

Transitioning Out of a Figure Skating Career in Finland: A Qualitative Study

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<p>In recent years there has been a growing interest in the implications of athletic career transitions and the post-career adjustment of athletes. The purpose of this thesis is to find out what kind of experiences Finnish figure and synchronized skaters have had in their transition processes, the support they had available to them, as well as the kind of support they wish to have had at the time.</p> <p>The theoretical framework of this thesis was based on two concepts central to the study, these being athletic career transition models and athletic identity. The theoretical framework also depicts an overview of the career paths of competitive figure and synchronized skaters in Finland, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the demands placed on these athletes.</p> <p>Based on the concepts studied in the theoretical framework, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the format for this qualitative study. Through the semi structured interviews, it was possible to understand and begin the analysis of, the individual experiences of the participants involved in the study. Interviews were conducted in February and March of 2021.</p> <p>Twelve former Finnish figure and synchronized skaters participated in the study. They each had their own diverse reasons for transitioning out of their skating careers, and through interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interview transcripts, subordinate themes were collected, and where appropriate, connected into superordinate themes. As a result, a deeper understanding was found for how to support athletes in their transition processes and prepare them to be well-adjusted to post-career lives.</p> <p>The results of the study indicated that the participants' negative transition experiences were primarily caused by a perceived lack of support, ineffective coach-athlete relationships, a high athletic identity, and a lack of pre-retirement planning. Peer support and a plan for post-skating life were the most helpful in facilitating adjustment post-athletic career. In cases of crisis transition, sport psychologists played an important role in aiding the participants' adjustment. The participants of the study wished to have received more support from their coaches and to have had access to a sport psychologist.</p> <p>Based on these results, it is recommended that coaches receive more education on the topic of athletic career transitions, and that figure skaters in Finland be encouraged to pursue dual careers and social roles outside of sports. Additionally, the organization of peer support groups and alumni operation should be extended to more clubs. It would also be helpful to future transitioning skaters that access to sport psychologists be more easily available.</p>	
Keywords Athletic career transition, athletic identity, figure skating, synchronized skating.	

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1 Introduction

An athletic career offers the possibility of providing an individual with countless experiences, which may not be feasible to have in any other domain. This includes the range of character-building experiences and emotions concerning the highs and lows, which come with sports participation. Naturally, when this exciting and fulfilling lifestyle ends, many athletes may face difficulties and challenging times in adjusting to their post-sports lives, particularly if there has been no planning involved for what to do next.

Transitions out of an athletic career have been studied increasingly in the last two decades. The reasons for career termination are diverse and ultimately have an effect on post-career adjustment. The experiences of each athlete in their own transition process vary according to factors such as their social circumstances, their own resources and resilience, whether retirement was planned or unplanned and whether the transition out of career was voluntary. These factors are all key in determining whether the transition process will be a negative or positive experience for the athlete. Athletes who have an involuntary termination of their career are more likely to have adjustment difficulties than their counterparts who terminate voluntarily. Appropriate planning for athletic retirement contributes to greater feelings of control and provides increased chances of adapting to life after sport, in contrast to those who have failed to plan. (Cecic Erpic, Wylleman & Zupancic 2004, 46-47.)

A majority of athletes have participated in sport from an early age and along the way have built their own identity largely around their participation in sports. When transitioning out of an athletic career, athletes are confronted by the need to build a new self-identity, one which is no longer centred around their sports participation. This loss of identity can contribute to significant psychosocial distress. Indeed, individuals who experience higher levels of athletic identity have greater adjustment difficulties following their transition out of sports. (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder 1993; Lavallee, Gordon & Grove 1997.)

Figure skating and all the disciplines it covers, are early specialisation sports. Skaters each have their own individual career pathways and experiences, however one factor remains the same throughout, and that is, that in order to have an internationally successful career, you must begin early and commit to demanding training schedules all the way throughout your career. In all respects, figure skating is a tough sport. It demands time, effort, commitment and money. Due to the commitment required in figure skating all

throughout the formative years, many skaters feel at a loss with their sense of self following the transition out of sport, as well as in where to direct all the time and energy previously spent on practicing their sport.

This study will focus on the experiences of twelve former Finnish figure skaters and synchronized skaters in their athletic career termination process. Through semi-structured interviews, the purpose is to find out which factors during and after the transition process have been helpful in adjusting to post-skating life and which factors have hindered the process, making adjustment difficult. In addition to this, the aim is to find out what kind of support the athletes had received from external sources in the planning process as well as post-retirement, and the kind of support the athletes would have wished to receive for the entire transition process. Based on these findings, recommendations will be made on how skaters' families, friends, clubs, coaches, and the Finnish Figure Skating Association could provide assistance and support to athletes who are transitioning, or who have already transitioned, out of their skating career.

2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework discussed in this chapter is based on literature review of two concepts central to this study, these two being athletic career transition models and athletic identity. The overview of these topics includes definitions, findings from previous research, and commonly utilized models. Two final subchapters are dedicated to the overview of figure and synchronized skating career paths in Finland, in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the demands placed on these athletes during their careers, as well as of the possible implications that career transition may bring to them.

2.1 Athletic career transition models

To understand the process of transitioning out of an athletic career and all that it entails, first we must understand the concept of career transitions. A transitional model based on transitions in working life was proposed by Schlossberg (1981, 5), whom defined career transitions as follows; “a transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships”. This proposition can be easily related back to athletic career transitions, including sports-career termination. The end of an athletic career will inevitably lead an athlete to re-examine their own sense of self and force them to pursue new paths in life outside of sports. However, career transition in sport should not be viewed as a singular event, rather a process and series of events. Schlossberg’s studies have given way for sport psychologists and researchers to create their own definitions and transition models more specific to sports, and indeed, in recent years studies on sport career termination have evolved into a holistic, lifespan, multilevel approach to the sports and post-sport careers of athletes. (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Côté 2009, 397.)

Over the course of their careers, athletes will inescapably undertake numerous transitions. Examples of what these transitions may entail in the sport of figure skating, include transitioning from junior to senior level athlete, moving to another club or team, or changing disciplines within the sport, for example from figure skating to synchronized skating. The end of an athletic career is also viewed as a transition. Transitions may be classified as normative or non-normative, with normative transitions being ones which are planned, predictable and to be expected, making them generally easier to cope with. Because non-normative transitions occur unexpectedly with little to no planning, such as a career-ending injury, athletes have been found to have considerably more difficulty in the coping pro-

cess. (Stambulova & al. 2009, 398.) It can be assumed that this difficulty stems from suddenly facing an entirely new lifestyle and self-identity, with no concrete plan in place on how to adjust to either of these. Both normative and non-normative transitions involve a specific set of demands and challenges which the athletes must overcome using their own set of resources, in order to have a successful transition either within their respective sport, or to adjustment in their post-athletic career lives (Alfermann & Stambulova 2007). The conceptual model of adaptation to retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie 1994) and the athletic career transition model (Stambulova 2003), both reflect the current view of athletic transitions as a collection of coping processes, and how these processes combined with the effective utilization of an athlete's resources, affect an athlete's experience, and ultimately, outcome in the career transition process.

In their evaluation of causes of sport career termination, Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) and Taylor and Ogilvie (1994, 1998) conclude that four main causes of career termination exist, these being age, deselection, injury, and free choice, as shown in Figure 1. The former three of these causes are independent of the athlete's choice in the matter and lead to a forced retirement. A forced retirement is one which is more difficult to adjust to and requires a more heavy-handed set of resources and coping skills to move on from, in order to lead a fulfilling life outside of sports. Free choice, however, is a reason for termination which is within the athlete's control. By having control of the choice to end an athletic career, athletes will be more likely to have designed a plan on how to cope with the change in lifestyle and any challenges which may arise in response to career termination. This is due to the perception of control not only fostering mental health and successful development (Seligman 1991), but also being strongly correlated to heightened feelings of self-efficacy, which plays a key role in behaviour change and adjustment (Bandura 1997). It can thus be inferred that the reason for retirement, in that whether it is of free choice or forced choice, will influence the adjustment to it. (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte 2004, 62).

The causes of athletic retirement directly affect an athlete's ability to plan for the retirement process, as well as post-athletic career. A forced retirement, which can also be considered a non-normative transition, allows little to no time for planning for the process. According to Taylor and Ogilvie's (1998, 435) reflections on the adaptive function of control, planned retirement is associated with a better and more positive adaptation to life post-sports career than unplanned retirement. Moreover, a planned retirement is connected to more positive and less negative emotional reactions to career termination, a shorter duration of the transitional period, lesser use of distraction strategies and higher current life

satisfaction. This due to the planning of retirement providing athletes with feelings of personal control over the situation, which increases self-efficacy in relation to successful post-career adaptation. (Alfermann & al. 2004, 70).

In their model, Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) outline factors related in adaptation to retirement and the resources which are available to the athlete at the time of retirement, as directly affecting the quality of adaptation to retirement. The factors related to the adaptation of retirement include the abovementioned perception of control over the transition process, as well as self-identity and social identity, which will be explored more thoroughly in the next chapter of this thesis. Additional factors relating to adaptation involve the athlete's personal developmental experiences, as well as any tertiary contributors. Resources which should be available to the athlete at the time of retirement involve the athlete's own coping skills, social support, as well as engaging in pre-retirement planning. Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) model proposes that if these resources are available to the athlete, the process of transitioning to a post-career life will be of high quality and lead to a healthy career transition.

However, if an athlete is lacking in any or all of these resources and if factors such as self-identity negatively impact the coping process, the athlete may experience a crisis retirement. Research shows that a crisis retirement can lead to a number of issues such as psychopathological, substance abuse, occupational problems and family or social problems, all of which require intervention. (Taylor & Ogilvie 1998). This intervention could potentially involve any support or guidance from a professional, to aid in managing the psychosocial impacts of the transition process or to help combat an otherwise difficult and unsuccessful transition (Stambulova 2011, 157).

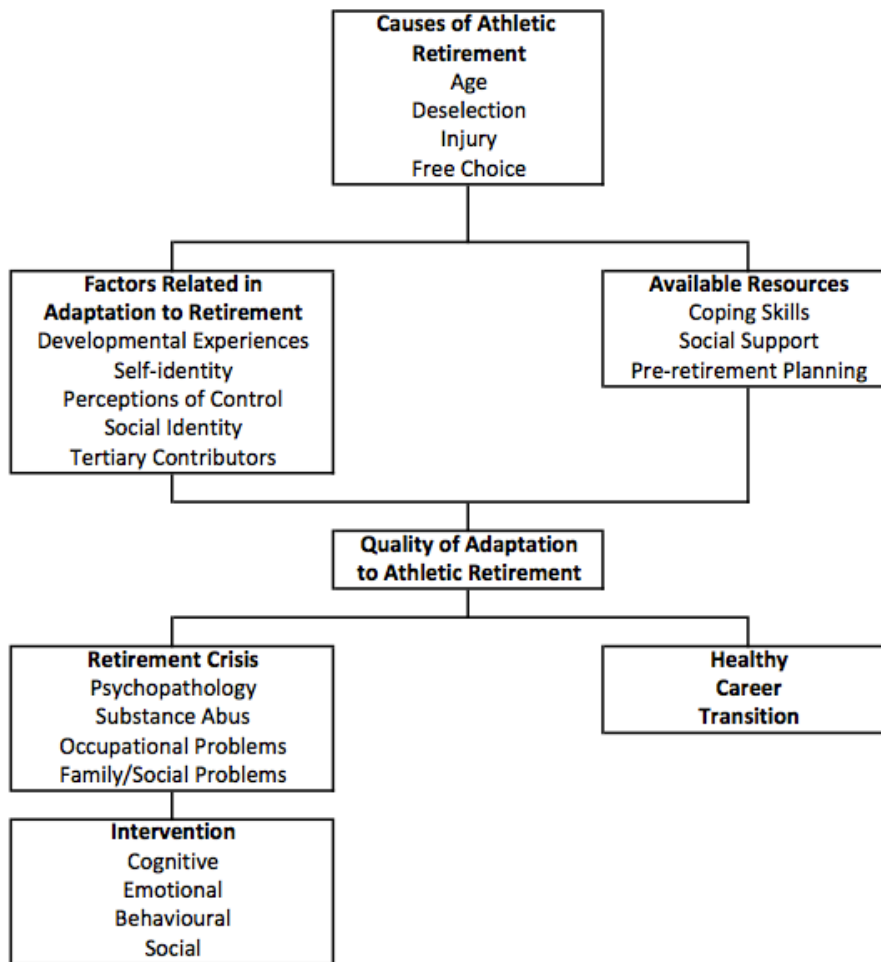


Figure 1. The conceptual model of adaptation to retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie 1994; 2001)

Similar to the model put forth by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) and expanding on previous transition models such as that of Schlossberg's, Stambulova (2003) has created her own athletic career transition model, based on her studies with Russian athletes. This model, depicted in Figure 2, shows career transition as a set of resources and barriers which require effective and active coping mechanisms. Based on Stambulova's (2003) perception of the athletic retirement process, a retiring athlete must actively cope with a specific set of retirement demands by taking action, in ways such as reorganizing their lifestyle, finding a new occupation and actively reassessing their self-identity, in order to effectively adapt to a life without sports (Stambulova & Samuel 2020, 119). Therefore, active coping as opposed to passive coping can be seen as one of the key factors which enables an athlete to smoothly transition to post-sports life. The utilization of active coping in challenging situations is considered more adaptive and less associated with mood disturbances. It is also associated with enhanced self-efficacy and other positive consequences. (Jex, Bliese, Buzzell & Primeau 2001, 401-409.)

Stambulova's (2003) model outlines two fundamental outcomes of the career transition process, these being an effective, therefore successful, transition and a crisis transition. The outcome of the transition process is dependent on the effectiveness of the active coping processes of the athlete, including early employment of crisis prevention interventions. If an athlete is to manage their resources, possible transition barriers and coping mechanisms well, this will lead to a feeling of being well-adjusted to post-sports life, thus a successful transition. (Stambulova & Samuel 2020, 121-122).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, failing to cope with the transition demands will lead to a crisis transition. This failure to cope may be due to factors such as lack of resources, ineffective coping mechanisms and excessive transition barriers. A crisis transition can be characterized by a set of psychosocial symptoms such as decrease in self-esteem, emotional discomfort and disoriented decision-making and behaviours. At this stage a need in intervention should be established and effectively implemented, in order to achieve a delayed successful transition. If there continues to be no intervention, or if the intervention is ineffective, the athlete will continue to deal with the costs for the failure to actively and effectively cope with the transition. (Stambulova 2017; Stambulova & Samuel 2020, 122).

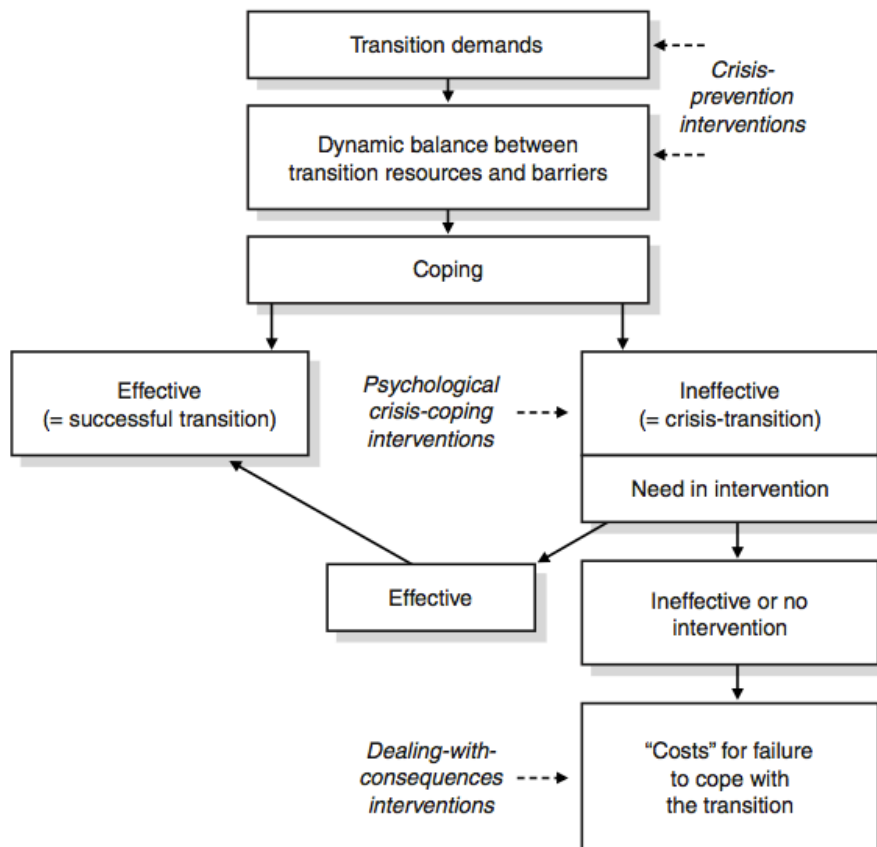


Figure 2. The athletic career transition model (Stambulova 2003)

Based on a later study conducted by Alfermann, Stambulova and Zemaityte (2004), on a cross-national comparison of German, Lithuanian and Russian athletes and their reactions to sport career termination, the use of a psychological training program for retiring and retired athletes was proposed, which would aim to help athletes maintain control over the retirement process. This type of training program would aid athletes in accumulating transition resources and help them prepare for transition. The training program could potentially include items such as equipping athletes with the knowledge and skills to use for the final moments of their sports careers, reasons for career termination, identifying an appropriate time for termination, planning for the short-term and long-term, including post-career, as well as accumulating transition resources such as self-analysis, social support and transferable skills. By establishing training programs such as this, athletes would be better equipped to actively cope with any transition barriers, have more knowledge in how to effectively utilize their own resources and be better prepared for life after sports, ultimately enabling them to experience a successful transition and be well-adjusted to their post-athletic career lives. (Alfermann & al. 2004, 61-75).

According to Stambulova (2011, 158), one of the most essential points to take away from the athletic career transition model is that crisis is one of the primary outcomes indicating ineffective coping with transition demands. Athletes whom are experiencing a crisis transition will require help and support in analyzing their own situations, as well as in creating strategies which will combat the athlete's own resources and transition barriers. Another significant point is that it is vital to provide the athlete with assistance early on, at the first signs of a crisis, when they are showing signs of experiencing difficulties, but with no or only mild clinical symptoms. This early intervention should be initiated by the athlete's close circle including family and coaching staff. It is also be important for the athletes themselves to have the adequate resources to be able to identify their own need for assistance. (Stambulova 2011, 159.)

2.2 Athletic identity

One of the central concepts to sports participation is that of athletic identity. Athletic identity can be defined as the degree to which an individual identifies themselves with the athletic role (Brewer & al. 1993, 237-254) and it has the capability to affect the way in which an athlete adapts to retirement. This identity is formed with the help of the sport itself and the people surrounding the individual within the athletic community. Individuals form an athletic identity as commitments to their chosen sport increase, which generally leads to a reduction in other social roles and this may result in both negative and positive consequences for athletes. (Cecic Erpic & al. 2004, 47).

This reduction in other social roles is called identity foreclosure and is something which athletes are particularly susceptible to. Identity foreclosure is what occurs when an individual commits strongly to the athletic role without adequate exploration of alternative identities. (Brewer, Petitpas & Van Raalte 2018, 156-163.) These alternative identities could include identifying as a student, friend, family member, or any other social or professional role. Perceived high athletic identity is found to positively influence sports performance and can therefore be regarded as a favourable attribute in athletes (Werthner & Orlick 1986, 337-363). Individuals with high athletic identity are often more motivated and dedicated to their sport and training regimes, have higher levels of intrinsic motivation to push them through training demands and athletic performances, and are more likely to dedicate their off-time from training towards leading a lifestyle which supports their athletic endeavours (Cecic Erpic & al. 2004, 47).

However, strong athletic identity also has the possibility to negatively impact factors such as academic performance, burnout, career development, substance use and psychological responses to transitions including deselection and injury (Brewer & al. 2018, 156-163). In addition, evidence also suggests that those who have a strong athletic identity risk facing difficulties post-athletic career (Blinde & Greendorfer 1985; Cecic Erpic 1998; Pearson & Petitpas 1990; Werthner & Orlick 1986). These difficulties are likely to be caused by limitations in the athlete's own perception of self and the resulting feelings of loss and inability to commit to working towards new goals and pursuits in non-athletic fields. Indeed, research shows that the kinds of difficulties athletes with a high athletic identity may face in the period following career termination include, for example difficulty in creating a post-athletic career identity. This is why athletes with a perceived high athletic identity generally take a longer period to adjust to post-sports life emotionally as well as socially, and is also the reason why it is crucial for athletes to develop a holistic and multidimensional sense of self, in order to be well equipped to handling the lifestyle changes post-retirement. (Lavallee & al. 1997.)

Self-identity is one of the key psychological issues which influences athletes' adaptations to post-athletic career lives. Furthermore, the issue is that athletes with high levels of athletic identity often base their own self-worth on their sports participation and achievement to much too high a degree (Blinde & Greendorfer 1985; Ogilvie & Howe 1982; Svoboda & Vanek 1982). If an athlete is so immersed in their own sports participation that they fail to recognize the importance of having other social roles or pursuing other interests outside of sports, they will inevitably have more difficulty in adjusting to life following an athletic career. Moreover, once these individuals no longer have input from their sport in helping carry their identity, they are left with little to support their sense of self-worth (Pearson & Petitpas 1990, 7-10). Athletes in this situation are more likely to experience feelings of major loss following their career termination, therefore leading to considerable distress and psychosocial symptoms. (Cecic Erpic & al. 2004, 48.)

The post-career issues resulting from a self-identity which is entirely built around athletic involvement may be tackled with appropriate planning for life beyond sports, already early on in an athlete's sports career. Previous research shows that those individuals with a strong athletic identity are less likely to plan for their post-sports life before retirement (Gordon 1995; Lavallee & al. 1997; Pearson & Petitpas 1990). This is due to the fact that athletes who are heavily invested in their athletic pursuits may even be considered unidimensional people, in that their own concept of self does not extend beyond the limits of their sport. (Ogilvie & Howe 1982). To combat this dilemma, it is crucial to examine potential alternatives to sports participation as athletes approach adulthood, in order to help

build a more multi-dimensional sense of self-identity. The problem with this, however, is that elite sports generally do not provide athletes with enough time or opportunities for exploring such options. During a sports season, athletes themselves, as well as the organizational structures around them believe that the matter of most importance is maintaining a focus on increasing athletic performance, and any discussion of career termination or post-career plans are ignored for the sake of sporting success. (Taylor & Ogilvie 1993.) This short sightedness and neglect of the holistic development of the athlete has potentially detrimental consequences to an athlete's self-esteem and post-career adjustment. (Taylor & Ogilvie 1998.)

The literature on athletic identity in sport career transition research suggests that athletic identity declines following retirement from sport and that this decline improves and speeds up the process of adjustment to life post-athletic career (Lally 2007; Lavallee & al. 1997). Studies have also found that some athletes, whom plan for retirement, begin to purposefully reduce their athletic identity in preparation for post-sports life. In her study to track the changes in athletic identity in six Canadian athletes from pre-retirement to post-retirement, Lally (2007, 85-99), found that the athletes reduced their athletic identity in preparation for retirement by utilizing a range of coping strategies. These coping strategies involved things such as becoming involved in other physical or academic pursuits. By beginning to negotiate a new self-identity well before retirement, these athletes reported relatively smooth transitions into athletic retirement. (Lally 2007, 85-99.) However, athletes whom may not have adequately explored their options outside of sports well beforehand, may have issues in facilitating this decline in athletic identity pre- and post-retirement. (Martin, Fogarty & Albion 2014).

2.3 Figure skating career path

Figure skating by definition includes four different disciplines, these being ice dance, pair skating, synchronized skating, and figure skating, also known as single skating. In this thesis single skating will be referred to as figure skating, and only figure skating and synchronized skating career paths will be explored in this section of the thesis, as the participants of the study were former athletes competing in these two disciplines. The career paths outlined are based on the Finnish figure and synchronized skating career path models, created by the Finnish Figure Skating Association as a guideline to be followed in terms of skater progression. The Finnish Figure Skating Association is the umbrella organization for figure skating in Finland, and all the figure skating clubs in Finland belong to the association. The career path models involve a skater profile, determined by age

groups, and themes related to coaching, training volume and sport specific skills. The models also involve physical, psychological, and motor skill competencies, as well as the role which parents play, at each stage. (Aalto 2017, 25.)

Figure skating as a discipline involves skaters competing individually and executing skills such as jumps, spins, step sequences and choreographic sequences in a competition program. These elements and their requirements in each level of competition, are dictated by the International Skating Union (ISU), and must be performed in specific ways according to the ISU communications which are published and updated annually.

In order to be successful, it is generally accepted that a potential figure skater must begin training in the sport from an extremely early age, approximately 3-4 years old. At these early stages, the child becomes acquainted with the sport through skate school and spends 1 to 2 hours a week at practice. From skate school, children move onto development groups, where training times increase to 3-4 times a week on the ice, and 1-2 hours a week of off-ice training. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.) Figure skating off-ice training involves practicing sports specific skills and fitness training. Training focus in development groups becomes increasingly sports specific and some skaters may participate in their first competitions. Already by the age of 7-9 years old, a skater is expected to have moved on to be a regionally competitive athlete. Training is organized 5-8 times a week on the ice, and 3-5 times a week off the ice, including dance and ballet lessons, which are known to support figure skating. In addition to this, it is expected that the child begins taking responsibility over their own warm up sessions and of practicing sports specific skills in their own time, outside of scheduled practice. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

This shows that figure skating is an early specialisation sport, as the abovementioned training schedules for 7-9-year olds, would leave little to no time to participate in, or to sample, other hobbies. According to the long-term athletic development model, which aims to help sports organizations create athletes whom are well-rounded, successful and go on to have long lasting careers, the sampling stage should occur between ages 6-13 years old. The sampling stage involves playing a variety of sports to promote enjoyment through sport. Participating in the sampling stage also helps prevent overuse injuries in youth, as well as burnout. Sampling a variety of sports also helps develop overall athleticism in children and youth (Pichardo, Oliver, Harrison, Maulder & Lloyd 2018, 1190). However, in figure skating this stage is often non-existent due to the nature of the sport.

By the age of 10-11, figure skaters in Finland are expected to be competing at the national level. Practice times are outlined to be 7-9 on-ice practices a week, 50-60 minutes at a time, and 4-5 off-ice practices, including dance and ballet. At this age, the athlete should have mastered double jumps and be prepared to begin working on triple jumps. Spins should be able to be executed at the appropriate level to correspond with competitive requirements. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

From the age of twelve onwards, the figure skating career path outlined by the Finnish Figure Skating Association, states that figure skaters aim to be internationally competitive athletes, and train as such. Between ages 12-13 years old, skaters may have up to 9-10 skating practices per week and 4-5 off-ice sessions per week. Skaters at this age compete in either novice or junior level and should have mastered 1-6 triple jumps. In addition to this they are expected to have spins of a good quality and smooth, high-speed skating skills. Also, where prior to this age skaters competed with one competition program, they are now competing with two programs, the short and the free program, as per ISU requirements. This also increases the physical training load and demands of the skaters. At 14-15 years old training times increase to 11-12 times per week on the ice, and 5-6 off-ice sessions. Skaters compete at either junior or senior level and are expected to be able to execute 3-6 different triple jumps and practice triple-triple combination jumps. In addition to having effortless and fast skating skills, skaters should be able to incorporate diverse use of body movements in their skating. Spins should be versatile and of high quality. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

If skaters have advanced along their career as according to the abovementioned path and have met all of the requirements along the way, by the age of 16 they should be competing at the highest level, in senior. Here, on ice practice is organized approximately 11-13 times per week, and off-ice practice 6 times a week. Triple jumps and a triple-triple combination should be mastered, and there is an increased emphasis on choreography and interpretation. In addition to competing at the national championships, and national qualifying competitions within Finland, with adequate success there is a possibility for skaters to qualify and compete in ISU events such as the ISU World Figure Skating Championships, ISU European Figure Skating Championships, ISU Grand Prix events, as well as other international competitions. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

It is important to consider in this overview of a figure skating career path, that each athlete is unique and will undergo their own individual path in their skating career (Aalto 2017, 27). The above outline of a career path is merely a framework or guideline, to be considered when mapping out the possibilities of a skater in pursuing their athletic career. Some

skaters may begin the sport later than the age of 3-4 and still go on to have a successful career. Also, many may not have the opportunity or the will to go on to compete internationally. In these cases, Finland has a system in place whereby skaters can go on to compete nationally in junior and senior level, where requirements for competition, and thereby training demands, are not as vigorous. (Aalto 2017, 32.)

No upper age limit exists at the senior level of figure skating. However, it is significant to note that as of the 2021-2022 season, in the Finnish figure skating national team the oldest skater selected for the ladies' team is only 23 years old. In general, due to the taxing demands of figure skating on the bodies of young skaters, many are forced to retire already in their early twenties. Also, the changes in female's bodies which accompany adolescence can prove detrimental to figure skating performance. Biological changes such as increase in height, body fat and weight distribution which accompany pubertal development in females, can have a huge impact on a skater's ability to perform jumps and spins. Increase in body fat makes it more difficult to achieve the necessary height to be able to complete rotations in jumps, and changes in weight distribution alters the location of a skaters centre of mass, which impacts timing and balance. (Cummins 2007, 393.) Of note, is that pubertal development does not have similar detrimental consequences to male figure skaters. In males, increases in height and muscular strength allow them to achieve greater jump height and faster rotation speeds in the air, which in turn enables them to execute increasingly difficult jumps. (Young & Freedman 2000, 294-328.) Therefore, male figure skaters are also often able to go on to have longer lasting skating careers. The oldest Finnish national team member for men's figure skating is 34 years old in the 2021-2022 season, which is a significant age difference in comparison to the oldest member of the women's team.

2.4 Synchronized skating career path

Synchronized skating is the most recent of the four figure skating disciplines. The standard number of athletes on the ice at one time is 16, and synchronized skating competitions are judged under the same ISU Judging System as the other skating disciplines. Competitive program elements include blocks, circles, lines, intersections, wheels, group lifts, and moves in the field. Scores given in competition are based on the technical difficulty and performance of the programs. Skills and elements seen in the programs may be performed in either hold, meaning that the athletes are connected to each other by using a variety of holds, or in the case of certain elements, individually. The sport has developed at an immense rate, since first being developed in the 1970's, and just as with other figure

skating disciplines, the required skills involved have seen a continuous rise in difficulty. As is the case with figure skating, the rules and requirements are projected by the ISU. (Fischer, Darby, Morgan & Tobar 2016, 271.)

Finland has long been one of the dominant countries in synchronized skating. The ISU World Synchronized Skating Championships were first held in 2000, and since then Finnish teams have won 9 out of the 20 gold medals on offer, as well as 16 silver and bronze medals. The three synchronized skating teams responsible for this success are Marigold Ice Unity, Helsinki Rockettes, and Team Unique, all based in Helsinki.

The career path for a synchronized skater is often more varied than that of a figure skater. Generally, skaters begin in skate school between the ages of 3-8 years old. There they learn basic skating skills and become familiarized with the general concepts of sport. Some clubs offer synchronized skating schools, where children learn already early on how to skate in hold and as part of a group. However, focus remains on individual skating skills. Training at this stage is organised 1-2 times per week with an additional 1 hour per week of off-ice training. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

Between the ages of 7-10, skaters typically move on to skating in their first team, at preliminary or pre-juvenile level. Focus remains on individual skating skills and this involves mastering and improving all the rudimentary skating skills as well as basic figure skating skills such as simple jumps and spins. Skaters at this age learn how to execute simple synchronized skating elements and practice tempo and timing, which are an essential component of synchronized skating. At this level skaters participate in their first competitions, and practice 3 times a week on the ice, with an additional 1 hour per week dedicated to off-ice, dance and fitness respectively. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

From the ages 9-13 skaters may move on to competing at the juvenile level. Juvenile teams in Finland usually train 4-5 times per week on the ice, and 3-4 times per week off the ice, which includes fitness, sports specific training and dance, ballet, or gymnastics. At this stage the skater should have the ability to execute all simple skills with relative ease and begin practicing elements and skills of increasing difficulty. This includes synchronized skating elements, steps and turns, and figure skating elements. It is also important that skaters at juvenile level have mastered good perceptual skills, which play a big role in synchronized skating. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

At 10-15 years old skaters continue on to the novice division. At novice level, teams compete at the national level and some may have the opportunity to compete internationally

once per season. Organized training occurs 5-6 times a week on the ice and 4 times a week off the ice. Skaters are able to execute difficult turns and synchronized skating elements in a simple and basic setting and have mastered a repertoire of figure skating skills. Novice teams compete with one program, and this program should be considerably more difficult than at juvenile level. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

Between 14-19 years old, skaters move on to junior synchronized skating teams where training load increases to 5-6 times a week of on ice practice and 5-6 times per week of off-ice practice. There exists a large pool of junior synchronized skating teams in Finland and thus the division is extremely competitive. Teams at junior level compete with two competition programs, the short and free program. This increases the physical demands of the athletes. Junior teams compete nationally as well as internationally, and each season the top two teams are chosen to compete at the ISU Junior World Synchronized Skating Championships. At this stage skaters practice difficult steps and turns in complex settings and have a good grasp on difficult synchronized skating elements, as well as a wide array of figure skating elements. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

From 16 years old and onwards, synchronized skaters may be able to skate at the senior level, which is the highest possible level. Senior level skaters should have mastered all synchronized skating elements and skills, a range of figure skating elements and be able to interpret and perform to music at an excellent level, in their two demanding competition programs. Senior teams compete nationally, as well as internationally, with two teams being chosen to participate in the ISU World Synchronized Skating Championships each season. Training in the senior division involves 5-6 sessions a week on the ice and 5-6 off-ice sessions. (Finnish Figure Skating Association 2021.)

Again, the above is only a general outline of the career path of a synchronized skater. In comparison to figure skating, synchronized skating is not as hyper-specialised in that many athletes begin the sport at a slightly later age, and it is not uncommon for skaters to begin their careers in figure skating, and after some years, transition disciplines to synchronized skating. Each athlete has their own individual path through the sport. Also, as is the case with figure skating, if a synchronized skater decides, or is unable, to pursue this more competitive path towards international competitions, they have the possibility at any time to transfer to recreational skating teams.

3 Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to find out what kind of experiences former Finnish figure skaters and synchronized skaters have had in their career termination processes. The study aims to figure out which factors have been helpful in adapting to post-skating life and which factors have hindered the adjustment process, making the transition more difficult. In semi-structured interviews, former skaters reflected on their own transition processes. The participants of the study discussed the kinds of support they had received throughout their respective process, as well as the support they wished to have had at the time of transitioning out of the sport. Based on the results, recommendations will be made on ways that coaches, clubs and the Finnish Figure Skating Association could potentially help guide and support athletes in this transition process in the future.

4 Methods

4.1 Participants

This study utilized purposeful criterion sampling strategy, which is a technique widely used in qualitative research, as it allows the identification and selection of individuals whom are particularly knowledgeable or experienced in a certain topic of interest. It also enables the researcher to select participants whom are available and willing to participate, and who possess the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in a manner which is articulate, expressive and reflective. (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood 2013.) The aim was to find 8-10 participants who had been competitive in the sport, and who could easily recall the feelings associated with their transition process. The participants for this study came to be composed of twelve former Finnish synchronized skaters and figure skaters. All of the participants had competed at the Finnish national level, and aimed to compete, or competed, internationally. The participants were between the ages of 19-30 years old, and the duration of their participation in the sport ranged from 7 years to 19 years. Time elapsed since career termination varied between 1-10 years.

4.2 Instruments

An interview schedule was developed based on the athletic career transition models created by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) and Stambulova (2003), as well as the literature surrounding athletic identity and its significance in career transitions.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature in order to promote deeper reflection and discussion into the themes discussed. Participants were asked a set of open-ended questions, which were set around the experiences of the career transition process and the psychosocial implications during and following their career transitions. Participants were encouraged to discuss and answer questions with as much detail as possible, in order to gain a true sense of their experiences and the associated feelings.

The structure of the interview was divided into two main parts as well as leading questions where participants were invited to openly discuss their own skating careers and about the time elapsed since retirement. The first main section of the interview schedule was based on the feelings and support received at the time of making the retirement decision as well as the time shortly before, e.g. during the final season of participation. The second section involved questions on the implications of the transition to retirement and support received

in the time period following the athlete's retirement. Follow-up questions included items such as whether the participant had continued their involvement in the sport in any way and if the participant had wished to be directed into different possibilities of pursuing involvement in the sport after termination of active skating career.

4.3 Procedure

Access to the sample for this study was gained by sharing an invitation to be interviewed in a Facebook group called Finnish Figure Skating Alumni. This group is composed of approximately 1000 former figure skaters, synchronized skaters, and ice dancers. The interview invitation requested those interested to respond via email to confirm their participation. A convenient time for the interview was then mutually agreed upon with each of the participants. Interviews were held in February and March of 2021. The interviews were held via Zoom calls and the participants were each informed that the interviews were to be recorded on the local computer, in order to be transcribed into text at a later date. The participants were also informed that the results of the study would omit their names, in order to provide anonymity. After transcribing the interviews, the transcriptions were translated into English, in order to make data analysis more straightforward and to align with the language used in writing this thesis.

4.4 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed, and pseudonyms were used to provide anonymity. Following detailed familiarisation with the transcripts, data was collected in reflection with the framework of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Initial impressions of meaning were noted and upon further examination were categorized into subordinate themes. From these subordinate themes, items which contained significant similarity were clustered together to form superordinate themes. IPA was selected as the method of analysis as the method is primarily concerned with understanding the interviewees' lived experiences, and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, 4), factors of analysis which are crucial to reach the aim of this thesis.

5 Results

The results reflect the experiences of twelve former Finnish figure and synchronized skaters in their career transition process. The participants of the study described in detail their feelings surrounding the transition process and reflected on the challenges brought on by the end of their skating careers. The participants also discussed the forms of support and guidance they had received, and wished to have received, at the time.

The participants' participation in their sport ranged between 7 to 19 years. Each of the participants claimed to have a strong athletic identity or to strongly identify themselves through their sport, and they all skated at a highly competitive level. The reasons for termination among the participants were manifold and the majority of the participants identified more than one reason affecting the decision to cease participation in the sport. Figure 3 displays the range of reasons for the participants to make the decision to terminate their skating careers. Factors such as age and injury are often outlined as non-normative in career transition, however in this study the participants whom listed these as reasons for termination, did not receive injuries which suddenly ended their careers and had time to adjust to the idea of retirement before ultimately making the decision. The participant whom stated age as one of the reasons for termination, did not reach an age limit in the sport, rather she had felt that personally at her age she needed to set her sights on other ventures outside of sports. Therefore, these were considered as normative transitions in the context of this study.

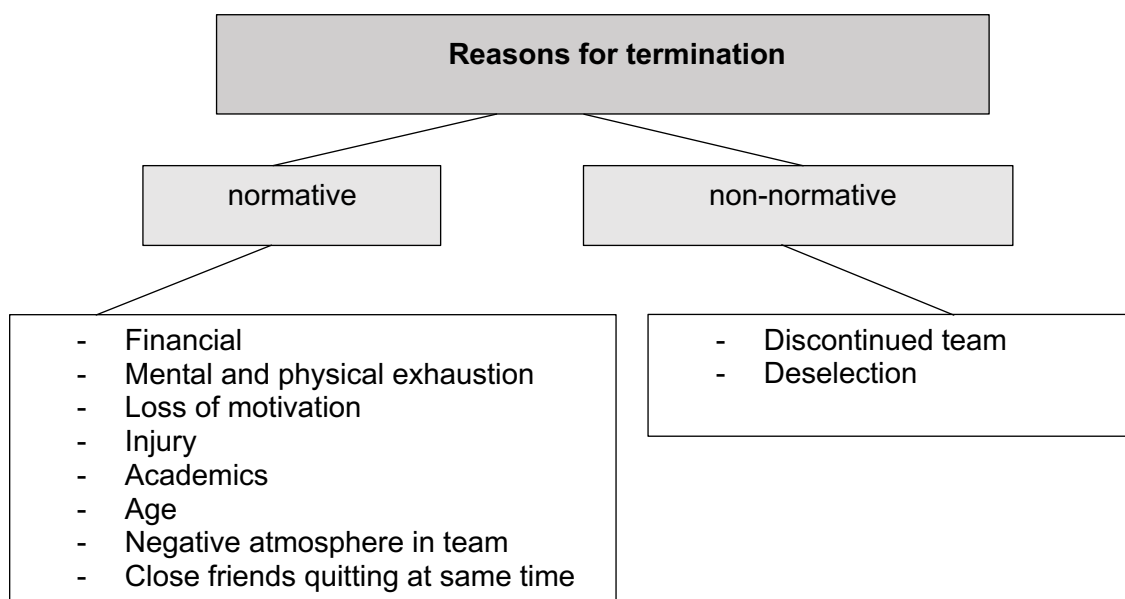


Figure 3. Main reasons for the participants' career termination.

Although the participants all had different backgrounds as well as differing reasons to transition out of their skating careers, IPA analysis indicated many similarities between the participants' experiences. The interview results also indicated that although all the participants experienced at least some degree of negative feelings in relation to the transition process, it by no means meant that it had been a negative or traumatic process to each of these former skaters.

The results highlight an athlete's need for communication and support before, during, and after the transition process. The participants were able to identify factors which facilitated and aided their own adjustment to a post-sport life, as well as those factors which were detrimental to adjustment. Further chapters will provide an outline of the main themes collected from the IPA analysis of the interviews.

5.1 A lack of transparency

More than half of the participants discussed the way that conversations surrounding career termination are considered taboo, and how this had negative implications for their transition process. Participants also spoke of the culture of the sport, or their team and club, and how that culture impacted their personal experiences surrounding the transition. The issue of culture was also considered in the sense that certain aspects of factors impacting the transition process are not transparent and have limited discussion surrounding them.

5.1.1 Career termination as a taboo topic

Participants described how prior to their transition process, they had felt that they were not allowed to speak about transitioning to the coaches, or to any of their fellow athletes. However, the former synchronized skaters explained that they understood, why in a team sport, it is not conducive to openly talk about the topic in the middle of a season. Emma stated:

It's somehow really, it's really taboo that you're going to quit. Which I in a way understand why you can't discuss it with the team too early on in the season, because you still want to fully focus on the season and competitions, but that it's really like so taboo that you're going to quit. It's like a huge secret that you're going to quit.

Having to remain silent about the topic had burdened the former athletes emotionally, and as a result, made the transition process feel increasingly difficult. They felt that with added transparency and open discussions about career transition, the transition process would be easier for athletes to cope with. Hailey explained:

I understand why it's not really such an open topic in a team because you want to concentrate on the season, but on the other hand because it's a kind of a taboo topic, it doesn't really help with the process, I think.

Some of the former athletes were also afraid to discuss their transition plans, because they were afraid that it might negatively impact the morale in their team, or the way in which they were coached. Feeling that they weren't able to discuss the topic also resulted in a sense of loneliness with the decision. As the participants felt that they could not speak about the transition in their training environment, they were therefore left feeling as if they had no one to turn to, once they began experiencing the emotions associated with process. The participants also accepted not being able to talk about the transition because,

as Emma said, “that’s just how it goes, you don’t talk about these things”, which also caused them to refrain from seeking help from within the training environment.

Some of the athletes did not feel that being unable to discuss the topic of career transition was a particularly negative thing, rather they accepted it as something which they personally did not want to affect the team in the middle of the season. As Chloe explained it:

I didn’t talk about it a lot with others. I remember I tried to keep it a secret because I didn’t want it to affect training or my teammates’ attitudes towards me, so I tried to be really neutral if anyone asked me about it.

However, most participants wished there would have been more transparency in their practice environment surrounding the topic of career transitions.

5.1.2 Culture

A portion of the participants explained how their transition was made more difficult by the culture within the sport. The initial point raised is that within the figure skating community there is a culture whereby difficult things or negative aspects of the sport are kept quiet about. In recent years there have been an outbreak of stories in which former skaters have raised these issues and come out publicly to discuss them. Some of the former skaters who participated in this study, brought out these issues in their interviews and explained how having to keep quiet about misconduct hindered their own transition processes.

Participants discussed how the negative culture within their training environment affected their ability to adjust to a post-skating life. Nora told:

In our team we had the kind of culture where for example the skaters who quit, were talked bad about behind their backs and some personal things were spread around. So maybe I would’ve wished that that kind of stuff didn’t happen. It probably would’ve helped the, in addition to it being such a big change that you quit, that in addition you have to go through like oh no what are they going to talk about me.

Nora, who believed that otherwise she had coped well with the transition, felt that this anxiety about what her former teammates and coaches were saying about her, was the only mentally burdensome factor during and after the transition. She also said that this was something which she continued to battle with for many more years post-skating career.

Another participant, Lily, also brought up the issue of culture around skating:

What's made it difficult is being afraid to talk about those things. There's like a culture of silence around the sport.

Lily had also had difficult experiences stemming from the club environment during her career, which she had not initially realised due to her young age and being so used to the regularly occurring inappropriate behaviour. It was not until years later that she realised the misconduct that had been occurring on a daily basis. After these realisations she had recognised why she was experiencing difficulty in adjusting to her post-sports life. However, she felt alone with these issues and struggled to find someone to talk to who would understand, due to the previously mentioned "culture of silence".

5.2 Coaches' role in the process

In their interviews, nine out of twelve of the participants brought up the role that coaches had played in their transition process. In response to a question on the kind of support received during the transition process, almost all began their response by saying "nothing from the coaches". This is significant as the participants had not been prompted in any way to involve coaching as part of their answers, and this strongly insinuates the fact that the participants would have wished to receive support in the process from their coaches in particular.

The two main subordinate themes in relation to the coach's role in the transition process were the value of communication in a coach-athlete relationship, especially during a challenging process such as transitioning out of a sports career, and the importance of supporting a skater's decision to retire from the sport.

5.2.1 The value of communication

Coaches play an important role in athletes' day to day lives and informing the coach of the decision to end an athletic career may be a nerve-wracking and emotional moment. As Emma said, "for me telling the coach was probably the biggest thing for me, and probably for many others as well".

However, many of the participants in this study conveyed their disappointment at the lack of discussion and involvement of the coaches in their transition processes. They had hoped that the coaches would initiate discussion about the transition, and perhaps offer

some guidance on how to approach the process. Some of the participants themselves had brought up the topic with their coaches, only to be met with disregard. Maria told:

I brought it up myself, that this is what I've been thinking, so that it would've been in some way, that someone would've commented on it something more than "too bad".

Eliza, who was also battling with the forthcoming decision on whether to end her skating career or not, explained how she was left to make the decision on her own. This was despite Eliza's coach's knowledge of her being uncertain in how to proceed:

I felt like you aren't allowed to talk about it, you're not allowed to ask about it. And my coach just asked me why I don't know what I'm going to do. And that's all. Then she just left. I was just like ok are you going to leave me here alone to think, aren't I allowed to talk to you about it.

Eliza and Lily wished that coaches wouldn't see ending a skating career as such a negative thing. As Eliza said; "everyone has to quit at some point!". Many felt that the reason that coaches didn't wish to discuss the transition with them was for this very reason, that the coaches saw it as a negative thing and perhaps did not want to encourage skaters to retire by discussing it with them. Some participants were also afraid of bringing the topic up with their coaches because they were concerned that it would have a negative effect on the way they were coached. Lily explained:

From the way I did it, I was too scared to tell the coaches that I've been thinking about quitting and felt that it had to be done at the last possible minute, so that it doesn't for example affect the way that I'm coached, or how I'm treated, that maybe in relation to that there needs to be a certain degree of openness. Like that it doesn't have to be such a big deal in a way.

A number of participants also wished that they could have had discussions with their coaches in the time period following termination. Some said that it would have been helpful to, in a way, "bring it all together", as the termination occurs so suddenly, with little to no discussion. By this they meant discussions at the end of the season with those skaters who had ended their careers. Those who had had negative experiences stemming from coaching during their careers pondered whether it would have been helpful to discuss those issues afterwards, in order to understand the coaches' point of view of "what had been going on".

Coaches may not realise the extent of the influence they have on athletes both in and outside the skating rink, and it is evident in the results of this study. As Tessa said it:

the coaches are such a big part of your life when you're skating, and you tell them lots of things and they ask you lots of things and they're really a second family

The former skaters wished that their coaches would have at the least, made themselves available to have a conversation about the transition process. As many skaters look up to their coaches as trustworthy adults in their lives and trust them to give advice on all things skating, it is clearly disappointing to the athletes when this does not occur during a challenging time such as career transition.

5.2.2 Supporting a skater's decision

In relation to the value that the participants placed on coach-athlete communication during their transition process, some also felt that once they had informed their coaches of their decision to retire, they were not supported in their decision in the least. Kate said:

I feel like it was kind of for the coaches as well in a way that okay if you've decided to quit, then quit and bye bye. So, I don't like feel that the decision was supported in any way.

This feeling of not being supported for some, had long lasting consequences, and extended to beyond their skating careers. One participant's coaches had attempted to pressure her into continuing skating, even though she had repeatedly explained that due to her reoccurring injuries and desire to improve her academic performance, she was not able to continue her skating career. The participant had even thought about whether to continue skating, just to please her coaches. However, she managed to "hold her ground". She explained how, still at the ice rinks, if she happened to see her former coaches, she was met with anger:

One of the most difficult things for me was that every time I went to the ice rink and the coaches were always there. And sometimes in the same dressing rooms. So maybe that they didn't even talk to me. They didn't look at me and they didn't say hi to me. So maybe that as well always made me think about those things. And I couldn't get over it.

Above all, these former skaters wished that their coaches had shown more understanding, support and openness in relation to the career transition process. Coaches have the ability to be an important resource and source of support to athletes undergoing an athletic-career transition. However, the participant experiences show that they proved to be the opposite, in many cases hindering the transition process, or having an otherwise negative impact on the participants' emotional and mental well-being.

5.3 Support

With regard to the support received and wanted during and after the transition process, three main sources of support were identified, these being peer support, support from the skater's family and support from a professional. Almost all participants claimed peer support to be the most helpful factor in coming to terms with the transition process, with a few saying that they wished they had had more peer support. In terms of family support, most participants said they had had some discussions with or support from their family, however they did not seem to find family support to be as helpful or useful as peer support. A number of participants wished to have had some kind of support from a professional in the matter, for example a therapist or a sports psychologist. This wish also included those participants whom did not consider their transitions to be an overall negative experience. Two of the participants had received help from psychologists in dealing with their transition process and they discussed how this had been helpful in their adjustment. Although nearly all participants had received at least some form of support, many were still left feeling alone with the process.

Many of the participants also discussed how they did not necessarily feel the need for support initially after the transition. Based on the participants answers, the timing of the end of the skating season, which is in spring, had made the transition feel easier at first:

Because summer comes so quickly after you quit so then because summer is such a wonderful time and the summer doesn't really feel any different to what it was when you were still skating.

For many, the negative feelings associated with the transition process failed to occur until after the summer, when they were faced with their new routines and day to day lives after skating. Also, partly because the season and thus their careers ended at such an optimal time of the year, they failed to process their feelings and emotions early on, which led to a postponed adjustment period. Indeed, a few of the participants stated that they did not fully realize the need for help or guidance in relation to the transition process until autumn, by which approximately six months had elapsed since the end of their careers.

Some of the former skaters also discussed how the psychosocial impacts weren't realised until a much longer time following transition. Lily, who did not have the opportunity to reflect and deal with her feelings early on, explained it as follows:

For me quitting wasn't the hardest when I first quit, but years later after I realised how my skating career had affected the way I work and think and all that.

Lily explained how the feelings in relation to the impact her skating career had had on her, did not begin to take effect until at least two years after her decision to transition. From there on it was a process which took many years of learning to understand and cope with the negative impacts she was experiencing.

5.3.1 Peer support

From the participants responses, it was evident that the most valuable support system for these former skaters was that which was provided by their peers. Emma told, “that’s what saved me from the worst breakdowns, that my best friends happened to quit at the same time”.

Indeed, most participants above all, felt the need to be able to speak to others who were in a similar situation and could empathize with what they were going through. They believed that this was something which they were not able to receive from other sources of support. It was important for the participants to feel “understood” and that they could openly share their experiences. Those participants whom had friends that had ended their skating careers at the same time or before them felt relieved that they had that support system available to them. The peer support did not in all cases stem from other figure or synchronized skaters. One participant explained that what was most helpful to her, in the time period following her transition, was meeting former athletes from other sports, who she was then able to share experiences with.

Some participants felt that they failed to receive peer support initially after their transitions as their friends were still involved with the sport. They therefore felt a sense of loneliness and were relieved when some years later their former skating friends ended their careers. Holly explained:

Later on, I’ve got the peer support that I’d been wanting for years, when my friends quit skating. And also, like, well this was way afterwards as well, but like in the past few years I’ve been able to talk about the feelings and also got a kind of that I haven’t been alone with all those feelings. That others had felt the same way.

Many of the participants said that they could only imagine how difficult the experience of the transition process would have been if they had not had their peers to share it with. Lily and Chloe discussed the idea of mentorship for the next generation of skaters who will be transition on from their careers. As they had both felt the importance of having the peer support be available to them, they also wished they were able to provide assistance and

support to the athletes who don't necessarily have any peers to share their thoughts and feelings on the transition process with. Chloe explained:

I can imagine if you've just quit and don't necessarily have a good social circle or if all your friends are still skating and your whole life has been about skating and then it all of a sudden disappears, that maybe then it would be nice if you had a support person or a mentor or someone who to talk to. I noticed after I'd quit that then some of the younger ones in the team had sent me messages about how I'm doing and what kind of feelings I'd had when quitting. So maybe if there was some kind of organized sparring with those skaters who have already been through the process, maybe that would've helped.

In receiving peer support, it was important for the participants to be able to discuss their experiences as honestly and openly as possible. Some had difficulty in opening up, as they were anxious about whether other former skaters had experienced things in the same way. The participants were concerned that if they were to open up to another former skater, that the other wouldn't be as forthcoming with their own experiences, thus making them feel like, as Lily said, they were "the only person who had experienced things in a certain way".

5.3.2 Family support

Those participants who had been able to discuss the transition process with their families, had found family support to be helpful in the transition, as well as adjustment process. This was the case particularly for those who were living at home with their parents at the time of their transition. In many cases, the participants' family members were the first ones to be informed of the desire to move on from their skating careers. Emma explained how her parents were able to see, based on her moods and behaviour, that she was "losing her passion for what competing at such a high level required" of her. As her parents were so observant, it also prompted necessary discussion into what the next steps to take would be, and this support from her family was invaluable:

That my own family stood right by me and were like you can do whatever you want to do, and we'll support you, that kind of family support was a big deal.

In addition to verbally expressing their support for the transitioning skater, families also helped the participants in their adjustment process in other ways. Kate told how her parents had "tried really hard" to think of new sports or things to do after her skating career ended suddenly. Eliza described how she had decided to move away from home and her family were helpful in all ways in coping with the move, planning and other life changes which occurred during the time. Eliza's family also helped in providing distraction methods

by organizing activities to do together. Lily on the other hand had decided to continue living at home following her transition, and thereby was able to have ongoing family support close at hand. She explained how her family was a source of support as follows:

Probably my family was the biggest support at the time. For example, when I started studying, I didn't move away from home, so I got support in that way, that I didn't have to start everything from scratch. Because there was already so much that had changed in my life, so that helped a lot.

However, not all the participants received support from their families. Sarah, who struggled with her transition, felt as if her family "didn't maybe understand what a big life change" the transition was. She highlighted the importance of not having the transition experience be downplayed, especially by those close with the athlete.

5.3.3 Professional support

The participants expressed how they would have benefitted from and wished to speak to a professional about the transition both before and after ceasing participation in their sport. By professional support, the participants meant support from a sports psychologist. They wished they could have utilized this professional help in their final season of skating, in order to be able to confidentially discuss the feelings associated with the oncoming transition. The participants went through what many of them described as an "emotional roller-coaster" during their transition process. Some of the feelings they experienced in association to their sports participation had changed completely and were therefore foreign to them. This particularly concerned feelings associated with a lack of motivation, which for many of the participants was a factor which initially alerted them to the idea that a career transition may be imminent. The participants felt they needed guidance in how to handle these emotions while still in the midst of a competition season.

Emma explained how she was confused about the lack of motivation she had begun experiencing during her final season of skating, and how she wished to have had an "outside professional" to confide these to. This was due to her not wishing to speak to her coach or teammates about the feelings she was experiencing, as she was concerned that that would negatively affect her team:

I started getting even guilty feelings about how I was getting the feeling that I don't have the passion for it anymore. So, I started feeling guilty like is this really fine that I feel like this. I felt like I was betraying my team for even thinking like that. Even though it's probably normal that elite athletes get those feelings at some point. But yeah, maybe outside help would've been good.

Hailey and Nora spoke of how it would have been helpful for them if a “professional, a psychologist or someone” could have come and spoken to them individually, as a team, or only certain members of a team, at some point in the season. These discussions, according to them, could have involved “something about the kinds of feelings” that they might experience in relation to transitioning and how “they are not necessarily anything to worry about”. Nora also spoke about how this would have enabled her to, in turn, advise her family and friends on how they could help her during the process:

Especially during the spring after I’d quit, I went through so many emotions relating to it, so maybe what would’ve helped a lot would have been to have discussion once or twice with someone who understands elite sports. And then I could’ve told my family and friends like “what is a nice way that you could support me with this” and be like “I might get these kinds of feelings and you don’t need to react to it in anyway” or yeah.

Tessa and Lily skated in clubs which utilized a sports psychologist for facets related to improving performance and not so much with the emotional aspects of sports. It would have been ideal to be able to utilize this help for those undergoing their transition processes, not only because dealing with the related negative emotions can possibly impact performance, but also to aid in the athletes’ holistic well-being and thus prepare them for adjustment to post-skating careers. Tessa suggested:

And maybe, we had a mental coach so maybe it could’ve been organized that those who were quitting could have had some kind of a discussion or something.

After ending their careers, Eliza and Emma felt that they could have used the help of a psychologist to help them deal with their problems in adjusting post-career. Emma felt that so many things had changed in her life so radically and in such a short space of time, that she was “seriously considering” seeking professional help to help her manage the overwhelming feelings she was experiencing. Similarly, Eliza stated how she didn’t feel the need for help “right away in the spring, but later in the autumn”, as she felt her behaviour was in hindsight “quite crazy”, in the time following her career termination. She told how this behaviour stemmed from “everything being so new” and “probably from just not skating anymore”.

Lily and Sarah had ended up seeking professional help, after their skating career ended, for their issues surrounding skating and career transition. They both felt that this had been immensely useful for their adjustment and in processing the feelings and experiences around their skating careers. Sarah had had a non-normative transition and explained how this had made her feel the need to seek support:

Like because it was too sudden of an ending which wasn't based on my own decision, it then had a big effect on my personal life as well, so then I felt that it was necessary for me to receive some help. I feel like the therapist I've been seeing is really good and knows a lot about skating and specializes in this kind of stuff.

Lily had also recognised the need for professional support, however she had problems in finding a psychologist who understood the mindset of an athlete. She felt that the issues she was experiencing were strongly to do with her skating career and the athlete's mindset that she had continued to adopt in her life outside of skating. She initially began seeking help through therapy services offered through her university, however felt that it didn't work for her as the therapist had little knowledge on the minds of athletes. Lily continued to seek help as an adult and had little luck, until someone close to her suggested that she needed to look for someone who understands an athlete's mindset:

I needed someone to say like hey some regular student psychologist, or a regular psychologist might not necessarily understand... Someone who understands the kind of background you have, so then like it really has helped that someone really understands the things you're going through.

Lily explained how finding a psychologist who has knowledge of sports psychology had helped her in dealing with the issues she was experiencing, still eight years after ending her skating career. According to her, finding the right kind of psychologist had enabled her to recognize that "the way she works and thinks" is directly related to her athletic identity. Through this recognition, Lily feels that she is better able to understand herself and be aware of the ways in which this affects her life outside of skating.

5.4 Sense of belonging

In response to being asked what the most difficult thing about transitioning out of a skating career was, the majority of participants said that it was leaving the "skating community" and having friends continue with the sport. These factors resulted in subsequent feelings of loneliness and in some cases jealousy. The participants wished that the process of leaving the skating community had been "smoother" and not as abrupt. Many explained how they wished that there was "a community of ex-skaters" to graduate on to following termination. This sub chapter discusses the former skaters' personal experiences in leaving behind the skating community and their friends, as well as the associated feelings.

5.4.1 Feeling left out

Most of the former skaters taking part in this study expressed how the majority of their friends had been from their skating club or team. They had formed close ties with their fellow athletes whom they spent the majority of their time training and competing with. Thus, when it came time to transition on to other ventures, the participants subsequently felt that they had a diminished circle of friends. Those whom had been synchronized skaters had, for the majority of their lives, identified themselves strongly as part of belonging to a team. Therefore, it is to be expected that following transition, they had some degree of trouble in adjusting their identities to no longer being based around belonging to a team. As Amy described it:

I got a kind of loneliness which came after I'd quit, like a kind of that all of a sudden you don't belong in the team anymore and you're just you. And what even are you if you're not a member of this team, or a skater, or anything, what are you then.

Maria, Holly and Tessa spoke about feeling "left out" from their circle of friends following transition. All of them had their friends continue on with skating and these participants felt as if they were "leaving their friends behind", and that they no longer had as much in common with their friends, due to no longer being in "a similar situation". Holly discussed how this made dealing with the transition increasingly difficult. Tessa described the situation as follows:

I was so young that lots of my friends still continued skating, actually none of my friends quit. And because skating was such a big part of my life that I didn't really have any close friends from school who I would've spent my free time with, it was always with my skating friends that we would hang out with on days off training. So that was probably the hardest part, leaving them behind. And because I knew that they wouldn't have time to see me because they would always be at training.

Nora, Sarah, Kate and Hailey explained how it felt difficult to see their friends and peers continue with the sport. Hailey said that initially after termination it "felt wrong somehow" to see her former teammates compete and go to training camps. Nora and Kate reported feeling jealous seeing their friends continue with the sport. Nora said:

There were mixed feelings because of course I wanted them to succeed and that everything goes well, but in a way I kind of got a... Especially right after quitting I felt like damn what if they win now and what if I would've continued and then I would've been there too, and those kinds of jealous feelings. Even though of course I wanted them to be successful and do well.

Based on these interviews, it is clear that if, in addition to dealing with other big life changes and feelings related to the career transition process, athletes also have to undergo a radical change in losing some of their closest support system and social circles,

this is bound to have a negative impact on the adjustment process. As well as having to find a new direction in their lives, whilst simultaneously having to cope with the intense feelings associated with the process, many of the participants were left feeling alone due to their diminished friendship groups.

5.4.2 Letting go of the community

The figure skating community in Finland is a small one and offers skaters the feeling of belonging to a tight-knit community. The participants explained how it was a difficult experience to leave that community so suddenly and wished that it was either a smoother, more gradual process, or that there was some way in which they could have continued to feel a part of it following the end of their skating careers. Emma told about how leaving the community was a factor which caused her some anxiety even before it occurred:

The whole letting go of the community was a kind of thing that scared me, like damn this is a big family that I've grown really attached to and now all of a sudden, I'm supposed to let go of it.

Lily explained how she felt that it was really "clear cut", that "either you skate, or then you don't skate and don't belong in the community anymore". Some clubs in Finland have organized alumni operation and the participants wished that this could be extended to include more clubs, or that skaters be encouraged to organize some kind of activity together in other ways following career transition. Holly, Amy and Nora advocated for this, as in their experience it would have helped with the transition process in making exiting the community a smoother experience, as well as offering the possibility of peer support.

Sarah was aware that there are ways in which to continue with the sport, in ways such as coaching or judging, but felt that these wouldn't have been enough to fill in the void left by skating and being a part of the "skaters' community":

It would've been nice to stay in this world afterwards. I feel panicked the more time goes by because I feel that I get more and more distanced from it...I feel that I can't really fill in the void left by skating with any judging courses, but it would be nice to stay in the community somehow.

However, for some, staying with the sport in other ways helped provide them with the feeling of continued belonging in the skating community. For instance, Tessa, had gone on to coach following her skating career and said that this aided her in "not feeling as empty". She also felt that this provided her the opportunity to make "new skating friends" through other coaches, thus lessening the negative social impacts of ending her skating career.

5.5 Loss of identity

In line with the research done on athletic career transitions, this study also found that the athletes faced much trouble in re-evaluating their identity as well as self-worth, now that it was no longer based around their sports participation. The participants had found it difficult that their “whole lives” had been built around skating and when that disappeared, they felt “lost”. Many of the former skaters were left asking themselves the question “who am I?”, now that they were no longer skaters.

For some of the participants this concern had been at its strongest shortly after ceasing participation, however for others, creating a new identity was a process which took multiple years. Holly told how she had only started “finding her new identity” in the past two years preceding the interview, even though it had been six years since she had ended her skating career. Lily, who had also had an extensive process in coming to terms with the negative factors affecting her, hadn’t begun re-evaluating her identity until she had received the help she needed from her therapist. For her the most difficult thing in terms of identity had been to re-evaluate it so as to not be as performance oriented. Her skater’s mentality had reflected into her professional career and her exercise behaviours, which was detrimental to her overall well-being. She had to work tremendously hard to change her mindset and to learn to be more forgiving and gentler with herself.

Some of the participants were concerned with how others would perceive them following transition. They were left questioning whether “anyone would find them interesting” now that they were just “regular” people. The participants felt that when they were skaters, they were strong personalities and had felt important, and now that they were no longer skaters, they were “nothing”. Emma explained this mindset:

My god, my identity was so strongly in skating and all of that! So then when you quit, all of a sudden, you’re nothing, even though you’re a normal person for god sake! You’re a young energetic person, you have the whole world open to you but in that moment, it feels like you’re nothing. And what do normal people even do?

It is important to note that at the time of transitioning out of their skating careers, the participants had spent nearly all of their young lives adhering to leading an athletic lifestyle and spending the majority of their time in practice. Those whom competed at the elite level felt confident, in that they felt they were a part of doing something great. This was of much value to them as individuals and made them feel that they were a part of something very special. People who didn’t participate in skating were considered “normal” people, and the idea that these skaters would have to become “normal” people was very foreign to

them. Most had been worried at the time of transitioning that they would never get to experience anything as “cool” again, and that they weren’t going to receive similar feelings of success anywhere else. Emma further explained the stress of letting go of this strong identity:

I was thinking am I able to be a normal person and who even am I when I quit, and will I find anything else I’m passionate about because skating has been such a big passion... I still really miss skating and the team and the feeling when you have your competition dress on and everything and you’re so proud of what you’re doing. And as an athlete and a national team athlete I got the feeling that damn I’m a cool person for being here. Or like damn how cool, I do such cool things, and these days it’s like what do I even do that’s cool. Now I’m a completely normal boring person.

5.6 Life outside of skating

In the adjustment period following career transition, the participants for this study explained how one of the most difficult factors was in creating new routines in their day to day lives. Whilst skating, their time was strictly scheduled around practice and school, so when their careers ended, they were met with an immense amount of newly found “free time”. Some who had been skating in the same club or team for years, may have been following the exact same weekly schedule for all those years, where it was clearly dictated when they had free time and so forth. Chloe said:

The most difficult thing was reorganizing my day to day life. Because of course when you’re used to Wednesdays and Sundays being your days off, and on Monday’s ballet ends at 22.30, or you know you’ve had that kind of rhythm. And it might be that you’ve had the same rhythm for years. So that’s difficult to reorganize.

A few participants wished that they had had received help in how to move forward with reorganizing their lives, or in what steps they should take to ease the adjustment period.

Nora said that in addition to other discussion which was wanted from the coaches or any outside help, she would have liked to have discussions surrounding this next phase in her life:

Maybe as well in relation to other discussions, I would’ve wanted discussion about how I can go ahead and build my life and how I can fill in the void which was left by your not being at training for so many hours a week, like what you can do instead of that. Or something like that. I would’ve wanted something like that.

The following sub-chapters explore the participants’ experiences of how they overcame the difficulties surrounding this newly found lifestyle, as well as explanations of how “having a life outside of skating” helped them in their adjustment process. The three main topics of discussion are the necessity of having a plan for life beyond skating, the value of

having friends outside of the skating community, and the importance of finding new things to “replace” skating with.

5.6.1 Planning

Those of the participants whom had had some kind of a plan to fall back after their skating careers ended, for example a spot at university or a job, had a considerably easier time in their adjustment process than those whom were left with “nothing”. The participants with a plan expressed how they believed that they would have struggled with the transition to a much higher degree if they did not have new goals or a plan in place. The participant answers highlighted the importance of goal setting and of thinking ahead, already during the time prior to ending their skating careers. Those whom had failed to do so expressed the difficulty of being left emptyhanded. Amy told:

I didn't really plan the life after in any way. I hadn't planned anything beforehand of what I would do when I quit skating. I didn't really have any dreams of what I would want to be if I wasn't a skater. So that kind of backfired on me, the whole planning thing. So then because I didn't plan it, it just kind of happened. And then I really was left with nothing. It was really just so sad for me.

Hailey said, that the cessation of skating did not “feel that bad in my day to day life, because I had school and stuff”, and many other participants reiterated this point that having a plan in place and things to fall back on helped in reorganizing their day to day lives. Eliza explained how having a spot to study at university had helped assure her that she did indeed have a future outside of skating and that it was okay for her to transition on from skating as she wouldn't be “left with nothing”. Nora expressed how in hindsight she was very grateful to herself for making sure she had a job so her “routines kept rolling”. She discussed how having something to fill the time with had surely prevented her from experiencing considerable distress.

Chloe, who had not perceived her career transition in any way as negative, explained how this was most likely due to her having such clear goals for her future. Indeed, it was due to these goals that she had made the decision to end her skating career. She said that she had been able to transfer her goals from being related to skating success, to pursuing her studies. Even though, for her, reorganizing her schedules and adapting to new routines had been the most difficult aspect of career transition, her goal setting and planning aided her to a huge extent in this regard. She explained how having a clear goal in mind helped her through her transition process:

It helped that I was really passionate about what I wanted to study, so that was the thing that kind of saved me. I can understand if you've just quit and you're like what the hell do I want to study now, do I go to a business school, or do I become a physiotherapist, I can imagine it's a lot more difficult. Whereas I was like I have to get into that one university that I want to and study exactly that one subject that I want to and if I don't get in then I'll be pissed. So maybe that kind of that I had a clear goal in mind, that helped.

5.6.2 Non-skating friends

Emma, Chloe and Nora discussed how having strong social circles outside of skating had been helpful in handling their lives outside of skating, as well as having served as a form of planning for life beyond skating. Nora explained how she had always believed, even before thoughts about transitioning had even crossed her mind, that it was important for her to "have a life outside of skating". By this she meant having friends outside of the skating community. Nora felt that even though her social life outside of skating wasn't very active due to her skating commitments, it was important to maintain those social ties in order to have that support system in place following her skating career. She believed that this had served the purpose of a "multi-year preparation" for her career transition and helped ensure that she wasn't "left with nothing".

Emma and Chloe both had close friends from school and felt that this had enabled them to consistently see that "there was a life outside of skating". It was these non-skating friends who helped them in adjusting to their newfound lifestyles, by means of providing distractions in the form of other activities, and also enabled them to reassess their athletic identities more efficiently. As Chloe explained it:

It helped so much that I had strong social circles outside of skating. And felt that it would've been harder if I'd have quit and been at a sports high school and have all my friends still skating. And life would be always just who's skating, who's competing and what were the scores and what did the judges say. So, I didn't have any of that. When skating ended, then it was nice to go with my friends to cottages and skiing and I got lots of new things to fill in the day to day with.

All the participants whom had had strong social groups outside of sports, felt that this enabled them to relinquish their athletic identities more easily than if they had continued to only be surrounded by skaters. Having non-skating friends was therefore a helpful factor in the participants' adjustment to their post-athletic career lives.

5.6.3 Replacing skating

It was important for the participants to find new methods and activities by which they could “replace” skating with. Those whom were active in seeking new experiences and things to do were able to adjust to their post-sports lives more efficiently. In addition to having a job, studying or social relations to fall back on, the participants explained how they had discovered other means by which they were able to ease their own transitions.

Maria, who had initially after transitioning felt that she was “left with nothing”, as she had been unsuccessful in her application to university, ended up moving abroad for work. She claimed that this change helped her in beginning to rebuild her identity:

It helped that I got a new, I got something new to replace it, so that kind of filled up the old day to day which had got so much free time. So, in general that I didn't just stay stuck in the emptiness, but that I found something new to replace it with.

Chloe also utilized these kinds of active coping methods. In addition to working hard to reach her new goals and having an active social life, she also invested her spare time in pursuing her other interests and discovering new hobbies. For Tessa, her method of replacing skating was by beginning coaching:

At the time I didn't even think that I would start coaching. But then I thought maybe it would be nice because it would've felt really empty if I would've let go of skating completely.

By being proactive and resourceful, the former athletes in this study were able to lessen their own distress surrounding the transition process, at least by some degree.

5.7 What did I get from this?

The participants reflected on the experiences and feelings that their skating careers had ultimately provided them with. Depending on their background and the environment in which they had grown up training in, these were either positive or negative and went on to have an effect on the participants following their transitions. Emma explained what she believed skating had given her:

I miss the team so much. I miss training so much and all the positive energy that you get from the team. Damn it makes me emotional thinking about this. Like I've noticed now that I don't have it anymore, that how much, even though skating takes a lot and is demanding, but damn you get so much good energy that there's nothing like it. And it's something you don't understand until now.

Reflecting on their skating careers in hindsight was an important factor in processing the many years which they had participated in the sport. Reflection allowed them to process feelings and thoughts associated with their transitions and that was not always an easy thing to do. Lily's reflections allowed her to better understand herself and helped in dealing with the issues she had been experiencing post-skating career. She described how it had been an extensive process and it was initially difficult to admit to herself that the club culture she had grown up in had not been healthy:

What was hard was not understanding how an athletic career affects everything. Because somehow at least for me I didn't know how to look at it objectively, and of course because in our club the atmosphere wasn't very healthy. So then at the beginning it was really difficult for me to admit it to myself, I didn't want to think about it like that. So, the kind of unawareness about it, like I thought it was normal, that this is the kind of life I've lived.

The former skaters also discussed how their experience of transitioning was impacted by whether they felt they had achieved everything they had wished to, during their careers, and whether they themselves had given everything they had to the sport. The participants also explained how the traits they had been given by skating, still affect them to this day.

Those of the participants whom had reached their goals during their skating careers and felt that they had experienced everything possible, felt that it was easier to move on to new endeavours. Similarly, the ones who felt that they had given the sport all that they were able to, felt that they could move on from skating with a good conscience. Emma explained this thought process:

I had like an internal peace because I felt that I had given everything I could and that I've also received so much. Kind of like a circle closing. So, it's like I can leave with a good conscience and like just that I felt like I had the right to quit because I felt like I've given my everything to this team not only this season, but all these years.

However, on the opposite end of the spectrum, those former skaters who felt that they did not reach their full potential had trouble in "letting go". These participants had transitioned due to factors such as injury and deselection, which led to associated negative feelings. Maria, who had retired from skating due to her injuries, felt that the end of her career was bitter and that she was never able to become the kind of skater she believes she could have been, if not for her injuries. Similarly, Tessa who also ended her career due to injuries explained how it was difficult to see those close to her achieve great things with the sport, knowing that she wished she would have been able to do the same. Many of these skaters stated that they often still play around with the thought of "what if", which has evidently hindered their coming to terms with the transition.

Sarah explained how these days she avoids conversation around skating. Due to the manner in which she concluded her skating career, she says that she always associates feelings of shame to talking about skating. For Holly the most difficult thing has been in attempting to accept that her goals in skating weren't achievable. After auditioning for teams which she had dreamed of joining since a young age, she was not accepted. It made her feel as if she "didn't have what it takes" to be able to make it into these teams. Letting go of her long-time dreams was difficult for her to accept and also hindered the process of creating a new identity after her transition, as she had identified herself so strongly through her goals.

Lily described how she still recognises how her athletic identity affects her mindset in relation to what she perceives to be a "successful life". She explained how this means that it is easy for her to base success on accomplishments, which reflect onto her professional career. However, she discussed further how she enjoys identifying herself as a former athlete and that shows in that she enjoys leading an active lifestyle and in her ambitions. Chloe told about how her skating career is always brought up in situations such as job interviews:

I bring it up for example in job interviews, that I can work under pressure, I take care of things systematically and I'm organized and use my time efficiently.

Evidently skating has played a big role in all of the participants' lives and has therefore contributed much to how they identify themselves at present. Even though most of the participants said that they no longer directly identify themselves through skating, they still felt that skating had contributed to the way they perceive themselves to this day. The participants believe that some of the traits they had received from skating are most likely "never going to go away", as according to Emma, Chloe and Tessa.

6 Discussion

The former skaters who took part in this study had each dedicated the majority of their young lives to their sports of figure skating and synchronized skating. They had devoted countless hours to refining their skills, strictly adhered to leading an athletic lifestyle, and many had gone on to achieve exceptional things throughout their careers. When the time came to let go of the sport for which they had dedicated themselves to for years on end, the transition process was inevitably going to be “an emotional rollercoaster”. The outcomes of the transition processes of the individuals taking part in this study, were all unique, as were their backgrounds, resources and the feelings surrounding the process.

The purpose of this study was to find out what kind of experiences former Finnish figure and synchronized skaters had had in their career transition processes. The goal was to realize which factors had been helpful, and which had hindered the process. In addition, the aim was to find out whether the participants had received any support during their transition processes, and what kind of support this had been.

The results of the study indicate that the career transition process was, to varying degrees, a mentally and emotionally demanding experience for the participants. The length of time taken to adapt to a post-athletic career life in most cases largely exceeded the one-year time period which is what most studies on athletic career transitions show it to be (Alfermann 2000, 45-58; Sinclair & Orlick 1993, 138-150). Nearly all of the participants had felt that they had not received adequate help or support during the process. The main forms of support the former athletes wished to have received were support from their coaches, peer support, and support from a sports psychologist. Support received by the athletes included family support, peer support and support from a sport psychologist. In terms of factors which had made the transition process most difficult for them, the main factors were a lack of transparency surrounding the topic of transitions and in the sport in general, a loss of identity and losing the sense of belonging. Those factors which were most helpful in adapting to the transition were having social life, and a plan for the future, outside of skating, as well as the peer support received.

The subsequent sections will highlight the main factors impacting the participants' transition processes in light of previous research, as well as practical recommendations, strengths, limitations and future research directions, and an evaluation of my own learning during this process.

6.1 Main factors involved in the process

A range of factors impacted each athlete's transition process. Perhaps the most influential factors were coaches, peer support, athletic identity and pre-retirement planning, all of which had either particularly positive or negative consequences for the former athletes.

6.1.1 Coaches

For the participants of this study, coaches were primarily a negative influence on their transition processes. The reasons for considering coaches to be a negative influence were the lack of communication and support received from the coach, as well as otherwise ineffective coach-athlete relationships. An ineffective coach-athlete relationship can be characterized by a lack of interest and emotion, remoteness, antagonism, deceit, exploitation, and physical or sexual abuse (Jowett 2005, 412). Coaches also play a tremendous role in creating a team, club, or practice environment. The lack of transparency and negative team or club culture described by the participants, is therefore also linked to ineffective coach-athlete relationships.

The former athletes taking part in this study had been disappointed at the lack of communication between them and their coaches in relation to career transition. Participants also described a disinterest on the part of coaches when participants had attempted to bring up the subject of career transition for discussion, as well as a failure on part of coaches to accept the decision they had made to transition. If these coach-athlete relationships had been effective, the participants would have received support and empathy during their transition processes. According to Jowett (2005, 412), an effective coach-athlete relationship involves empathic understanding, honesty, support, liking, acceptance, responsiveness, friendliness, cooperation, caring, respect and positive regard, among other things.

A coach's primary role is to enhance athletic performance, motivation, confidence, and autonomy. If this role is fulfilled, the coach is able to make a positive impact on an athlete's life. (Jowett & Wachsmuth 2020, 124.) Few of the participants reflected on the inappropriate behaviour and coaching methods implemented by their coaches, which had long-lasting negative impacts on their emotional and mental well-being. Some participants were also afraid of discussing the topic of career transition with their coaches as they believed it would have negatively impacted the way they were coached or being treated. These experiences show that these participants' coaches were not responsibly exercising their role as a coach and were in fact misusing their power. The coaches of these athletes failed to create a holistic, athlete-centred environment, and rather created environments which

were impersonal, and self/ego centred. These types of environments are characterized by feelings of isolation and anxiety, instability or uncertainty, and uneasiness or disharmony for the athlete. Athletes whom experience impersonal and toxic coaching environments are more likely to see their coaches as uncooperative, unsupportive and reflect on their athletic careers with anger or resentment, as was the case with some of the former athletes in this study. (Jowett & Wachsmuth 2020, 124.)

Moreover, it seems that in the case of the participants of this study, coaches failed to take responsibility in assisting their athletes with their career transition processes. Literature surrounding the topic of career transitions claims the coach to be one of the key players in helping prepare athletes for their forthcoming transitions. Alongside athlete's other support networks, coaches must help athletes in the decision-making process by increasing their awareness of the demands of career transition, and by equipping them with the necessary resources and strategies needed to cope with these demands. (Stambulova & al. 2009, 408.)

6.1.3 Peer support

From the results of this study it is evident that peer support was one of the most important factors involved in the participants' transition processes. Although the participants had in most cases received support from other sources, peer support was deemed as the most effective in helping cope with the feelings regarding the process. The participants felt that it was through peer support that they were able to openly share experiences and feel understood. Indeed, it was the perception of feeling understood which enabled support to be effective.

Peer support for the participants came in the form of team-mates or skaters within the training group, as well as other former athletes from various sports. The participants placed much value on being able to discuss the transition with others who were in a similar situation and were also able to provide support for others which as well aided in their own processing of the feelings involved. The availability of peer support enabled a lower threshold of seeking help or support, compared to other sources of support including that from coaches, family, or psychologists.

The literature surrounding athletic career transitions provides little information on the role and value of peer support during the transition process. As it was one of the most influential factors for the participants of this study, it could possibly provide a new avenue for research in terms of the support received during athletic career transition processes.

6.1.4 Athletic identity

All of the participants of this study claimed to have had high athletic identity during their sports participation. Many claimed that their “whole lives” were centred around their sport, which showed that they were extremely committed to the athletic role and did not necessarily explore other identities. As discussed in the theoretical framework for this thesis, the failure to explore identities alternate to the athletic role may lead to identity foreclosure, which in turn will inevitably have a negative impact on the career transition process (Brewer, Petitpas & Van Raalte 2018, 156-163).

Those of the participants who had cultivated and maintained social ties outside their sport, experienced less distress in their transition process. Additionally, those whom had explored other social and occupational roles, took less time to adjust to their post-sports lives. This emphasizes the importance of a holistic view of an athlete, in that they and others around them, should view athletes as people who not only do sports, but also other things in life. Thus, athletes should be advised to search for a balance between demands in sport as well as outside sport, to prioritize in their lifestyles, and to emphasize transferable competencies (e.g., goal setting, planning, time/stress/energy management) that can work as resources in coping with transitions both in and outside sport. (Stambulova & al. 2009, 408.)

6.1.5 Planning

When the participants were asked whether they had planned for their post-career lives and the transition process, none of them described having any concrete plan in place. Some explained that their planning was limited to mental preparation for the transition and ensuing feelings whilst others said that they had prepared to go on to study and applied for jobs, which they in hindsight reflected as being a form of planning. Also, some participants stated that maintaining social ties outside of the realms of skating had acted as long-term planning so as to not be left without a social life post-career. However, many of the participants had failed to plan in any way for their transitions, which led to negative consequences post-athletic career.

Through pre-retirement planning athletes are able to facilitate their own perception of control over the transition process. As in the case of one of the participants of this study who had failed to plan, she had felt as if the end of her career “just happened”, and she was

left feeling that she had nothing to fall back on. This caused her long-term negative consequences as she failed to adjust to her post-sport life. Planning should serve as one of the preventive methods of coping with career transition. Preventive interventions help athletes in becoming better aware of forthcoming transition demands and to develop all necessary re-sources for effective coping, well before they are needed in practice. (Stambulova & al. 2009, 399.) Therefore, pre-retirement planning is one of the primary resources available to athletes in order to have a successful adjustment to a post-career life and should be utilized by all athletes.

6.2 Practical recommendations

Based on the results of this study there are a number of practical implications and recommendations to be made for those whom are involved in the sport of figure and synchronized skating in Finland. Firstly, coaches should be educated on the topic of athletic career transitions, and how to discuss it with their athletes, as well as how they could possibly offer guidance on the issues surrounding the transition process. While the focus remains on improving athletic performance, coaches should have the ability to view athletes from a holistic perspective and be prepared to consult their athletes on the forthcoming demands of career transition. This would also aid in providing an air of transparency in the practice environment, which would allow athletes to feel more at ease with their decision and process.

Secondly, athletes should be encouraged to pursue a dual career and other social roles outside of the context of skating. The participants in this study whom experienced the most difficulty in adjusting to their post-career lives, were those who felt that they had nothing to fall back on post-career and who felt that their identity was limited to their sports participation. By supporting athletes in pursuing their studies or non-athletic careers during sports participation, athletes would have an easier time adjusting following transition. Through encouraging athletes to explore other social roles, athletes would be able to develop an identity which is more multi-level, and one in which their self-worth is not entirely determined by their sports participation, thus preventing the loss of identity which many of the participants in this study claimed to have experienced after ending their skating careers. However, with regard to this, it is also important to consider that due to the nature of the sport, figure skating requires early specialization and considerable commitment if the goal is to successfully compete at the highest level. Therefore, it may be challenging to achieve a balance between training demands and non-athletic endeavours, as well as a healthy degree of athletic identity and other identities outside of skating.

As many of the participants believed peer support to be the most important form of support, teams and clubs should attempt to create a network for the skaters that have transitioned from sport. This network could serve the purpose of a platform for discussion and sharing experiences, or for staying in touch in other ways, such as organized get-togethers and occasional skating sessions. Some clubs have already organized this kind of alumni operation, and it would be of great use to transitioning athletes if this was also extended to other clubs. Through this kind of alumni activity, transitioning skaters would have a ready peer support system waiting for them, in the form of a community of former skaters, following the end of their careers. This could prevent them from possible feelings of loneliness and allow them to continue feeling a part of “the skating community”.

The use of sport psychologists to aid athletes in their career transition process would be of great help. With this, the financial resources of the team or club may prevent the hiring of a psychologist, however in those cases where a sport psychologist is already employed by a club or team, they should be utilized also for this purpose. In the case of insufficient financial resources, the Finnish Figure Skating Association or the clubs in question, should consider researching sport psychologists whom the skaters could personally contact if they feel the need to. This would help preserve the athletes’ resources during a time which may already be mentally and emotionally difficult. If a ready list of names and contact details was composed, coaches would then be able to point the athletes in the right direction of where to find the right psychologist for them.

6.3 Strengths, limitations and future research directions

The greatest strength of this study was the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and the format of the interviews. The IPA approach enabled deeper insight into the issues which the participants brought up during their interviews. The participants were able to discuss in great detail their experiences surrounding the transition process and felt that they had been able to bring up everything they had wished to during the interviews. Some of the participants also provided voluntary feedback in which they said that they had felt comfortable in discussing their experiences with the interviewer and that the interview questions were “good”. A thorough understanding of the personal experiences of each former skater was gained. New themes emerged from the interviews, which had not been discussed in the theoretical framework, such as the impact that coaches have on the transition process and the value of peer support.

Limitations can be considered in the sense that the inexperience of the researcher in conducting a study such as this may have limited the depth of the analysis into the topic. However, considering the lack of experience, a sufficient and thorough understanding was still gained during the process of analysis. As a retrospective study, the amount of time elapsed since career transition may have affected the ability to recall the precise experiences and feelings associated with the transition process. Nonetheless, all participants gave their best effort at providing as much detail as possible when discussing their transition experiences and were able to provide the interviewer with a thorough sense of understanding of these experiences.

The sample in this study was an appropriate size in terms of qualitative research. However, when studying the experiences of former figure skaters, it would be of value to include a more equal number of participants from all four disciplines. This being, as experiences could slightly differ depending on the discipline in question. The participant experiences in this study, however, did not have much variation between skaters of different disciplines. In terms of further research, it would also be of value to conduct a study involving male skaters, as none applied for this particular study. As there has been little research on the career transitions of figure skaters, it would also be interesting to conduct this kind of study on an international scale, to see whether any observable differences occur in the experiences of a multinational sample.

6.4 Evaluation of learning

The topic for this thesis was chosen from a place of immense personal interest as well as the knowledge that many within the figure skating community would share the same interest in a study such as this one. There have been no previous studies conducted on the transition experiences of figure skaters in Finland, and prior to the last few years there has been no large-scale discussion of the topic in the Finnish figure skating community. This prompted me to delve further into the topic, in order to gain a sense of what kind of experiences skaters had had and whether they had any help available to them.

The theoretical framework of this thesis encapsulates the key factors and definitions involved in athletic career transitions. It could have been made broader as there is much research that has been made into the topic, however I felt it important to keep the section concise and clear to follow, involving only the most crucial information needed to gain an understanding into the career transitions of figure skaters in Finland.

From the beginning of the process it was clear that the method in which the study was going to be conducted would be qualitative, in order to gain a deep understanding of the participant experiences. The theoretical framework provided a solid basis for beginning to form an interview schedule. The recruitment of participants for the interview proved to be an easy process, as all of the participants volunteered based on the one general interview invitation, instead of having to pursue participants individually. As the participants were all volunteers, it was clear that they had the motivation and will to discuss the topic thoroughly. The interviews proved to be fruitful and provided a large amount of material to be analyzed. Based on the feedback of the participants, the interviews were conducted in a way that allowed them to discuss all the factors pertaining to their transitions which they had felt were important and had felt comfortable in doing so.

The analysis of the transcriptions required research into the use of IPA, in order to execute the analysis correctly. Following familiarization with the transcripts, subordinate and superordinate themes emerged. The themes were relevant to the theoretical framework and aptly encompassed the experiences the participants had had in their transitions.

In creating a schedule for this thesis, in hindsight more time should have been allocated for the transcription of interviews. This was a factor which slowed the progress made with this thesis considerably for some time, as not enough consideration had been given to how time-consuming transcribing interviews can be. However, the rest of this thesis was written in a timely manner.

6.5 Conclusion

An athletic career transition is an inevitable process which all athletes must eventually experience. This study focused on the career transition experiences of former Finnish figure and synchronized skaters. It was found that negative transition experiences were primarily caused by a perceived lack of support, ineffective coach-athlete relationships, a high athletic identity, as well as a lack of pre-retirement planning. In contrast, peer support and a plan for post-skating life helped facilitate adjustment in the former athletes. In cases of crisis transition, sport psychologists played an important role in helping participants' adjustment. The participants wished to have received more support from their coaches and to have had access to a sport psychologist. These findings may aid coaches, clubs and the Finnish Figure Skating Association in understanding the transition process from an athletes' perspective and in creating models by which to go about in supporting future skaters in their career transition processes.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview schedule

1. a) Kerro luistelu-urastasi.
b) Kuinka vahvana koit oman urheilijaidentiteettisi? / Kuinka vahvasti identifioit itsesi luistelun kautta?

2. a) Miksi lopetit luistelun?
b) Miten suunnittelit luistelun lopettamista?
c) Minkälaista tukea/ohjausta/neuvoa sait luistelun lopettamisen päätöksentekoprosessiin?
d) Minkälaista tukea/ohjausta/neuvoa olisit kaivannut luistelun lopettamisen-päätöksentekoprosessiin?
e) Minkälaisia tunteita/tuntemuksia sinulla oli ennen lopettamista- lopettamisprosessin aikana?

3. a) Mikä oli vaikeinta luistelun lopettamisessa?
b) Minkälaista tukea sait lopettamisen jälkeen?
c) Minkälaista tukea olisit kaivannut lopettamisen jälkeen?
d) Mitkä seikat helpottivat lopettamisprosessia?
e) Mitkä seikat vaikeuttivat lopettamisprosessia?
f) Kuinka paljon nykyään identifioit itsesi luistelun kautta?
g) Koetko nyt "päässeesi yli" luistelun lopettamisesta? Vaivaako lopettaminen sinua vieläkin?

4. a) Oletko pysynyt jollain tavoin lajin parissa, miten?
b) Olisitko toivonut, että sinulle olisi avattu erilaisia vaihtoehtoja, miten pysyä lajin parissa?