly they realized there is a lot they can do to help move things forward:

B: So then I started going across the country. No one had seen this before in Canada so I had to start from scratch and think okay, well who's going to do this and actually I looked to the Netherlands, and France because there were doctors who had done this procedure before. And it's a procedure that's fairly simple but they had never done it in young individuals before so they don't know the long-term effects. So I contacted and did a lot of research on who had had the surgery and the effects and things like that. So when I decided to do it that was a big decision but then I went to Vancouver because there was a doctor who had done one before and so I decided to go see him, but it didn't work out. So I came back to Manitoba and talked a little bit more to the surgeon here who in talking to him, and building a relationship he knew how dedicated I was, and the process I had gone through.

I: And how important it was?

B: Yes. How important it was. And so he decided to do it and that was...it was a big thing.

In this next passage one gets a feel for how time consuming the process of gathering information was for the following athlete as well as how committed they were to resolving the situation:

C: And since it was all new—the drug tests on the nandrolone—there was no research out there and my husband and I looked on the Internet every day. We contacted a doctor out in South Africa and one in England. We talked to another doctor in England and we talked to [name of doctor] in the United States so yeah and we had the two doctors here. A lot of time was also spent meeting with our lawyer.

Once the decision is made to take charge and get busy it is important to remain persistent as one athlete explains:

C: We had to keep looking for stuff, and had to keep fighting because I think if we would have sat back that it wouldn't have...

I: You wouldn't be where you're at is what you're saying?

C: Yeah so if it wasn't for [partners name] and I meeting with doctors and just persisting. It was hard. There were a lot of ups and downs and some days you just don't feel like looking at it or talking about it and then another day you can.

Persistence in finding information and in dealing with setbacks was key for the following athlete:

C: I guess you could say we just hit bumps in the road and there was definitely a lot of bumps and hills and stuff to overcome but we just had to get right back up and fight again because we knew there had to be something that would happen. We couldn't understand why it was taking so long and thought, "Why can't this just be over now, why can't they find anything and why is the research so slow". But we just knew we had to keep going.

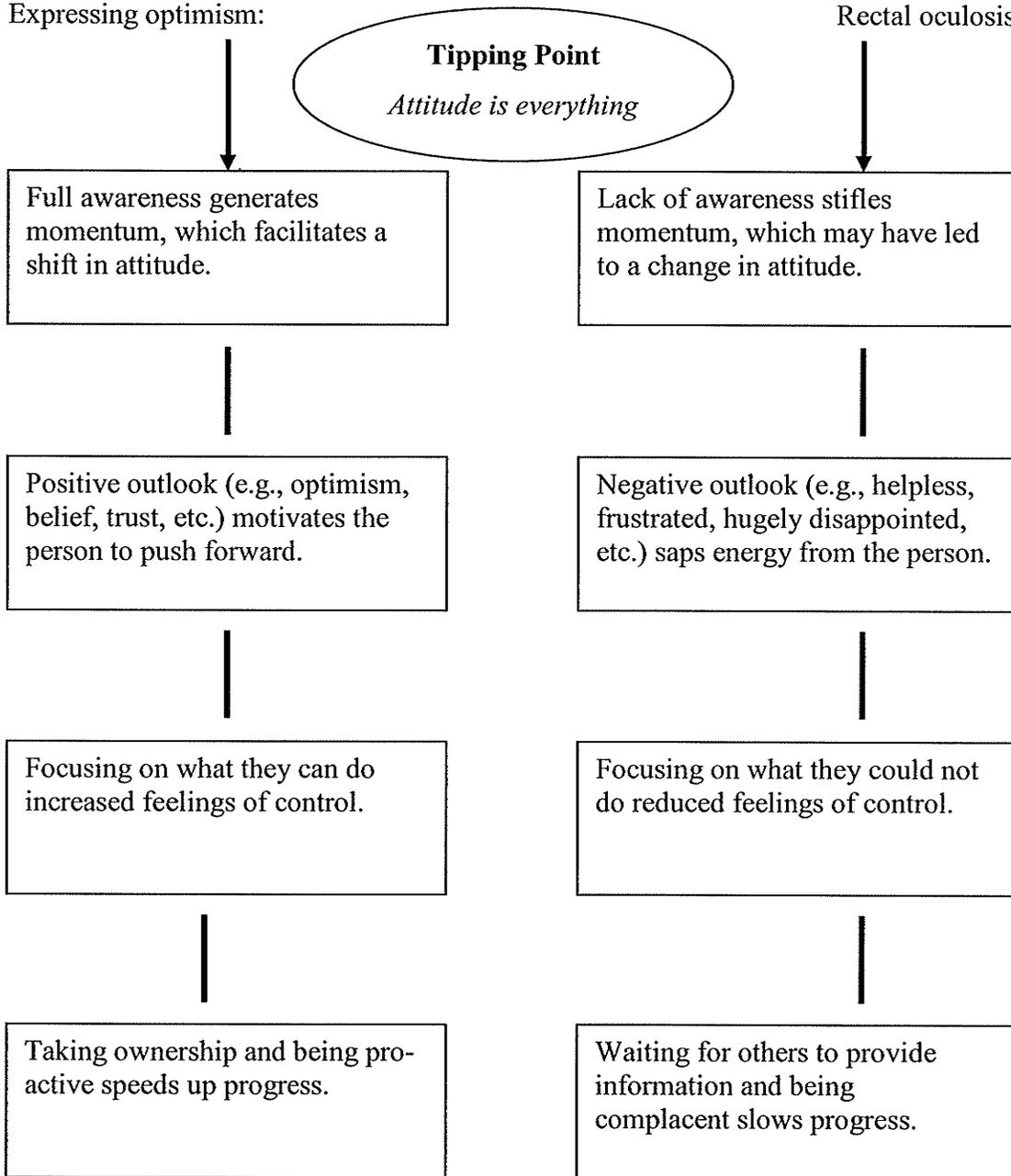
To summarize, once the athletes were able to understand and accept what was in front of them they were mobilized to make things better. A change in attitude was a good first step. This had a powerful effect on the athletes psyche by reducing feelings of despair and doubt and promoting feelings of hope and optimism. This switch from feelings that draw energy to ones that produce energy helped fuel the athletes I interviewed through the long road ahead. Among the shifts in attitude the participants went through are from feeling helpless to feeling more in control, from feeling stuck to feeling empowered, from feeling sad to excited, fearful to hopeful, skeptical to a believer, and from doubting to trusting.

The participants described how their initial attitude was not helping progress, and so they identified a more constructive outlook and committed to it. The effect of which was that it boost morale, lowered some of the anxiety they were feeling and got them focused on what they can do to change their situation. The notion that a shift in attitude boils down to a choice is important to discuss. In the end the participants chose to change their attitude—nobody did it for them—and chose to stay committed to it when setbacks occurred and this made a big difference in the experience. Additional shifts in attitude that helped include, letting go of what you can't control, staying positive, looking for opportunities in the experience, trusting in your process, believing in yourself and others, and taking ownership and getting busy. Taking ownership involved getting informed and being pro-active. Getting busy served to help enhance the athletes understanding about what they are going through which brought peace of mind and ultimately hastened progress.

Figure 6.

Expressing optimism:

Rectal ocolosis:



Finding Meaning

Finding meaning is the act of making sense of the experience in a way that brings value and purpose to it. It is the way a person chooses to internalize and assimilate the experience in the mind. Often in times of adversity people struggle with the question “why”. The answer a person comes up with to the question “why” often determines what the experience will be, and how significant it is. The athletes I interviewed were all of the belief that “things happen for a reason”. And as the athletes have described in the interviews, the “reasons” they came up with to make sense of their situation helped to validate the difficult times they experienced, and also served to bring peace of mind, and lead to a level of closure.

That is not to say the experience does not stay with the participants. There still may be unresolved feelings and unanswered questions that have an affect at times. It would appear then that getting through the experience and getting over it is not the same thing. What matters though according to the athletes is that they have evolved to a point where they are okay with what happened, and how it has worked out. Once the athletes were able to derive a sense of meaning and purpose from the challenge facing them, they were able to move forward in their lives.

Assimilating the experience

Assimilation refers to the process of comprehending new information or experiences taken into the mind. It involves making sense of things in a way that brings meaning and purpose to life. This subcategory describes the different ways in which the participants came to understand, make room for and embrace the adverse experience each went through. That is to say it is about finding meaning. Coming up with an answer to

“why”—as in “why is this happening”, “why me”, “why now”, etc.—surfaced in the interviews as an important step on the path to finding meaning. The participants described how finding a reason why this happened and committing to it was beneficial to them. The most often cited answer to “why” in the interviews is that “things happen for a reason”. The reasons the participants identified to explain why they had been subject to such a difficult experience brought meaning and purpose to the challenge each person faced:

I: At some point throughout all of that “stuff” did you ever ask yourself “Why”?

Why me, why this?

B: I think everyone asks that question. I always ask that question when I encounter a challenge or obstacle. Especially things that challenge the base, the core of who you are and challenge the real things that matter to you

I: What were those things in this case?

B: My dreams, what I had been working so hard for, for so many years. Going to the Olympics was something I had been working towards and this [injury] now all of a sudden challenged that and how ironic it was that the injury happened in the year leading up to the Olympics. I mean my training had increased in intensity and frequency and amount but at the same time why then? But if you ask that question too many times you’ll get lost in it because you may start feeling sorry for yourself and why me, why me, why. And so I remember often I would start asking that question and then I would say “Hey, no it happened. Get over it. Deal with it”. And often the only way I could deal with things like that were, it meant it happened for a reason. It’s happened to me because, one, I know I can deal with

it. Why else would this be happening? And, two, that I can be a help to others through sharing my story. I mean that's one of the things I was excited about was to be able to share this with you because it is important to share our stories so that when other's encounter these sorts of challenges they can look it up... So things like that you just go through and if you spend too long dwelling on why, then you won't see the other side. You won't see the little crest on the hill, and reap the benefits. And so with this challenge I feel I was meant to go through it to learn from it, to be able to go through it, and then be able to tell the story afterwards.

The reasons that another athlete came up with helped to change feelings of frustration and disappointment to optimism and gratitude:

A: I remember thinking this is a change of pace in my life but maybe its going to be the best thing for me in the long run, and I have a busy couple of years potentially ahead. And that is how I made sense of it as opposed to being so frustrated and annoyed and disappointed that this happened instead I saw it as a change of pace where I have a chance to do some other things.

Even if the "reason" is initially unclear, the belief that it will reveal itself in time helped the following athlete get through the rough patches:

B: It was more just confirming the fact that I embrace challenges, I embrace adversity in the sense that I want to learn from them [adverse experiences] because I know they make me a stronger person. And I remember crying--multiple crying sessions-- but often I would just say to myself "You know, this is going to make me a stronger person, it's going to in some way, shape or form, in my future

this will benefit me in the long run. I will use this somehow to better myself as a person, to better the lives of other people, and I want to be able to use it to make a difference in the future”.

Another athlete commented on how committing to the belief that things happen for a reason helped to strengthen their resolve:

C: I always think that things happen for a reason. So I just knew that my believing in myself was key and it would just take time in my situation. I didn't understand how long it was going to take but the belief in myself was always there. It was attacked though, and it got wounded but it was still there.

It is easy to forget how difficult the experience was for the following athlete stacked against the lessons they have learned and value they have taken from it. One gets the sense that the value in the experience and the difficulty of it go hand in hand. That is, because the experience was such a significant challenge, getting through it is all the sweeter, all the more fulfilling. The idea of leaving a legacy so that others may learn from what you have gone through was a sentiment shared by all the participants:

I: What reasons have you come up with for why this happened to you?

B: Kind of along the same lines of what we were just talking about earlier is that in some ways deep down inside I knew that it would strengthen me, and I knew that I would be able to get over it or learn from it and share it with others. And I think sometimes the hardest lessons are the most valuable to be able to share in that they stand out, because they were so difficult. And I think just to make me grow as a person as well.

Efforts to help others through their story made it easier for the following athlete to make the best of an unenviable position:

C: [A sport psychology consultant] said "You know you're setting a precedent for future athletes. You're the guinea pig" and that really hurt at first because I don't want to be the guinea pig.

I: Nobody asks for that.

C: No. No I don't want to be the guinea pig but, I mean that's the way I also have to look at it is that I'm helping out future athletes.

"Why" questions were useful to the following athlete because the reason(s) they came up with to answer "why" brought meaning and purpose to what they went through:

I: When you go through an experience like you did "why" must come up a lot. In terms of why me, why now, why this, that kind of thing. Is that safe to say?

A: Yeah but then I feel like you just need to turn that around and thank goodness now as opposed to another time when things were maybe more critical. Better now at the very beginning of the season than at World championship time or Olympics time. And I think no matter when it happens you just have to turn it around and not face those "Oh, why me or why is this happening". I just feel I'm a person who thinks "Well, maybe everything does happen for a reason and maybe it happened because it's just time to teach me a lesson, and I just did need a little break and to get refreshed and it's going to help me down the road". So I was disappointed and frustrated at times but I don't think I was ever in a daunting phase where I wondered "Why is this happening to me, why" I think I just felt

that yeah I had phases of disappointment and sadness but in the grand scheme of things maybe everything does happen for a reason.

I: What was the reason?

A: I think it's that I did need time maybe to get refreshed, and that it will help me in the long run to be stronger and face challenges and know how to respond to adversity in the future.

Recognizing the experience as an opportunity to learn and grow as a person were reasons another athlete came up with:

B: I'd been on the national team since 1997 and it was what I knew and I think there were things in my life that kept coming up such as that I hadn't finished school. Just knowing that things happen for a reason, in some ways I feel like this stopped me to say "Finish those things" so that if you do choose to go back into sport you have an open mind, your slate is clean, and you can give one hundred percent.

Interpreting the experience as an opportunity to help educate others who may be faced with a similar challenge is noted as well:

B: One of my key beliefs in life is that I don't let anything use me I use it. I try to make everything an opportunity. An opportunity to learn, to move forward, to become a stronger person, challenges to me are opportunities.

I: Even something as significant as this you were able to frame it that way?

B: Yeah. One of the things it allowed me—and this is again, going through the process of using it as an opportunity is I mentioned before that 1 in 5 people in my sport are at risk for the injury I had so it's about creating an awareness for it.

Someone had to create awareness and well because I had to go through it, I can do that... If 1 in 5 have it [the injury], and I have it, then that means there are a lot more athletes in Canada that may as well and it's never been seen in Canada before so a lot of people don't know about it. So that was one reason I agreed to go public with it and share my story with CBC and Canada was to put the radar out there so that the condition was known, and so that other athletes wouldn't have to go through the same thing I did... So we put together this document to share with everyone and to create awareness for it.

I: To learn from it.

B: To learn from it exactly. So I may have been a guinea pig but at the same time hopefully other people won't have to go through the same thing.

Another athlete reasoned that they have a responsibility to educate others in their sport about the risks and consequences of the choices they make:

C: Yeah, it's to help out the future athletes. To help them to understand and especially the athletes that are close to me because they know what I went through and so hopefully to them, and the people around me they can see what I had to go through and think twice.

The following athlete illustrated how the idea of leaving a legacy helped them find purpose in the experience:

B: It's one of a few things that I can look back on and say this is why it happened is that now I can help and hopefully prevent other athletes who are going through the same thing. Because now it's better known [i.e., since this athletes experience] and that to me is very satisfying to know I was able to help others... It resonates

deep within the core of who I am in that, in asking myself the question of "What is my purpose" I really truly believe that part of my purpose in life and what I enjoy doing most is being able to share experiences with others.

The participants described how committing to the idea that things happen for a reason helped them gain peace of mind and move forward in their lives safe in the knowledge that in the end there was a point to all the hardship they endured:

I: What is the effect of committing to the idea that things happen for a reason?

A: I think it's just another way of putting yourself at ease and knowing that this can be something that's really good. So I think it's just a way where say if people are spiritual and believe in destiny, or it's just a way of making it seem like this is something that can be good in your life and it happened because it's going to make you a better person in the long run. And so I think it's just knowing that this experience is okay.

For the following athlete part of buying into the idea that things happen for a reason is being able to perceive benefit in what they are going through. Perceiving benefit is another way in which people found meaning in the experience:

I: What is the effect of committing to the idea that things happen for a reason?

B: It kind of goes back to exactly what we were just talking about in that, that's just how I want to live, how every part of me wants to live in the sense that everything is a learning process, everything is a learning opportunity, everything happens for a reason so we can learn from it and we can move forward and be richer people and live more fulfilling lives.

I: So part of the idea is that it does help you move forward.

B: Yes.

I: Once you can find a reason for whatever you're going through—good or bad—once you can attach a reason to it, it helps you move forward.

B: Yeah, and to look at what you gained from it and what you learned helps too [i.e., to move forward] ...I think that most challenges and especially this one because it was such a deep, core rocking experience make your life richer. It makes you a richer person because you've had that experience and we are after all a compilation of all our experiences and this one just made me richer.

Going through an adverse experience can help to illuminate for a person what they are about, and what they are capable of overcoming. Much of the testimony in the interviews on the topic of perceiving benefit referred to becoming a better stronger person because of what they have gone through such as the following athlete explains:

I: Final question. Looking back now that you've come through it do you perceive any benefits?

A: Yeah, probably knowing that I have gone through something difficult and I think again, at the risk of sounding repetitive, but having gone through it and knowing I'm stronger because of it. I feel that there's always going to be setbacks, big or small and I think now knowing how to process it, and you know we can all be taught little lessons in our lives but I think when you experience something like this it really does just sink in and now maybe it's a more natural reaction for me to feel grateful everyday and have moments of appreciation and just make the most of it. I've always tried to have that in my life but when you go through an experience like that it really makes you re-evaluate it and re-affirm all of those

balance things in my life. I can look back now and know that I have learned from it and know that I'm better because of it.

By accentuating the positives about the experience the following athlete perceived multiple benefits in facing adversity:

I: Do you perceive any benefits from this experience?

B: Oh yeah, huge. I'm a stronger person for it. I'm going to use it to make a difference in other peoples lives in the future. It made me stop and finish my school and simple things like that. It allowed me be able to go up to Baffin Island and experience the north something that my grandfather did and I feel I became closer to my grandfather because of it. I mean through everything, through every challenge that we face there's a sunny side to it and you can always see the good from the bad.

In addition one athlete described how the experience served as a catalyst for them to re-evaluate and perhaps re-align their priorities in life and regain perspective:

A: It really was a time where it forced you to stop and reflect and to just sort of re-evaluate again what kind of person you are, and what you are about, and what makes you happy, and what you enjoy in life and appreciate.

Another athlete gained a deeper understanding about the kind of person they are and the way in which they want to live their life:

B: I think in asking myself "Why, what is the purpose to me"...I have many goals in life and whether it be in sport, or whether it be in school, or whether it be in a professional career, it all comes back to the foundation. And that foundation is who you are, and what makes you, you. And I think through this experience I

realized that I am a deeply creative person so in a way this experience helped to define for myself who I am and what I'm about. Because ultimately we are all unique and I think I was able to celebrate that through this experience.

Moreover the following athlete found benefit in using the experience as an opportunity to fulfill other important dreams and goals:

B: I got to spend a week with my grandmother that I wouldn't have got to otherwise. I was able to finish my undergrad. All these things that are happening over the last year since this whole thing happened have been just collecting and I wouldn't have had the opportunity had the injury not occurred. I went up to Baffin Island and was able to spend two months there and now I'm creating a documentary and may have the opportunity to go up to Ellesmere Island this summer to make a documentary about my grandfather who set up the arctic weather stations. There are just so many things that have...

I: Snowballed.

B: Snowballed from it and now I can look at all these opportunities and think wow, look what's become of this.

As difficult as the experience was one athlete extols the value in going through adversity. Setbacks and challenges are part of life. Learning how to navigate successfully through difficult experiences is of tremendous value as participant "A" described:

A: Yeah because no matter the disappointment—if you're out for two day's or two months, or a year, or whatever it is—I still think that it would be valuable to go through that same process of processing things, and turning it around to think, "No this isn't a negative, I'm going to turn it around and I'm going to use this

day off' ...The major point I want to make is that I think adversity can come in so many different scales but that the same process of turning it around, and making it beneficial to you, and reconnecting to what you take pride in, I think is very important.

The participants had clear ideas as to why finding a reason and perceiving benefit helped them get through:

I: You mentioned a few ways in which you perceived benefit. How did it help you to really buy into that?

A: Again it's just believing that this can be something positive as opposed to something that's "Oh, this is so awful". I just think that right away you have to turn it into something positive and look for all the good that this can bring and so I think that helped me just knowing that sure it was going to be difficult but it can be so good in all these different ways. And I think that really helped my recovery process just knowing that this is something that is going to be okay.

It took time for some of the athletes before they were able to look for benefit in the situation. Through a process of gaining awareness, understanding, and acceptance the following athlete evolved to a point in the experience where they were ready and receptive to finding the good in it:

I: You mentioned a few ways in which you perceived benefit from this experience. How does that help you?

C: It helps a lot. It helps in the recovery, just going through that first several months which was a blur especially the first month just trying to figure out what to do and where to go. And still for quite a while it was "Why me". And I

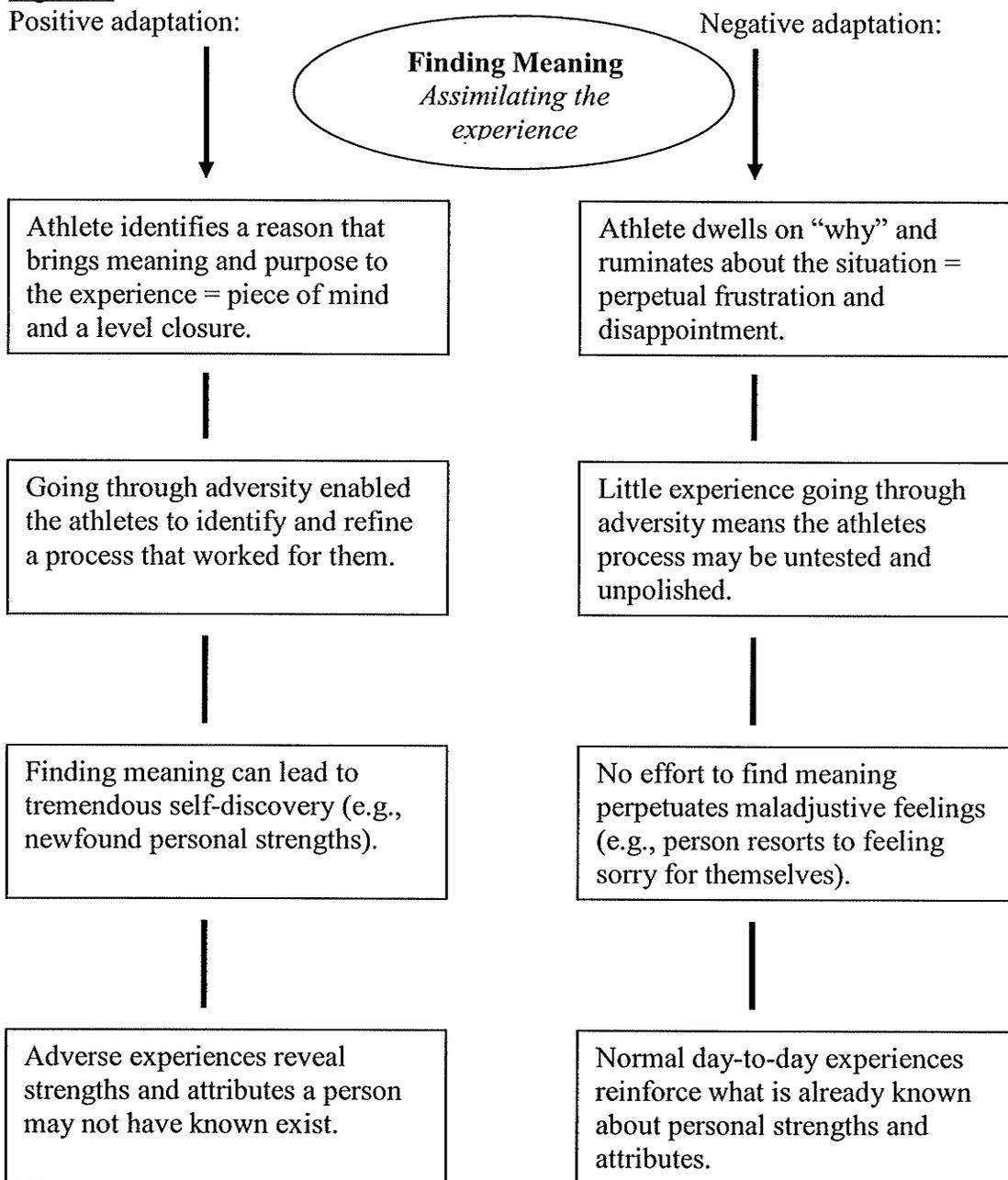
remember talking to [a sport psychology consultant] and he said, "Think about what you're going to do for future athletes" and I'm thinking, "I don't want to be the guinea pig". So after I was able to accept this more, and deal with it, and talk about it more, then I could understand that yeah I am helping out other athletes. And now I can do speeches and talk about it to help other athletes whereas before I couldn't do any of that. I know of course that my case has helped a lot of athletes and will continue to help out more athletes. And if someone needs to phone or get in contact with me I'm always willing to talk to them.

I: Point is you're at a point where you can do that now.

C: Yeah. I can do it now, before I couldn't.

To summarize, the participants describe how they were able to make sense of and embrace the experience by answering the question "why" in a manner that brought value and purpose to all that they had endured. Committing to the idea that things happen for a reason and perceiving benefit proved to be helpful strategies in this regard. Finding meaning led to peace of mind and enabled the participants to move forward in their lives knowing that there was in fact a point to all the difficulty they faced. Whether the point was to make them a stronger person, to appreciate life more or to remind themselves what is important, the reasons the athletes came up with served to help them internalize the experience in a way that made sense and that brought peace and closure to it.

Figure 7.



Work in progress

The underlying sentiment of this sub-category is that getting through the experience, and getting over it is not the same thing. The research question I posed was how do elite athletes make sense of and get through adversity in sport? Throughout this study the athletes I interviewed have described how they managed to do so, and how they know they have reached a degree of closure that they are comfortable with. However that is not to say the experience does not remain with them at a conscious level and affect them from time to time. It is not surprising that an experience as challenging as what each participant went through leaves a lasting mark. What mattered in the end is that the athletes were content, and at peace with whatever the outcome.

While the emotion of the experience still affects the following athlete, their desire to move forward and help other athletes facing similar challenges outweighs any unresolved feelings they may be harboring:

I: In what way does this experience stay with you?

B: The raw emotion of it stays with me. When I reflect I can remember how I felt when I was holding that paper from the final test, which showed that it wasn't me. Emotion is one of the biggest things and still to this day when I tell the story I still get emotional. It stays with me through the lessons I learned, and also through the sharing of my story... Because ultimately I hope to be able to pass on my experience to others... I think being able to share our stories and our challenges makes it easier for all of us to experience challenges because we will all encounter them at some point in our lives and it's better to be able to say "There was someone else who did it to".

According to Martin (2000) the only way to get over a fear of something is to do the thing you are afraid of and have nothing bad happen. Fears must be felt and experienced to change them. Facing some of the lingering fear and uncertainty brought on by the experience is another way in which the experience stayed with the participants. I am reminded again that getting through the experience and getting over it is not the same thing. Much like the difference between forgiving and forgetting, these athletes have found ways to accept what has happened, draw lessons from it, and find meaning in the experience but that's not to say there aren't lingering effects.

The participants described how they have come to a degree of closure that allows them to move forward from the experience while cognizant that there still may be the odd issue to sort out over time. So while they attest to getting through the adverse experience, it appears that getting over it is in some cases an ongoing process as one athlete explains:

B: Well I'm still working on it... There is still a sense of hesitation, there is still a sense of non-confidence in trusting my body to be there for me so yeah it's still a process [i.e., ongoing] ...And one of the difficulties I'm struggling with right now is when I train I'm still confronting it. I know it's there, and every time I train when I feel a little twinge in my leg, I freak out! But I guess how I look at it is, I've got to face it. I know the fear is always going to be there with me if I don't face it and so every time I train I just try to push through it and so far so good.

Experiences that challenge things of central importance to a person are liable to leave an indelible mark as one athlete described:

I: In what ways does this experience stay with you?

C: Oh gosh it always will. It's a big part of me, seriously getting on the podium when I got my bronze medal, going to Pan-Am games, and this experience [doping charge and subsequent battle to clear their name] are the biggest memories of my career. You can say you got your high points and low points and this was definitely the lowest. I don't think you could go much lower.

Coming to terms with missed opportunities is noted as an ongoing issue the following athlete had to work through:

C: For me I was already in my early thirties and so I was coming to the end of my career. I had already had my little girl but for myself I had done every major meet except for the Olympics. And there was no women's (name of sport) at the Olympics until 2000. So that's what also kept me going is I wanted to come back for the Pan-Am games and for the Olympic games.

There were additional unresolved feelings and unanswered questions for the above athlete to sort out over time as well:

C: Even though we don't know to this day what happened a lot of areas are closed now. Some are still open, but a lot are closed, because I know that I didn't cheat, and I got reinstated. But yeah, there still is some hurt that my career came to an end so abruptly and my training was going well, I was right at my peak. And at the world level the people in my sport were like family to me.

Working through certain shattered assumptions and challenged beliefs is an ongoing process for the following athlete:

B: I think through this process I lost confidence in myself. I lost that just knowing that I could do it [i.e., perform well] and I think that knowing you can do it also

comes from just loving what you do because you don't question you just do what you love and I just need to find that again. I need to find that love of just myself, and what I'm doing and so I'm going through that process right now.

The mark the experience leaves can actually be a welcome one. Being able to look back on the experience and be okay with it is important. Being able to look back on the experience as having provided a valuable opportunity to discover or re-discover who you are and what really matters is better still:

I: In what way or ways does this experience stay with you?

A: I think that all the events you go through in life you can grow from and every experience you go through in life it helps to shape you and who you are. And so for me it was about gaining insight on what I value and what is important to me in life. I think it was an experience that I really do feel made me a stronger person and more well balanced and...just a reminder of what I value in life.

I: And you're okay with it?

A: Definitely I am okay with it and I look back and I know there were moments that were tough for me, but I think all the way through it and ever since I want to look at it as something, that did happen and I'm okay with it, and I'm better because of it.

At the very least it appears that accepting and finding meaning in the experience signaled to the athletes that they had come through the experience and gained a degree of closure. Some aspects of the experience required ongoing work but there was a sense of completion that came from finding meaning that made things okay.

C: I mean I'm really happy even though there are still unanswered questions but it's come a long way. And you know what I'm content that it's come to a completion. There are still a few unanswered questions and things that I think about but...

I: And you're okay with unanswered questions at this point?

C: Yeah, I am. I still wouldn't mind finding out but I'm over that though. If I don't find out the answers it's okay.

Another athlete finds value in revisiting the experience from time to time. Doing so helps reinforce and refine this athlete's process for overcoming adversity, which they feel, will make it easier to overcome future challenges:

A: I can go back to that now, having gone through it once where that experience forced me to go through that process and reevaluate. And now when I experience minor setbacks in day-to-day training or things like that I think its easier for me to go back to that point where I did get reconnected, and remember what I am about, and just to enjoy each moment for what it is.

Despite the considerable value in the experience each person has described, feelings are mixed as to whether they would be willing to go through the experience again knowing what they know now:

I: You mention you have grown in many ways because of this experience. Would you trade in the growth you've experienced for never having had to go through this?

C: No I never want to go through this again. Trust me no. And even with the result of this being that I helped out athletes, because that's the person I am, I wouldn't want to go through all that I did just for that, nope.

For another athlete the value in what they have learned through this experience was worth the pain and struggle they went through:

I: You've mentioned that you've grown in many ways because of this experience.

Would you trade in that growth for never having had to go through it?

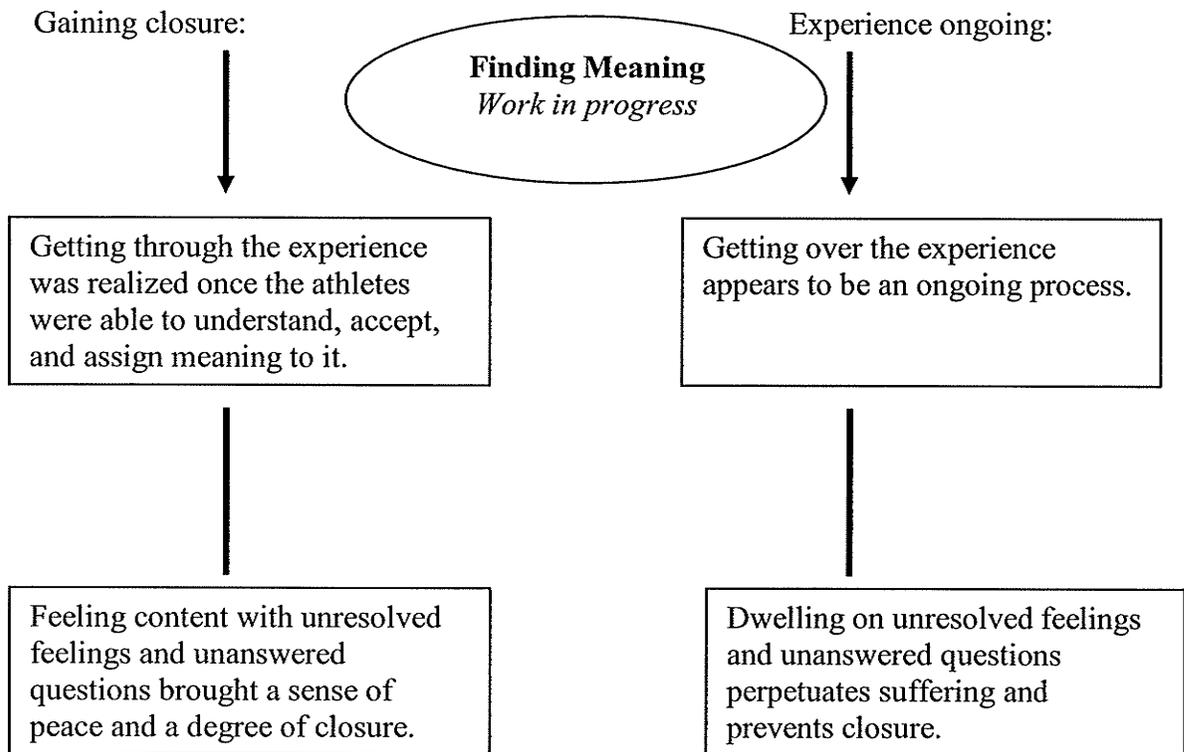
B: Never.

I: Why not?

B: The result [i.e., what she's learned, experienced etc.]. I don't regret anything. I never look back, always forward.

To summarize, while coming to understand, accept, and find meaning leads to a form of closure the experience does not go away completely. There may still be unresolved feelings and unanswered questions that creep into awareness from time to time and require some ongoing work to sort through. What mattered most for the participants is that they reached a point where they were okay with any remaining ambiguity or discomfort surrounding the experience. A distinction is drawn between getting through the experience and getting over it. Getting through is realized once a person can comprehend the situation, accept it, and assign meaning to it. The participants referred to reaching a point of closure that makes room for lingering uncertainty and emotions. The process of getting over however is ongoing in some cases as remaining issues are rationalized over time.

Figure 8.



The last word

The following is not a category or subcategory, but rather a synopsis of how it is these individuals got through the experience. What I have done is try to piece together bits of text that describe in detail the answer to the question “how”. This data was difficult to fit into any one category because it speaks to the entire process in a condensed form, which is why I have let it stand-alone. All of the sentiments in this section have been covered throughout these pages however this is what it looks like when you piece it all together:

I: Why were you able to get through this?

B: Because I looked at it as a journey, as an adventure. I let myself feel when I felt emotions and let myself go through the emotion. Of the support crew that I had they were incredible. They didn't direct they were just a shoulder to cry on when I needed one. They were a sounding board; they were stable when I was going through rocky times.

I: They allowed you to just be.

B: Uh-huh. And I allowed myself just to be, rather than force things... And I think also to look on anything as a learning experience whether it be a challenge, or whether it be a success that everything you do is a learning experience.

A combination of a positive attitude, gratitude, and strong support were key factors for the following athlete:

I: Why were you able to get through this?

A: Because I think that I do look at things the right way, and I think my attitude helps, and I think I've been so fortunate to have the people I'm surrounded by in

life, and also that I have all the resources and information I needed to make a full and proper recovery, and that I'm really fortunate.

For another athlete the belief that they had in their ability to get through the challenge coupled with a healthy perspective on the importance of sport were important elements:

I: Why were you able to get through this experience?

C: I think it's just my character as a person... I'm very easy going and I think that helped a lot.

I: You mentioned things within your character. What things within your character do you think helped you get through this?

C: Again, just confidence and patience and knowing there is another life outside of sport and I've always thought like that. And I've always—I do my sports because I love them.

Another athlete describes the basic elements of their entire process for getting through sport related adversity:

A: I just think with small setbacks or big setbacks, whether it be this experience I went through or you just had a bad game, or you're disappointed or you don't feel that confidence from the coach it's all little things but we still process them the same way to get to that same outlook. And I mean all of this adversity is similar in that you just have to turn it around, get yourself grounded, think about what you are about and who you are, and then turn it around to feel grateful, and appreciative, and driven again.

Discussion

Revisiting the research question

I set out in the beginning to explore how athlete's manage to navigate through significant instances of sport related adversity. My hope was to identify and articulate a process, if there was one, grounded in the participants' experiences. I believe the athlete's I interviewed have in fact described a process for getting through a significant sport related challenge. How do we know it is a process? The most obvious support lie in the language the participants' used to describe how they managed to proceed from crisis to meaning. The athletes spoke of transitions, progress, stages and closure all of which implies a dynamic series of events marked by a tendency towards forward movement. Moreover there were moments when each person made a conscious decision to shift from one major transition to another. The process that the athletes have described however is more circular in nature than strictly linear. It is circular in the sense that people moved back and forth between positive and negative emotions as they encountered setbacks along the way. The linearity of the process is seen in the transition from the initial stage to the tipping point. That is, by being proactive seeking out information and resources that could help them understand their situation better and by changing their outlook the athlete's made forward progress from a point of uncertainty and disappointment to meaning and contentment.

This process begins with a disruption to the athlete's routine. The initial reaction is largely fear based as people are inundated with feelings of shock, and disbelief. Once denial proves fruitless the person is overwhelmed with feelings of frustration, and disappointment exacerbated by the fact they know little about their situation or how to change it. Processing these emotions enables the person to shift their focus towards

seeking out solutions to the problem. This marks the beginning of the second major transition wherein the person actively seeks out people and resources that can help them understand what they are dealing with. As well they make a conscious decision to turn around how they think and feel about the situation from disappointed and frustrated to more positive and optimistic. As they learned more they began to gain back some control. These efforts collectively tipped the experience in a manner that led the athlete to believe that the worst was over, and that they were going to get through it.

Simultaneously two sub-processes are at work to assist the athlete in dealing with issues that may either help or hinder their progress through the experience and to facilitate the search for meaning. Doing other activities, reflecting on life, seeking out support people, and reminding oneself about what is important helped offset feelings of loss brought on by the experience and re-established a sense of wholeness. In addition, committing to the idea that things happen for a reason and then identifying reasons that bring value and purpose to what they have been through helped the athletes get to a point of understanding, acceptance and ultimately closure. The experience still stays with them and comes to the surface on occasion but what matters is each person recognizes this as part of the process and is okay with how things have turned out.

Revisiting the literature

Overcoming adversity

Existing literature on adversity and resilience encompasses many of the themes that have surfaced in this study. Dealing with painful emotions, the importance of social support, experiencing a loss of oneself, and the value in finding meaning in adverse experience is well documented. However little research on this phenomenon exists within

the context of sport, which is where the potential benefit of the findings lie. In terms of sport related research on adversity and resilience Mummery, et al. (2004) suggest that individuals with a strong self concept, and coping skills, are more likely than others scoring low on these traits, to rebound after challenge or failure. The self-concept of the athletes I interviewed however was more fluid throughout the experience. Each person moved from a strong and clear sense of self prior to the incident, to a lost or fragmented sense of self following the incident, until eventually discovering or re-discovering an even stronger, more balanced sense of self as they reached a point of closure.

Other researchers have demonstrated how an optimistic explanatory style contributes to resilience in sport performance after failure (Martin-Krumm, et al., 2003; Schinke & Jerome, 2002). Expressing optimism was a significant part of the participants' process for overcoming adversity in the study I conducted. By changing their attitude from feelings of despair and frustration to optimism and belief the athletes I interviewed experienced an increase in energy and momentum and in feelings of control over the situation.

Another study described how two athletes dealt with the emotional fallout from an injury that left them incapable of engaging in sport (Collinson, 2005). The initial reactions of the participants' were quite similar to the ones expressed by the athletes I interviewed. They were beset with anxiety, fear, shock, helplessness and intense frustration before reaching a point where they got busy with getting better. The motivation for action also bore some resemblance across the two studies. The participants in Collinson's study were spurred to act out of anger from what they felt was inadequate treatment on the part of medical professionals. Two of the participants I

interviewed were also motivated to some degree by anger and resentment towards their sport for the way they were treated. Whereas participant "A" experienced tremendous support from sport so anger was not an issue for that participant. Nevertheless the similarities between each of these studies suggest that being pro-active increased feelings of control, decreased anxiety, instilled hope and helped re-establish a sense of self that had been diminished with the loss of sport. Moreover, the participants in Collinson's study described the process of getting through as circular and not strictly linear which echoes the sentiments of the people I interviewed. When setbacks appeared the participants in each study took a step backward as feelings of disappointment, frustration and uncertainty resurfaced. Collinson refers to this as being flung back in the "time tube" (p. 230) wherein the person experiences an "oscillation" of emotions as they move forward and back throughout the experience. Feelings of depersonalization are also noted in Collinson's research as the participants' complained of being objectified by health care professionals who failed to treat them as a person.

Research on perspective within the context of elite sport also shares several similarities to the results of the study I have completed. Brown et al., (2001) found that athletes with a broad multifaceted identity, strong support, and who express themselves openly and authentically are better positioned to process adverse experiences. Further that maintaining a view of self that does not identify too strongly with the athlete role buffers a person against sport related challenges. Some of the athletes I interviewed felt an initial loss of the whole self, not just the athlete self, in response to the loss of sport and through the reactions of others. However they were reminded of the value in maintaining a more balanced identity and took steps to reclaim a sense of self that transcended the athlete role

by reflecting on who they are, and what is important as well as by engaging in activities that speak to other important aspects of the self. The participants in the Brown et al. study also indicated that in times of struggle putting faith in the idea that things happen for a reason helps restore a sense of order and meaning to life.

Nixon (1994) looked further at the significance of support for athletes going through sport injuries. Nixon suggested that the specific support network consisting of coaches, teammates and trainers is an essential element for athletes coping with injury. Nixon referred to this subculture of support as an “interactive sportsnet” (p. 341) through which athletes seek out understanding, encouragement, and guidance from key persons within the context of sport. The willingness of athletes to seek out people in their sportsnet is influenced by the level of compassion and empathy they perceive from these individuals. In other words when coaches, teammates and support staff care about the athlete and empathize with what they are going through, the athlete experiences strong support and is more likely to access people in sport for guidance or assistance. The athletes I interviewed mentioned how damaging the withdrawal of support from people in sport was to them. Applying Nixon’s model it is as though their interactive sportsnet was crumbling in front of them at a time when it was needed most. The questioning and doubting by people in sport prevented the participants from accessing certain individuals in their sportsnet. People in sport must be aware that some of what they say and do is perceived as hurtful by athletes.

Additional research outside of sport offers further examples of how individuals overcome adversity. Again, many of the findings resonate with the experiences of the people I interviewed. For example Felten (2000) found that some women over the age of

85 who have survived an illness late in life attribute their own resilience to equanimity, perseverance, meaningfulness, self-reliance and existential aloneness. Equanimity refers to a balanced perspective, meaningfulness speaks to the ability to find meaning in significant events and existential aloneness refers to the opportunity to reflect on life that presents itself when an illness forces a person to slow down. Bohn, Wright & Moules (2003) report that families of a person who has had a myocardial infarction adjusted better if their beliefs were facilitating as opposed to constraining. Facilitative beliefs lead a person to look for options and ideas to change the situation whereas constraining beliefs may close off certain options and perpetuate suffering. For the people I interviewed belief in themselves, in those around them, in their process, in the idea that things happen for a reason and that everything will be okay was an essential part of their efforts to get through adversity. Their beliefs were challenged, but even in the lowest moments remained strong.

The value in expressing optimism is discussed in the work of Mosher, Prelow, Chen, & Yackel (2006). Optimists they report are more likely to engage in active coping efforts wherein they mobilize themselves to seek out solutions and are persistent in their quest. This is quite similar to what the participants I interviewed have described. Once they changed their attitude they were spurred to action.

The role of support in overcoming adversity is emphasized in the literature. Researchers point out that it is the quality of support that matters more than the number of supporters. In fact some researchers make the case that what matters most is a person has at least one special person who is a consistent source of comfort and strength (Katz, 1997; Simon, Murphy, & Smith, 2005). Each of the athletes I interviewed had broad solid

support structures in place. They received support from a variety of sources; some of which was expected and some were pleasantly surprising. However the participants did also point out a nucleus of support that was absolutely essential to them. Primarily this involved a small group of close family and friends who were a stable presence in a time they were really needed. Despite the withdrawal of support from key people in sport, the strong support they received from their core network more than made up. A link can be drawn to the work of Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne (1998) which describes the idea of coping as a communal process. Essentially in times of need the burden of getting through is shared by close others who commit to doing all they can to meet the person's needs and help them cope with whatever is causing them distress. All of the participants I interviewed revealed in the comfort of being around close supportive people in a familiar environment. Whether it was going for a walk, searching for information on the internet, or grabbing a cup of coffee, key support people were actively involved in the participant's recovery.

Loss of self

The notion of multiple selves is implied in the responses of athletes I interviewed. Reference is made to the physical or athlete self as a distinct aspect of the person or whole self. Researchers such as Harre (1991) and Hermans (2002) provide a nice description of the multiplicity of self. The self of personal identity is the core whereas aspects of this self are manifested in social relations in the form of roles. The person has the ability to change selves in accordance to changes in situation and time. Harre suggests the idea of self be broken down into self 1 comprising the entire person and self 2 which is the diverse selves that the person presents in given situations. Santee and Jackson

(1979) add that people anchor their self-identifications in situations and in relation to others through the performance of roles. Other researchers point out that the identification with multiple selves can serve as a potential protective factor against adverse events (Brown, 2001). Because a person identifies with the athletic role as one of many important roles, the loss of sport is assumed to be less depersonalizing than a person who over identifies with being an athlete. Webb et al., (1998) also caution against the pervasiveness of the athlete identity at the cost of other selves. They suggest the public nature of elite sport and by extension the status it brings, coupled with the dedication it takes to compete at the top level leaves athletes susceptible to identifying too strongly with the athlete role. The participants I interviewed confess that while sport is a major part of their lives it is only a part. Further the experience reminded them how important it is to make time for other selves beyond the athlete self to ensure a sense of balance and perspective in life.

The experience of a loss of self is common for athletes who have developed an injury (Roderick, Waddington, & Parker, 2000; Wainwright, Williams, & Turner, 2005). The loss of sport can by extension threaten the very identity of the person (Sparkes, 2004). Roderick et al. also note that injured athletes struggle with adjusting to a new less regimented, less meaningful routine, and in dealing with feelings of self-blame and guilt. The participants in the study I conducted found tremendous value in gaining distance from the training environment, which had the effect of reducing guilt and pressure. Sparkes (1998) posits that injuries threaten the self because they challenge assumptions a person has about their body, and sense of wholeness. The injury leaves the self in a fragmented condition, which makes it difficult to assimilate and accept, and launches a

person into a state of shock and disarray. This sounds similar to the initial reactions of the people I interviewed who struggled with the same feelings of disbelief and disappointment. In another article, Sparkes (2004) refers to the value in quest stories as a means to overcome challenges. Quest stories are narratives constructed by the person that view adversity as a journey and as an opportunity to grow and help others. Each person I interviewed extolled the importance of leaving a legacy through their story so that others may benefit from their experience.

Finally Brock, & Kleiber (1994) further illustrate how a loss of self occurs with the loss of sport through the concepts of liminality and stigma. Athletes in a liminal state are adrift in a sea of ambiguity. They are stuck somewhere between where they were and where they will be, which is initially unknown. Brock and Kleiber refer to this as a “reverse transition” (p. 420) wherein the athlete comes from a “sacred to a profane condition”. Stigma is based on the idea that the athlete has gone from a celebrated state to that of ordinariness. While the comparison can be made to the people I interviewed having embodied this liminal state early on, I am not convinced they would identify with sport as strongly as is implied here. Certainly sport is very important, but there were other aspects of the self they held as sacred if not more than sport prior to and after being injured.

Finding meaning

Meaning in life is a core feature of what researchers refer to as optimal human functioning (Frazier, Lee, & Steger, 2006). The term meaning in life implies that a person recognizes and comprehends their life as having significance, and purpose. The athletes I interviewed expressed how finding meaning in a difficult sport related challenge was a

key component in their process for getting through the experience. These findings are echoed by other researchers such as Coward & Kahn (2005), who found that meaning making helped women being treated for breast cancer to adjust and move forward with their recovery. Furthermore these researchers add that those individuals who are proactive, seeking out information and support, find strength and meaning in the search and through sharing their story with others going through similar challenges. It is suggested that a person reaches a state of self-transcendence by giving to others and by learning to accept difficult situations in a way that brings peace and order to life.

The frustrations of breast cancer patients are heightened initially by a lack of knowledge concerning the effects and implications of the disease. The experience of breast cancer often leads to a re-evaluation of priorities. In the end it is accepted that certain aspects of the experience, such as a person's emotional reactions to it, stay with you even after successful treatment. The following quote from one of the participant's in Coward and Kahn's (2005) study bares some of the same features, in the same order of occurrence as the people I interviewed. The point is to demonstrate that the process of getting through adversity is similar across different negative life experiences of different severity. I am not implying that the experience of breast cancer or any other life threatening condition is similar to a sport setback, rather the process for overcoming these experiences share certain features.

The discovery of breast cancer is associated with shock, fear of dying, loss of identity as a healthy person, and an urgent need to learn enough about breast cancer and treatment to advocate for oneself. When diagnosed, women quickly reach inwardly for strength and confidence in their ability to educate themselves as they navigate the diagnosis and treatment process. They reach outwardly for education and support from family, friends, and health care providers. They call on past successful coping experiences and motivation for a healthy future to maintain the effort required to learn to manage breast cancer and its

accompanying emotional and spiritual turmoil. The expansion of previous perspectives and behaviors leads newly diagnosed women to other women with breast cancer. Networking and bonding with similar others occurs in a way that brings them comfort, a desire to modify previous life priorities, enhanced appreciation of supportive others and of life itself, and a desire to advocate for breast cancer issues (p. 276).

Additional research on the process of meaning making in persons with breast cancer suggests that the search for meaning is successful when it brings purpose and order to life (Collie, & Long, 2005). Citing the work of Viktor Frankl (1984) these researchers explain that ultimately meaning making boils down to a choice. Regardless of whether we are talking about a sport related challenge or the horror of the holocaust in the end the person chooses how the experience will be etched in their mind. Therefore efforts to look at the experience as meaningful in some way leads to closure, peace of mind, and allows the individual to assimilate the experience more readily. The factors that Collie and Long suggest facilitate finding meaning include perceiving benefit, letting go of what you can't control, an ability to see the big picture, making time for deep introspective reflection, time spent with family, seeing the experience as an opportunity and quality support. Reference is made to all of these factors in the testimony provided by the people I interviewed.

Lightsey (2006) proposed that meaning making mediates between negative emotions brought on by the experience and positive emotions that arise through reframing how we look at the situation. Other researchers have pointed out the value in perceiving benefit in difficult experiences by illuminating how people are transformed in positive ways (McMillen, 1999). When people search for meaning it can lead to a changed existential outlook, the discovery or re-discovery of personal strengths, a

reshuffling of priorities more in line with what is really important, and more meaningful relationships. The simple fact is that adverse experiences shock a person to a higher level of being if the process they have followed leads to finding meaning and acceptance.

Yalom (1980) distinguished between the state of forgetfulness of being where a person gets lost in the drone and monotony of everyday life, with a state of mindfulness of being wherein a person enjoys a more authentic existence, fully aware of the possibilities and limits of life and of themselves. It often takes a significant life experience to elevate a person to this heightened state of being. The athletes I interviewed were forced to stop what they were doing and as a result began to reflect on key existential concerns that previously had not been considered or that were placed in the background by the demands of elite sport. Each of the athletes I interviewed felt they had come through the experience stronger because they found a way to represent the struggle in a manner that brought purpose and order to their life.

Future research

As the lead researcher in this study the ultimate question to me is what value if any does this research have from a practical standpoint? Will other people benefit from learning how these individuals got through adversity in sport? Is it enough to simply read about the process or can it be taught to athletes, coaches, and other people in sport? It would be interesting to apply this model to athletes currently facing sport related adversity to see whether the experiential knowledge of the athletes I interviewed can be internalized in a way that helps other athletes get through their own challenges. It brings up an interesting point though in that a lot of the growth the participants experienced occurred because they had to refine their process as they went along. One wonders that if

other people simply emulate what these individuals have done do they miss out on discovering their own process, which may look quite different than the one's expressed in this study.

Perhaps efforts aimed at helping athletes identify and refine some of the core elements of their own individual process for transitioning through sport related adversity would be more practical. While there was some overlap between participants with regards to what made a difference, each athlete's process was highly unique and specific to the individual. Recall that a grounded theory is particular to a given time and context. This study describes what three elite athletes have identified as the key elements of their own individual process for transitioning through adversity. Each of these athletes has had different experiences in sport and life, they come from different backgrounds, have differing worldviews, etc. The point is by no means is this thesis meant to serve as a how-to list for overcoming challenges. There are a variety of factors such as race, gender, religion and spirituality, that did not surface in the interviews as relevant but which certainly have a shaping influence on a person's identity and worldview. It would be interesting to approach this same topic with the intent of exploring one or several of these variables to see whether any new information emerges that might further enhance our understanding of what makes a difference for athletes going through adversity. For example, it is possible that an athlete with a strong faith in god might reason that adversity is all in god's plan.

A further extension of this study could be to identify what some of the core personality traits are for the athletes I interviewed as it relates to research on resiliency. Resiliency refers to specific traits that make a person better equipped to cope and get

through personal challenges. Examples of these traits include having a strong self-concept, above average intelligence, and an optimistic explanatory style. I would predict that in many instances there is a strong correlation between the presence of resilient traits in an athlete and the probability for successful transition through sport related adversity.

The practical value of such a study is that while it may be important for each person to develop, refine, and experience their own process for getting through adversity; coaches, sport psychologists, and administrators can design programs that aid athletes in identifying and developing the kinds of traits that have shown to be helpful for people going through a significant challenge. Workshops on dealing with identity issues, and developing a stronger self-concept, and learning how to reframe and process difficult experiences are examples of strategies that may help athletes develop the kinds of skills resilient individuals possess.

The value of support in times of need is well documented. However I did not come across any research articles in sport throughout a review of literature that dealt specifically with the withdrawal of support, which the athletes I interviewed indicated was a particularly difficult reality to face. Given the propensity for elite athletes to associate strongly with the athlete identity it is important to sensitize people within sport as to how important their support is, and how damaging it can be if an athlete perceives they have withdrawn it. As I found little research on adversity in sport I would suspect that coaches, teammates, support staff and administrators have little formal training on how to help athletes get through critical incidents of adversity in sport.

Part of the responsibility falls on the athlete too, as they are responsible for communicating what they need from others in those situations. Nevertheless it would be

interesting to interview coaches and administrators to see whether they do have certain policies and/or resources in place to help athletes manage the effects of adversity. The odds are at some point in their athletic career an athlete will be faced with an instance of setback and challenge that will pose difficulty. I believe a key part of the problem associated with people in sport withdrawing their support is a lack of information and in some situations a failure on both sides to communicate effectively. Because people in sport jumped to conclusions without enough information to make an informed decision, two of the athletes I interviewed experienced the withdrawal of support from people they were counting on to be there. Furthermore, in an instance where a coach or teammate is trying to be supportive or motivating but it is not what the athlete needs, it is the responsibility of the athlete to let the people around them know what they need from them, and how they can help.

Therefore an extension of this study might be to interview athletes who while going through a difficult challenge experienced strong support from sport. Of interest would be to learn how that support was beneficial, and what each party did to ensure that the needs of the athlete, coaches, and teammates were being addressed. Moreover, it might be valuable to interview the coach of an athlete who has been acknowledged for being very supportive to learn how they managed the situation. That is how they communicated with the athlete, what if any expectations they had and how these were decided on, for example.

The athletes I interviewed described how valuable it was for them to leave the training environment and go to a place to recover that had a grounding effect on them. The athletes commented on how gaining some psychological distance from sport and

being in an environment that was supportive, and familiar actually accelerated recovery. Contrast this with the common practice in elite and professional sport that the athlete is required to remain in or around the training environment in situations where they are unable to participate. There are practical reasons as to why this is preferred such as in the case of an injury the athlete has access to trainers and therapists within the training environment to ensure they receive proper treatment. In addition, there may be value in the athlete attending training sessions and meetings to stay informed and to simulate training as well as the social benefits of being around teammates, coaches and support staff. However, the athletes I interviewed clearly stated how being home facilitated and expedited their return to sport. Certainly the goal of the coach and the team is to ensure that the athlete comes back to sport as soon as possible once they feel they have overcome the challenge facing them. It would be interesting to study whether athletes that have faced critical incidents of sport related adversity and were allowed to leave the training environment with the support of the people in their sport return to competition in less time than athletes who were required to remain there. Many of the factors people in sport point to for justifying that the athlete should remain in the training environment can be arranged for in other settings such as physiotherapy for example. Furthermore the relative psychological value the participants indicated they experienced by getting away from sport cannot be underestimated in terms of its influence on expediting their recovery.

The participants described how the uncertainty of the situation was one of the more difficult aspects of the experience to work through. Learning more about their situation including what the implications were, and what they could do to improve things

marked a significant turning point in the process of getting through it. Each of the athletes I interviewed took on active roles seeking out people and information that could answer many of the questions that were causing them concern. Often athletes are told by their coaches and other support personnel to focus on training, competing, and recovery and leave the rest of what needs to be done up to specific people in their sport to deal with. For example many sports at the elite level have experts in place whom the athlete relies on to plan training sessions, to provide counseling, to provide physiological testing and to oversee the assessment and treatment of injuries. However, the athletes in this study explain how the combination of their own efforts to learn as much as they could about their situation from multiple experts across a variety of settings and trusting in the experts they had access to in their sport hastened the process of getting through the experience. The athletes shared the responsibility for their recovery as opposed to leaving it entirely up to others and the effect was it reduced anxiety in the athlete, promoted collaboration between the athlete and the experts around them and led to a quicker recovery. Future research might look to examine whether athletes who take on a more active role in getting through adversity recover quicker than athletes who leave it up to the experts to take care of their situation. I would suggest the more active athlete would get through more readily and completely than the complacent athlete. Perhaps as a result, people in elite sport should be encouraging athletes to think about more than just training and competing and become more involved learning about other services available to them that can improve health and performance, such as injury rehabilitation and prevention for example.

Finally I have a keen interest in exploring how the reverse of adversity (i.e., a euphoric experience such as a surfer catching a big wave, or a veteran player winning a championship in the twilight of their career, etc.) can lead to many of the same reactions and effects as observed in this study. Experiences like these can lead to a tremendous shift in perspective and bring newfound meaning to life. I'm curious to see whether it takes a negative life event, as some experts suggest, to lead to a similar degree of self-transformation as expressed by the people I interviewed or can a euphoric experience lead to similar levels of growth and enhanced meaning in life? I would like to interview athletes who have had this kind of experience to learn how the experience is initially interpreted and how it evolves into a profoundly meaningful and perhaps life changing one.

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Appendix A: Information Letter

Transitions from Sport Related Adversity:

Interpreting the Elite Athletes' Experiences

Introduction

The environment of elite sport can be tumultuous. Athletes in this setting routinely are faced with instances of setback, challenge, and disappointment. These experiences can pose significant obstacles to personal health and well-being. It stands to reason that one's ability or inability to manage the effects of adversity in this context may partially determine how successful and content one feels about their athletic career. Furthermore, odds are elite athletes will face some form of adversity in their sport through the course of a career, and this may pose significant problems for them. Problems may include strong feelings that are difficult to process (e.g. feelings of anxiety, fear, frustration, etc.), a loss of identity, and an erosion of one's health and sense of well-being.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe how a number of elite athletes managed to progress from crisis and chaos to meaning, following a critical incident of adversity experienced in sport. In this study critical incidents refer to unanticipated highly charged events and situations in sport that pose significant challenges for elite athletes. Often these experiences incite periods of self-reflection and serve as catalysts for change. It is hoped that the findings will provide useful remedial and educational information for those parties living and working within the context of elite sport (i.e. athletes, coaches, sport science professionals, and sport administrators).

Participant Criteria

All participants must meet the following criteria:

- 1) Must have experienced an incident of sport related adversity while competing.
- 2) Must have adapted positively to the experience.
- 3) Must compete at the elite amateur level defined as national and/or international competition, and/or in the professional/semi-professional ranks.
- 4) Must speak English

Interview Procedure

You have been identified through a network of sport psychology professionals as someone who is to be considered an appropriate candidate for the study. If you choose to participate in this research project, you will be interviewed approximately 1 to 4 times. Each interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes and will be recorded on a digital voice recorder. The digital recordings will be downloaded onto my personal home computer, which is protected by a password. To ensure your anonymity and confidentiality, the transcribed data will be coded using an assigned pseudonym (e.g., Participant A). All transcribed materials will be stored and locked in my home filing cabinet. The results of the study may be published, but your anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured through use of the pseudonym. Data will be retained indefinitely as it may hold archival value.

Contact

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing REB. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the Human Ethics Secretariat

at 474-7122, or email margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca. If you are interested in participating in this study, and would like further information, please contact:

Jason Brooks, M.Sc. Candidate

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Studies

University of Manitoba

Thank-you for your time,

Jason Brooks

Appendix B: Consent Form

Transitions from Sport Related Adversity:

Interpreting the Elite Athletes' Experiences

Jason Brooks, M.Sc. Candidate

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Studies

University of Manitoba

Telephone: (204) 338-8477

Please Read Carefully

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

As a participant, you will be interviewed 1 to 4 times. It is impossible to predict with any certainty how many interview sessions will be required due to the nature of the methodology used in the study. Essentially, the goal is to create categories of meaning that accurately describe the participant's experience with sport related adversity. Once the categories have been identified and adequately described no more interviews will be conducted. In a review of literature a range of 1-4 interviews often was cited as sufficient to accomplish this aim.

Each interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes and will be taped on a digital voice recorder. The opening question in the first interview will most likely be: *“Tell me about a particularly difficult event or situation you have experienced in sport. Feel free to discuss anything you feel is relevant about the experience”*. Subsequent questions will follow based on your initial response. In short, you will be asked to “expand on” or to “tell me more” about some aspect of what you have said. The recorded interviews will be downloaded onto my personal home computer, which is protected by a password. To ensure your anonymity and confidentiality, the transcribed data will be coded using an assigned pseudonym (e.g., Participant A). All transcribed materials will be stored and locked in my home filing cabinet. The results of the study may be published but the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants will be ensured through use of the pseudonym. Data will be retained indefinitely as it may hold archival value. This research project is in partial requirements for a M.Sc. degree. Results of the study may be published in scholarly, peer reviewed, sport and health psychology journals.

Interview Transcripts and Future Research

The interview transcripts may hold archival value and the researcher would like to preserve the option of using the information for further research in this area. Interview transcripts will be retained indefinitely and used for further research only where the participant has provided consent. Participants hold the right to have their interview transcripts destroyed on request. In the event that the researcher would like to re-use or re-analyze the interview transcripts from this study, participants will be contacted and given the option to have their transcripts included or excluded in subsequent research.

Moreover, participants will be informed about the nature and purpose of any subsequent research being done, as well as how their interview material will be used. Finally, written consent will be obtained from each participant prior to re-using any of the interview material.

Signed Consent

I agree to participate in this study and understand that:

- My participation is voluntary
- All information I give will be treated confidentially
- I may withdraw from participating at any time for any reason without consequence
- I can obtain a summary of the results upon request

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____