

Athletes' retirement from elite sport: A qualitative study of parents and partners' experiences

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**Athletes' retirement from elite sport: A qualitative study of parents and partners'
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Abstract

Objectives: Athletes' experiences of transition out of elite sport have been well documented. Less is known, however, about how the family members of athletes experience the process of transition. This study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of parents and partners' experiences and the way that they managed and interpreted their role in the process of transition.

Method: Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parents and partners (two male and five female) of seven retired elite athletes from the UK. Data were analysed according to the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Results: Parents and partners experienced their own transition as they navigated uncertainty and upheaval in their own lives when the athletes retired. Parents and partners had to renegotiate their identity as they adjusted to changing roles and dynamics in their close relationships. Providing support to the former athletes was complicated by parents and partners' own difficulties during transition and they often felt unsure about their role as a supporter. Parents and partners often experienced difficulties in their relationship with the athletes during their transition, but things improved as time went by. This was due to better communication and a willingness to share their feelings about their experiences. This helped parents and partners to gain a positive perspective on their transition and a sense that their relationship with the athletes had strengthened and grown.

Conclusions: Transition is often a shared experience and the findings of the present study underline the value of exploring transition at the level of the family or partnership as well as the individual.

Keywords: *career transition; identity; interpretive phenomenological analysis; relationships; social support.*

51
52

Introduction

53 Retirement from sport, also referred to as the transition out of sport, is associated with
54 numerous psychological, social, and vocational changes in an athlete's life (Cecić Erpič,
55 Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004). The changes that athletes experience during transition can
56 present significant challenges as they attempt to deal with a range of complex emotions,
57 negotiate a shift in their identity, and deal with disruption in their social networks (Brown,
58 Webb, Robinson, & Cotgreave, 2018; Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). The process of adjusting
59 to these changes can unfold over several months and years (Fernandez, Stephan, &
60 Fouquereau, 2006; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and, in the most challenging cases, difficulties
61 adjusting develop into long-term mental health issues (Cosh, Crabb, & Tully, 2013;
62 McKenna & Thomas, 2007). Indeed, athletes have reported suffering from anxiety,
63 depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse many years after they retired (Gouttebauge,
64 Aoki, & Kerkhoffs, 2015; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

65 Models that describe the process of the transition out of sport (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie,
66 1994) highlight numerous factors that influence the process of adjustment, including the
67 reason(s) for retirement, level of pre-retirement planning, strength of athletic identity, the use
68 of coping strategies, and the availability and quality of social support. Although this research
69 has recognised the importance of understanding the factors that promote adjustment, the
70 interpersonal contexts and relationship dynamics involved in the process of transition have
71 received less attention. In particular, there is a lack of research on transition from the
72 perspective of people in athletes' close social networks, such as their parents and/or partners.
73 Given that major life transitions are often shared social experiences (de Jong Gierveld &
74 Dykstra, 1993), more work is therefore needed in this area.

75 **Relationships and life transitions**

76 Significant transitions in life are complex interpersonal phenomena, such that
77 transitions can be instigated, influenced, and resolved by the relationships that people share
78 with others (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Relationships and social support have long
79 been considered to be important to the quality of the transitions that people experience
80 (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). For example, research on retirement from work has found that
81 people with higher quality relationships are more satisfied with retirement and find it easier to
82 adjust to the changes that they experience when they leave work (Sherry, Tomlinson, Loe,
83 Johnston, & Feeney, 2017). Research has also shown that the disruption of students' close
84 relationships and loss of support from their family members can have a negative impact on
85 their adjustment during the transition to university (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie,
86 2007). These findings emphasise that both positive and negative life experiences often occur
87 in the context of interpersonal interactions in close relationships (Carstensen, Fung, &
88 Charles, 2003).

89 Life course theory (Elder, 1998) and family systems theory (Broderick, 1993) also
90 acknowledge that an individual's life is intrinsically linked to others. Relationships are not
91 isolated across time and space; rather, inter-personal processes shape experiences in dynamic
92 and complex ways (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Previous research has found that life
93 transitions are often shared experiences, with studies highlighting how one individual's
94 transition can influence the lives of others (Holdworth, 2004). For example, being made
95 redundant from a job or a child leaving the family home, may not only have an impact on
96 those experiencing the transition directly, but also those people with whom they share close
97 social bonds (e.g., Doiron & Mendolia, 2012). Shared transitions can take place in a variety
98 of close relationships, such as those involving romantic partnerships, parents and children,
99 siblings, and grandparents and grandchildren (Cowan & Hetherington, 1991).

100 The features of these transitions are often related to the way that people (re)negotiate
101 their personal and social identity, (re)define their role in close relationships, and manage the
102 provision and receipt of social support (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Research
103 suggests that these factors play an important role in adjustment to transitions by influencing
104 the personal and relational well-being of those involved (Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). For
105 example, poor interpersonal communications during transitions can lead relationships to
106 fracture and break down, with both parties suffering as a result (Solomon, Weber, & Steuber,
107 2010).

108 Given the vast amount of research that has examined the relational aspects of life
109 transitions, it is perhaps surprising that little attention has been given to these processes
110 during the transition out of sport. This represents a significant gap in knowledge and more
111 research into the interpersonal nature of close relationships may help to further understand
112 the process of transition and associated outcomes.

113 **Interpersonal aspects of the transition out of sport**

114 Research that has addressed interpersonal aspects of transition has tended to
115 concentrate on athletes' appraisals of the availability and quality of social support (see Park et
116 al., 2013, for a review). Close family members, particularly parents and partners, are often an
117 athlete's most important source of support and, in general, athletes who feel supported by
118 parents and partners during their transition find it easier to adjust to the changes that they
119 experience (Gilmore, 2008; Park et al., 2013). However, support from parents and partners
120 can vary in quality and not all athletes feel that they receive the support that they need
121 (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Lagimodiere & Strachan, 2015). There is also evidence that
122 the changes that athletes experience during transition can lead to difficulties in their close
123 relationships (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004). For example, athletes have reported tension and

124 conflict in their relationships because they believed that close others did not understand what
125 they were going through (Brown et al., 2018).

126 There is strong evidence to suggest that parents and partners play an important role in
127 the process of transition (Brown et al., 2018); however, there is little research on how parents
128 and partners experience the process of providing support and how this may influence their
129 wider experience of transition. Research outside sport suggests that people often face a
130 number of challenges when they provide social support, including feeling anxious about their
131 role and the possibility of giving inappropriate or ineffective support (Goldsmith, 1992).
132 Providers of support can also experience deterioration in their own wellbeing as they take on
133 the burden of the recipient's difficulties or distress (Coyne, Ellard, & Smith, 1990). These
134 factors may act as barriers to parents and partners' ability or willingness to offer appropriate
135 support to athletes during transition and lead to significant relational challenges that have a
136 negative impact on the experience of transition for both parties. Indeed, athletes have
137 reported tension and conflict in their relationships because they felt that family members did
138 not understand what they were going through (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999).

139 It is therefore critical to understand how people in athletes' close social networks
140 experience the process of transition out of sport to gain a more comprehensive understanding
141 of the phenomenon. To the authors' knowledge; however, the only example of this kind of
142 approach is Lally and Kerr's (2008) study involving the parents of former elite gymnasts.
143 Lally and Kerr found that parents experienced significant disruption in their lives when their
144 child retired. This disruption was characterised by changes in the parents' relationship with
145 their child and the other parent. Parents also described a loss of purpose as family roles and
146 responsibilities evolved. Lally and Kerr's study demonstrates, therefore, the importance of
147 understanding athletes' retirement from the perspective of family members and reveals

148 important information about the challenges that close family members may face during
149 transition.

150 Despite making a significant contribution to understanding relational aspects of
151 transition, Lally and Kerr's (2008) study only focused on the parents of athletes. Research
152 suggests that other family members, particularly spouses/partners, can also play an important
153 role in the process (Brown et al., 2018; Chow, 2001). Although relationships between athletes
154 and their parents and partners may differ in fundamental ways, exploring these relationships
155 in a single study provides the opportunity to explore the relational aspects of transition,
156 identify similarities and differences in the experiences of parents and partners, and develop a
157 more holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Noohi, Peyrovi, Goghary, & Kazemi,
158 2016).

159 Furthermore, Lally and Kerr's (2008) study largely focused on parents' responses to
160 their daughters' retirement and this leaves considerable scope to explore the interpersonal
161 processes involved in transition. In this respect, an interpretive phenomenological approach
162 (e.g., Smith, 1996) might be of potential benefit. The phenomenological concept of
163 intersubjectivity, in particular, can help to understanding how shared experiences are
164 characterised by interactive meaning-making that is *co-created* (De Jaegher & Di Paolo
165 2007). In addition, the phenomenological focus on agency and identity can expand our
166 understanding of the personal meaning that transition can have for parents and partners and
167 positions them as important participants in the phenomenon, worthy of study in their own
168 right.

169 **The present research**

170 The purpose of the present research was to explore the experiences of parents and
171 partners of elite athletes during the athletes' transition out of sport. Specifically, an
172 interpretive phenomenological approach was used to explore the interpersonal nature of

173 transition and the way(s) that retirement from sport can affect close relationships. The present
174 research also aimed to understand how parents and partners of athletes managed and
175 interpreted their role in the process of transition, including their possible role as providers of
176 support.

177 **Method**

178 **Methodology and philosophical underpinning**

179 The study was designed and conducted according to the theoretical principles of
180 interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996), and the philosophical
181 assumptions of critical realism. Wiltshire (2018) suggests critical realism offers a way of
182 transcending persistent paradigmatic debates that constrain the impact of research in the field
183 of sport and exercise psychology by bridging the gap between realist and constructivist–
184 interpretivist approaches.

185 Critical realism maintains that there is a reality that is independent of subjective
186 perceptions of the world (Bhaskar, 1989). Access to this reality, however, depends on sensory
187 perceptions and subjective interpretations that are limited and incomplete, such that people
188 may understand and interpret reality in different ways (Parker, 1992). This is congruent with
189 aspects of hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenological philosophy that acknowledges a
190 pre-existing social world that people are ‘thrown into’ (Heidegger, 1962/1927), but also
191 accepts that understanding of the world is mediated through individual’s consciousness, and
192 their own interpretations of their experiences (Finlay, 2009; Heidegger, 1992).

193 The present research was conducted, therefore, from an ontological perspective that
194 recognises a pre-existing ‘real’ world but acknowledges that it is impossible to describe
195 objective reality (Danermark, Ekstrom, & Jacobsen, 2005). Rather, the aim was to explore
196 and understand the nature of the participant’s experience and how they made sense of that
197 experience as they engage with their social world (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin,

198 2009). As a result, the present research was conducted from a perspective that is congruent
199 with epistemological relativism (Willig, 2016).

200 IPA is grounded in hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenology and views language
201 as important for describing and understanding the meaning of experience. Interpreting
202 experience involves a 'double hermeneutic' process whereby the researcher attempts to
203 understand the participants' attempt to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009).
204 Findings are, therefore, the researchers' interpretation of the participants' experiences. IPA
205 was considered appropriate for investigating parents and partners' experiences of the
206 transition out of sport because it draws on a phenomenological philosophy that seeks to
207 explore the intersubjective nature of the world as experiences unfold over time (Smith et al.,
208 2009). Thus, IPA was used to explore the interpersonal nature of social relationships during
209 the *process* of transition.

210 **Participants**

211 Purposive sampling was used to recruit parents and partners of seven former elite
212 athletes. Studies using IPA typically use a homogenous sample; however, the nature of this
213 homogeneity differs depending on the study and the focus is on selecting participants who
214 can provide a particular perspective on the phenomenon of interest (Smith et al., 2009). In the
215 present research, potential participants were invited to take part if they had experienced all, or
216 a significant part of, the former athletes' career in elite sport and their subsequent transition.
217 Given the paucity of previous research, the exploratory nature of the present research, and the
218 practical issues of gaining access to participants meeting the criteria, few other restrictions
219 were applied.

220 Four long-term partners of former athletes (one male and three females) aged between
221 30 and 47 ($M = 37.75$, $SD = 6.95$) and three parents (one male and two females) aged
222 between 55 and 67 ($M = 60.66$, $SD = 7.50$) volunteered to take part. All participants were

223 from the UK, were employed at the time of the athletes' careers, and lived with the athletes at
224 the time of their transitions. The former athletes had all competed at an international level for
225 between 5 and 15 years ($M = 12.50$, $SD = 3.88$), competed in individual summer Olympic
226 sports, and had taken part in multiple major championships; six having competed at the
227 summer Olympic Games. At the time of the interviews with their parents and partners, the
228 former athletes had been retired for between 3 and 12 years ($M = 6.42$, $SD = 3.90$).

229 **Procedure**

230 Following institutional ethical approval, former athletes were contacted through social
231 media and the authors' existing contacts. The aims of the study were discussed and the
232 former athletes were asked to nominate, and provide permission for us to contact, a family
233 member who might be willing to take part in the study. Potential participants were asked to
234 nominate someone who they were particularly close to, and who had played an important role
235 in their transition. The decision to let the athletes decide who to nominate was intentional and
236 ensured that they had the freedom to choose the relationship that was most important to them.
237 This strategy, borrowed from personality and social psychology (see Snyder & Ickes, 1985),
238 suggests that research on social phenomena or processes should study people who are
239 particularly likely to manifest or offer insight on the phenomenon or process of interest. It is
240 argued that this will generate knowledge of the phenomenon or process as it naturally occurs
241 in the most effective and efficient way. In this regard, we reasoned that the interpersonal
242 processes related to identity, communication, and social support - that have been identified as
243 being important during transitions (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993) - would be more
244 salient for close relationships nominated by athletes, than those selected by us.

245 Not all of the former athletes who were contacted wished to invite someone to
246 participate. Also, several parents and partners who were approached declined to take part. In
247 these cases, the former athletes and/or their parents and partners said that they wished this

248 time to remain private, did not want to revisit a difficult time in their lives, and/or felt that
249 discussing issues around transition may cause some distress. Three of the former athletes who
250 were contacted participated in research that has been reported in another publication (see
251 Brown et al., 2018).

252 Interviews were conducted with the nominated parent or partner who agreed to take
253 part. Face-to-face interviews were used because IPA is well suited to methods that provide
254 participants with the opportunity to offer in-depth, first person accounts of their experience
255 (Smith et al., 2009). All of the interviews were conducted by the first author using a semi-
256 structured interview schedule. Guidelines on conducting interviews from a phenomenological
257 perspective (e.g., Bevan, 2014; Smith et al., 2009) were used to develop questions to explore
258 the context, structure, and meaning of participants' experiences. For example, participants
259 were asked: "Can you tell me about (athlete's name) sporting career?", "Can you tell me
260 about the circumstances surrounding (athlete's name) retirement?", and "Can you tell me
261 about what it was like for you when (athlete's name) retired?" Although an interview
262 schedule was used, it was implemented in an open and flexible way and participants were
263 encouraged to lead the interview by discussing the experiences and issues that were most
264 pertinent to them. Participants were interviewed for between 70 and 95 minutes ($M = 83.57$,
265 $SD = 7.74$) and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participants and the athletes with
266 whom they were associated were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

267 **Data analysis**

268 The readings of the transcripts were informed by interpretive phenomenological
269 philosophy including concepts related to agency, identity, intersubjectivity, and the
270 processual nature of experience (Ashworth, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). These concepts became
271 more prominent during the latter stages of the analysis in which the researchers engaged in a

272 reflexive 'dialogue' between their psychological knowledge and the data to gain the
273 interpretive analysis that is crucial to IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

274 Analysis of the transcripts followed the guidelines described by Smith et al. (2009). A
275 particular feature of IPA is its commitment to idiographic enquiry; therefore, the analysis was
276 conducted on each case separately before conducting a cross-case analysis. The first stage of
277 the analysis involved reading each transcript several times before a detailed set of notes and
278 comments were recorded to capture salient features of the account. The notes focused on
279 describing the experiential content of the account, the language that was used by the
280 participant, and conceptual interpretations that aimed to provide a deeper understanding of
281 the meaning that was attached to each person's experience. These notes were used to develop
282 emergent themes that served to condense the data and capture the structure of the
283 participant's account. Next, a process of abstracting and subsuming the themes enabled them
284 to be clustered together to form superordinate themes that represented shared meaning or a
285 central concept. This 'cross-case analysis' identified patterns, similarities, and differences
286 across the themes and superordinate themes for each participant that were used to develop
287 higher-order concepts. The aim was to provide a coherent account of the data, while still
288 maintaining the idiographic focus that is central to IPA.

289 Writing up the final analysis also formed a key part of the analytical process as it
290 facilitated a deeper engagement with the participants' accounts and enabled further
291 interpretation of the data. In line with the philosophy of IPA, the accounts were co-
292 constructed between researcher and participants and the final report represents the
293 researchers' interpretations of the experience of transition for *these* participants (Smith et al.,
294 2009). Our claims, therefore, should be regarded as tentative, rather than a 'true' account of
295 parents and partners' experiences of transition.

296 Research quality and methodological rigor

297 The present research draws on a pluralistic and flexible stance for assessing the
298 quality of research, rather than a predefined 'checklist' that is applicable to all qualitative
299 research (Smith et al., 2009). The aim was to produce research that is faithful to the
300 theoretical principles of IPA using a rigorous and transparent method (for a full description of
301 the criteria suggested to produce 'good' IPA, see Smith, 2011).

302 Qualitative research within sport and exercise psychology tends to describe rigor in
303 the context of method (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Thus, we focussed on developing
304 meticulous data collection and analysis procedures that were transparent and thorough.
305 Specifically, applying guidelines for phenomenological interviews (Bevan, 2014; Smith et al.,
306 2009) encouraged participants' to recall and reflect on the key experiences that were relevant
307 for them, and helped us to maintain an approach that was congruent with IPA. At the same
308 time, the interview guide was based on a thorough review of relevant literature, which aimed
309 to ensure the present research was conducted with relevance to contemporary theoretical
310 issues related to the transition out of sport (Tracy, 2010).

311 A reflexive approach during data collection and analysis was crucial to the pursuit of
312 rigor. This included producing fieldnotes immediately following each interview to outline
313 aspects of the interviews that could have been lost once the analysis was limited to the review
314 of audio recordings. Fieldnotes included details of the interactions between the researcher and
315 participants prior to interviews commencing, the participants' body language and
316 mannerisms, and the researcher's initial reactions following the completion of the interview.
317 Fieldnotes formed part of a research diary kept by the first author (anonymised extracts of
318 which are available on request) that was used to document analytical decisions and to
319 promote a reflexive approach to the research. The diary helped to highlight any prior

320 assumptions and ideas about the research topic and any emotional reactions to the data during
321 collection and analysis.

322 The primary analysis was conducted by the first author, with the other authors acting
323 as 'critical friends' (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this respect, the other authors read and,
324 in some cases, coded transcripts; discussed the context and meaning of the transcripts; and
325 helped to develop themes, the structure of the cross-case analysis, and this report of the
326 findings. This aim was not to research consensus or achieve agreement (as is the case with
327 'inter-rater reliability'), but to use critical dialogue as a resource for developing the
328 interpretations made by the first author (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

329

Results

Context

331 The present research sought to explore the experience of transition out of elite sport
332 from the perspective of the parents and partners of athletes, rather than the athletes
333 themselves. However, we start by providing some description of the athletes' experience, as
334 described by their parents and partners, in order to provide context: Athletes' experiences of
335 transition were idiosyncratic and their reactions to retirement depended in part on the specific
336 circumstances that surrounded their exit from elite sport. However, there were several
337 common features of athletes' transitions that related to issues such as disruption of identity,
338 loss of self-esteem, difficulties establishing a new career, and the changing nature of their
339 relationship with their parents and partners. Many of these have been described in previous
340 research focusing on athletes' experience of transition (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Park et al.,
341 2013) and so here we focus on the experience of transition from the perspective of the parents
342 and partners of the athletes.

Overview

344 The changes and difficulties in the athletes' lives meant that parents and partners
345 experienced changes in their own lives that were often difficult to navigate. In effect, parents
346 and partners experienced their own transition. At times, parents and partners felt that their
347 relationship with the athlete was distant or detached, with each person in the relationship
348 experiencing a similar, but somewhat separate transition. However, parents and partners also
349 described times when they felt close to the athlete and transition seemed to be more of a
350 shared experience. During these times, they worked through challenges together and parents
351 and partners were willing and able to offer support to the athlete. This interpretation of the
352 parents and partners' accounts is captured by an overarching theme that was labelled 'parallel
353 and shared experiences of transition'. This overarching theme provided the context for three
354 other interwoven themes that form the structure of the analysis that follows: (a) initial
355 experiences of transition, (b) experiences of being a supporter, and (c) integrating experiences
356 into current life. Table 1 summarises these themes.

357 **Initial experiences of transition**

358 This theme refers to parents and partners' initial reactions to, and appraisals of, the
359 athletes' retirement, and the way that transition influenced their own sense of self.

360 **Appraisals and reactions.** All three of the parents, and three out of the four partners,
361 reported that the athletes experienced a difficult start to their transitions. Parents and partners
362 reported that this led to a difficult period for them and their relationship with the athletes as
363 they tried to make sense of changes in their own life. Parents and partners often experienced
364 intense emotional reactions to the athletes' retirement, including anger, sadness, and worry.
365 Parents, in particular, often experienced a sense of sadness and anger that the athlete's career
366 was ending, often in difficult circumstances. For example, in the quote below, James talks
367 about his experience when his daughter retired because she was not selected to compete at a
368 major event. James' emotional state at the time is reflected in his description of wanting to

369 find a physical outlet for his anger. Furthermore, during the interview itself, James seemed to
370 re-experience the same emotions as he described how he felt:

371

372 Her transition became really quite difficult quite quickly. It was very stressful for us
373 [James and his wife] as well to be honest. I felt angry, a lot, and sad...you just feel
374 duff...I didn't deal with it very well, what I wanted to do was go round and smack
375 one or two people in the mouth, but of course I couldn't do that...and then you start
376 thinking what the hell is she is going to do with her life, she'd given everything to her
377 sport for 17 years.

378

379 The apparent worry that James had about his daughter's future was also reflected in
380 the way that some of the partners of other former athletes discussed their experiences. All of
381 the partners were concerned about the future and what the former athlete would do for work.
382 Three partners reported that the athletes had been away for a significant part of the year when
383 they were training and competing and they seemed to be worried that the athlete's retirement
384 may disrupt their own lives. Despite having been together for many years, they anticipated
385 that they would need to get used to living with each other again. For example, Dani talked
386 about her partner's retirement after a 15 year career as an international athlete. The following
387 quote reflects how a phenomenon (in this case transition) can influence the way that people
388 reflect on the future and how this can shape their current experience.

389

390 **Interviewer:** What sort of emotions were you going through, what were you feeling
391 when Dave retired?

392 **Dani:** Just nervous I think...I thought he would find it very, very difficult because it
393 would be such a complete change of lifestyle and a completely different way of life. I

394 wondered what he would do for a job and about how it would be, him being at home
395 more, having had him not been at home very much.

396

397 **The impact of transition on the self.** Parents and partners were engaged in the
398 athletes' sporting careers by providing them with support and often sharing in their
399 experiences, including travelling to watch major events as the athletes progressed to
400 international level. Many of the parents and partners were invested in the athletes' career in a
401 deeply emotional way. They enjoyed the success that the athletes experienced during their
402 career, they felt part of that success, and sport became part of their own identity. Perhaps as a
403 consequence of developing an identity related to sport, when the athletes left their
404 competitive careers behind, parents and partners seemed to experience a transition of their
405 own. Here, Jo talks about what it was like when her partner retired. The use of the 'wave'
406 metaphor invokes a sense of excitement of being part of her partners' career, and some
407 sadness that this was no longer in her life.

408

409 I guess after a while I was like 'oh I really miss it' (being involved partners career),
410 because we were both then not doing anything. I guess I kind of rode the wave a little
411 bit myself and so I was like 'oh I really miss this'. I missed being part of that
412 environment.

413

414 The theme of loss was particularly prevalent for parents, as Jane describes:

415

416 It was hard because it had been a big part of our lives...we'd spent ten, fifteen years
417 of going to competitions and enjoying the success, it was a cut off for us as well. So it
418 was quite hard, it left a big gap in our lives really....it was just a void, you find things

419 eventually, it takes a few months or a couple of years and then, you know, your life
420 moves on.

421

422 It is interesting to note that Jane talks about her transition in terms of months and
423 years. This emphasises the often lengthy process of adjusting to the sense of loss that is
424 experienced when athletes retire. Similarly, Gill described her daughter's decision to retire as
425 like bereavement:

426

427 It was difficult for me to handle the fact that she said she was retiring. I didn't feel she
428 was ready to retire yet...so there was a period of difficulty and mourning for myself,
429 but at the same time I supported her decision to retire. She said 'would you be there,
430 would you support me?' I said 'yes I will be there and I will support you in every way
431 I can'.

432

433 The quote above highlights the difficulty and conflict that several of the parents and
434 partners experienced. They wanted to 'be there' for the former athlete, but they were also
435 trying to understand and make sense of their own transition. Negotiating this conflict proved
436 difficult for many parents and partners, as Gill described later in her account:

437

438 Having to deal with the things you are going through, that was the main thing, but it's
439 the pain that Helen went through too that I didn't fully understand. And at the same
440 time I didn't know what to say to make it better, because I didn't understand, I didn't
441 know how to deal with it myself.

442

443 **Experiences of being a supporter**

444 Parents and partners provided examples of the specific types of support that they
445 offered to the athletes to help them to deal with their transition. Their reports suggest,
446 however, that social support was not simply an exchange of resources, but was negotiated
447 according to the complex dynamics of each close relationship and the often challenging
448 context surrounding each transition.

449 **Providing support.** Emotional support was the most common type of support that
450 was provided by parents and partners, particularly in the early stages of transition, and was
451 offered in an effort to help athletes to deal with the shock, anger, and sense of loss that they
452 experienced. Usually this involved “just being there” (Gill), being “a shoulder to cry on”
453 (Tony), and being available to “sit down and talk” (Jane). For example, it was important for
454 James to let his daughter know that he loved and cared for her and to convey that his support
455 was unconditional:

456

457 ...just being there for her, you know, unconditional support and love, and reminding
458 her what she had achieved over her career and that we would help her find something
459 she really wanted to do and would be good at. I mean you just have to keep on
460 repeating that until she finds her way.

461

462 Parents and partners described how the athletes were often worried about money and
463 what they would do for work. Several parents and partners, including Emily, responded by
464 offering advice on career options and help in looking for work:

465

466 He's never been a paperwork man, ever. 'Cos he's obviously just got up and trained
467 all day. But all of a sudden he's having to fill in forms and do CV's and that kind of

468 thing, so I've tried to help him with that...I looked on the internet for jobs and things
469 for him, things he could do.

470

471 As transition progressed, social support often involved the athletes working together
472 with their parents and partners to understand the changes in their lives. This offered the
473 opportunity for disclosure, discussion of shared goals, and an emotional connection that
474 helped both parties to make sense of what was happening. This sense of togetherness seemed
475 to be helpful for both parties. Here, Dani discussed how she helped her partner to set up his
476 own business and how this helped her to understand what she wanted out of their new life:

477

478 ...I spent a period of time working for him and being a part of that business and
479 talking about it with him and helping him put it together...so some of that was kind
480 of, to a point, a joint venture...that's why I went back into [job role] because of what
481 he did. I helped him in terms of, I was interested in it and that was part of our
482 conversations about work, which kind of then led to 'right okay' that's something that
483 I want to go back into'. So it was good how work turned out.

484

485 **Negotiating support.** The interpersonal processes and relational dynamics involved
486 in transition were complex and not always easy for parents and partners to navigate. As
487 Emily put it, "it's just something that you muddle through". Some of the parents and partners
488 struggled to identify the appropriate type and amount of support to provide. They worried
489 about striking the right balance between being supportive and caring, and being honest and
490 realistic about what was happening. For example, despite wanting to provide unconditional
491 support to his daughter, James was concerned about giving her space so that she could work
492 through, and make sense of, her transition. Similarly, Jane provided emotional support to her

493 son but she was also worried about “molly coddling” a grown man. Most of the parents and
494 partners, in some way, felt uncertain and uneasy about their role as a supporter. For example,
495 Jo’s life with her partner had been structured around sport for over 10 years and she was
496 worried about how she would help her partner to negotiate transition. The quote below
497 suggests that Jo understood the changes that retirement would bring, but this gave rise to a
498 sense of uncertainty and worry around her perceived responsibility to provide support.

499

500 I was preparing myself to support in a very different way but I knew it was gonna be a
501 big void. It is a bit scary, you kind of think ‘God, how am I gonna fill that [void in
502 partner’s life]?’ Or, you know, all these evenings and all these afternoons that were
503 taken up with talking about training or ‘what are you doing tomorrow?’ What’s that
504 gonna be filled with now?

505

506 Tony also reported that he struggled to know how to help his partner after she retired
507 after a prolonged period of poor performances. He felt that this was made more difficult
508 because his partner did not know what she wanted from her life after sport:

509

510 I didn’t know what I was gonna do for her...she didn’t know what to do so she
511 couldn’t help me and say ‘do this and do that’ because she didn’t know what to do. I
512 felt like, I felt like [SIGH], I don’t know... I can encourage you to try different things
513 but at the end of the day I think it’s you that has to make that decision [on the next
514 steps in life].

515

516 The quote below from Emily reflects the complexity of all of the relationships; they
517 were dynamic, subject to stress, and often proved difficult to negotiate:

518

519 **Interviewer:** Did you think that you had a particular kind of role to play when he
520 retired?

521 **Emily:** Yeah, listen and try and give good advice...it was just a question of listening
522 to him really because he had an awful lot to say, bitterness more than anything...I
523 think it's hard when you retire. He's found it very difficult and he has taken it out on
524 us, he can be quite withdrawn at times, really moody. He was really moody to start
525 with, that's when I lost my temper with him, when he started taking it out on me and
526 the kids...that's when I got angry because it's not our fault, we tried to support him,
527 and I think I remember shouting at one point 'I'm sick of trying to be nice'.

528

529 Emily clearly saw that her role was to support her partner through a difficult time. She
530 appeared to be attentive to her partner's need to talk and was able to describe his feelings and
531 emotional state. However, there appeared to be a limit to her understanding and willingness
532 to help. She saw her partner's (depressed) mood as having a negative impact on their family
533 life and threatened to withdraw her support as a consequence.

534 **Burden and costs of being a supporter.** The stress and pressure associated with
535 having someone close to them make the transition out of elite sport often weighed heavily on
536 the parents and partners. For example, Gill described the difficulties that she experienced
537 trying to support her daughter while also struggling with her own transition. Her parental
538 instinct to protect seemed to come at a cost to her own wellbeing: "I have suffered with her
539 but she doesn't know I feel like that, she doesn't know because I don't get emotional with
540 her, I just let her tell me her emotions".

541 Partners who were living with the athletes seemed to find the day-to-day pressures of
542 transition particularly difficult to cope with. As Emily discussed:

543

544 It's been me that's suffered with the anxiety and depression, it's been me that's been
545 on the medication for it...because it's been a massive lifestyle change, massive,
546 everything's changed, everything changes but we are no different to anyone else that
547 loses a job or changes career so it's just one of those things.

548

549 Emily experienced changes as a result of her partner's retirement that felt
550 overwhelming and had severe consequences for her mental health. But in the quote above it
551 was interesting that she also normalised the experience, likening it to the experiences of other
552 people who have changed careers. This was a strategy that was used by some of the other
553 parents and partners and it could suggest a desire to reappraise the situation in an attempt to
554 reduce the emotional distress being experienced.

555 Jo also seemed to feel that supporting her partner came at a cost to her own sense of
556 self, with the consequence that she needed some time away, doing something completely
557 different, in order to get away from the stress and pressure of the experience of transition:

558

559 It was hard and that's one of the reasons that summer I went to start playing golf
560 because I just needed, I needed a separate outlook, and other people as well around
561 me that I could just go and spend time with, where I wasn't talking about Sam. I'd just
562 fully switch off...it was just kind of something completely different that was just
563 purely for myself.

564

565 **Integration of the experience into current life**

566 All of the parents and partners talked in some way about the longer term impact of the
567 athlete's career on their life and indicated that they were still working through many issues
568 related to their transition and that of the athlete.

569 **The ongoing process of transition.** Parents and partners' transitions often extended
570 over long periods and for many the process of adjustment seemed to be ongoing. In the quote
571 below, it appears that Gill is still trying to come to terms with her role in her daughter's
572 transitions, even several years after she retired. Gill feels a sense of guilt that she did not
573 support her daughter, and that her retirement was somehow failure on her part.

574

575 I felt I failed, and I still do. I feel there was a lot more for her to achieve, and that she
576 retired too soon. Perhaps I failed her somehow and perhaps I wasn't around enough to
577 ensure that she was happy during that period of time.

578

579 The partners of athletes were also dealing with issues and consequences related to the
580 athletes' retirement. In particular, they expressed ongoing worries about financial security
581 and had concerns about the athletes' career and relationship with work. For example, Emily
582 felt that her partner was not prepared for a career outside sport and that he fell into insecure
583 work as a result:

584

585 There's no, there's no career path for them once they've finished playing...you're on
586 your own so I think it's difficult...he wants me to work full time because I've only
587 ever worked part time, now he wants me to get a full time job to take some of the
588 pressure off him, he's always worrying about where the next bit of money's coming
589 from so we argue about that a lot.

590

591 Dani also expressed concerns about her partner's career.

592

593 I look at Dave and he has, he doesn't have a qualification but he has other experiences
594 and it's thinking where do those, what jobs do those kind of fit into? And still that 9-
595 to-5, will he ever fit into 9-to-5? Should he ever fit into 9-to-5? Could he ever work
596 for somebody else? And maybe that's just not what he's destined to do, and that he
597 carves a niche all the time with different things so he's, is he always kind of
598 transitioning and moving on? Has he found, even now, has he found what he will
599 continue to do? Does he know? Not quite sure.

600

601 The questions that Dani asked suggested that she was still wrestling with issues
602 around insecurity, despite her partner retiring some years previously. There was a sense that
603 Dani would like the security that would come if her partner had a 9-to-5 job, but she also
604 recognises that many years as an athlete might make this difficult for him. There is perhaps a
605 discrepancy between her ideal of a secure future and the reality that she faces and she
606 appeared to be consciously working through what this means for her. She raises the question
607 of how long transition should last and hints that it could be a never-ending process. This is
608 perhaps difficult for her as this would perhaps also mean a never-ending transition of her
609 own.

610 **Personal and relational growth.** Despite ongoing challenges, the passage of time
611 and the chance for reflection seemed to bring positive meaning to some parents and partners'
612 experiences and they expressed a sense of growth in themselves, the former athlete, and their
613 relationship. The quote below highlights both the meaning that Jo ascribes to her experience
614 of transition (i.e., a stronger relationship with her partner) and also the deliberate processes of

615 meaning-making that were used to attain and maintain this feeling. For example, a key part of
616 the strength of her relationship with her partner was being able to talk and communicate
617 openly with each other and putting time aside to be together:

618
619 We've only ever got closer and stronger cos we've been through so much together...
620 we spend a lot of time in a stressful environment...but we're very good at recognizing
621 when that happens [stress] and it only takes an evening of having a chat about it and
622 saying 'right let's look at the diary – we need to make sure we put some time aside
623 just for us', I guess just to remind yourself of what's important.

624
625 Sometimes parents and partners' positive feelings were tempered with sadness and/or
626 disappointment at how they handled the initial experience of transition. For example, Tony
627 said:

628
629 I wish I could have been more supportive and I could have helped her more but I
630 didn't know how to... my communication wasn't as good and that's why I think I
631 wasn't as supportive as I wish I could have...my communication now I think is much
632 better and we're always aware of each other.

633
634 This quote suggests that Tony had made sense of his perceived failure to support his
635 partner by attributing this to a lack of communication skills. He regretted not being able to
636 help and support his partner in the way that he perhaps could have, but Tony's (later)
637 understanding of these experiences facilitated a sense of personal and relational growth –
638 namely, that they are closer and stronger as a result of the experience.

639 James felt proud that his daughter had overcome the difficulties that she had
640 experienced after such a traumatic end to her career. His language in the quote below frames
641 the transition as a 'victory'; however, this was also tempered by negative feelings – namely, a
642 niggling sense of anger about what had happened:

643

644 I'm still angry about it, I mean we've all moved on but I'm still angry about it....
645 she's now moved on...she's now in a much better place, so in a sense she's won, so
646 she's come out the other side and despite what she was put through at the end of her
647 career she's come out on top.

648

649 This quote demonstrates the fine balance between positive and negative emotions
650 involved in meaning-making. James' view of his experience seems to be framed by the
651 meaning that he has derived from his daughter's success in life following her retirement from
652 sport. This enabled him to accept his anger and provides him with a sense of 'moving on'.

653

654

Discussion

655 The present research sought to explore the transition out of sport from the perspective
656 of parents and partners of former elite athletes. Our interpretation of the participants'
657 accounts position the transition out of sport as a process that not only impacts the athletes but
658 also people in their close social network. That is, the findings suggest that parents and
659 partners experienced their own transition when the athletes retired and the resulting changes
660 in their own life had a negative influence on their wellbeing. At times, parents and partners
661 also experienced difficulties in their relationships with the athletes, which reduced their
662 capacity and willingness to provide support.

663 Parents and partners experienced a range of powerful emotions during the initial stage
664 of transition, including sadness and anger at the circumstances surrounding the athlete's
665 retirement and anxiety about the future. Parents and partners also had to renegotiate a new
666 identity for themselves, manage changes in their close relationships, and deal with disruption
667 to their day-to-day life. Parents and partners both provided a range of different types of social
668 support to the athletes, but often felt the burden of being a supporter while also attempting to
669 manage their own transition. In many cases, parents and partners felt that transition was still
670 an ongoing process. However, despite some difficulties, many also saw positives in the way
671 that they had negotiated their transition, felt that they had learned something about
672 themselves, and experienced a sense of growth in their relationship with the former athlete.

673 Our findings suggest that the difficulties that parents and partners experienced were
674 often magnified because the majority of the athletes experienced a difficult start to their
675 transition. There is strong evidence to suggest that the extent to which athletes have control
676 over their decision to retire influences their subsequent adjustment to retirement (Park et al.,
677 2013). That is, athletes who retire for unplanned reasons such as injury or de-selection are
678 more likely to experience difficulties (Park et al.). Although the distinction between planned
679 and unplanned retirement was often blurred in the present research (e.g., one athlete pre-
680 empted the loss of funding, another retired due to a loss of form), parents and partners tended
681 to report that athletes typically struggled, regardless of the manner in which they retired.

682 The difficulties that athletes' experienced were often associated with a loss of self-
683 esteem, which appeared to be related to uncertainty around their sense of self. These feelings
684 of loss were mirrored by parents and partners, emphasising the idea that transition was a
685 shared experience. Parents, in particular, described feelings of loss in the initial stage of
686 transition and compared their experience to that of bereavement. This is similar to the way
687 that many former athletes have described their transition (e.g., McKenna & Thomas, 2008)

688 and also supports the findings of Lally and Kerr (2008) – the only other study to explore the
689 impact of transition on parents – who reported that the parents of retired gymnasts struggled
690 to fill the gap that their daughter's retirement left in their life, even many years after they had
691 retired.

692 The partners of former athletes also experienced change and loss, but in a different
693 way to that of parents. As the athletes were away training and competing for much of the
694 year, partners had developed their own careers, routines, and support networks. In many
695 ways, this was a necessity as the athlete's commitment to their sport meant that partners had
696 to adapt to a life where they saw the athlete fleetingly and at a time that suited the demands of
697 sport. Thus, the partners of athletes had led separate lives and therefore transition
698 fundamentally changed their relationships and the structure of their daily routines. Partners
699 lost a sense of familiarity in their lives that led to a related, but somewhat parallel, transition
700 to that experienced by the athlete. Partners often worried about money, their own career,
701 parenting, and adjusting to spending more time with the former athlete around. Partners also
702 experienced a loss of agency as they were no longer able to direct their own lives as they
703 struggled to deal with the changes that the athlete's retirement had instigated.

704 Previous studies on transition from elite sport have reported that some athletes
705 experiencing a difficult transition say that their parents and partners sometimes struggle to
706 support them (Brown et al., 2018; Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Gilmore, 2008). The present
707 research extends these findings by exploring the process from the perspective of parents and
708 partners directly and suggests that athletes' reports of absent, or ineffective, support may be
709 explained by what has been referred to as the 'dilemma of helping' (Coyne et al., 1990). That
710 is, supporters often find it difficult to balance their own needs at the same time as attending to
711 those of others. Research on life transitions outside of sport has found that supporters may
712 find it difficult to listen to, understand, and act on another person's distress while struggling

713 with their own difficulties (Harris, Pistrang, & Barker, 2006). This reflects the findings of the
714 present research which highlight the difficulties that some parents and partners faced when
715 trying to manage their own transition while attempting to help to the former athletes with
716 theirs.

717 This is not to say that parents and partners did not want to support the former athlete;
718 they often expressed a strong desire to provide help, but were concerned and worried about
719 the right course of action to take and many parents and partners felt ill-prepared to intervene.
720 Providing support was complicated because parents and partners were experiencing
721 disruptions to their own identity, uncertainty about the future, and often found it difficult to
722 understand what the former athlete wanted from their life after sport. Thus, trouble
723 communicating and difficulties managing expectations within the relationship posed
724 additional challenges to providing support. Furthermore, parents and partners' attempts to
725 provide support sometimes came at considerable cost to their own well-being. This finding is
726 consistent with research on social support in other contexts, which suggests that providing
727 social support to others can cause anxiety and distress as providers take on the burden of the
728 recipient's difficulties (Goldsmith, 1992; Wortman & Lehman, 1985).

729 Despite the challenges and uncertainty that parents and partners experienced, on the
730 whole they felt that they had played a positive role in the athletes' transitions. Effective
731 support seemed to be underpinned by a sense of trust, open communication, and the feeling
732 that parents, partners, and athletes were working through issues together. These factors
733 played a stronger role as transition progressed as opportunities for mutual disclosure became
734 more frequent. Research suggests that disclosing thoughts and emotions regarding a stressful
735 experience to a supportive other can facilitate post-traumatic growth (Prati & Pietrantoni,
736 2009). Furthermore, studies have found that self-disclosure can contribute to growth by
737 enhancing feelings of closeness in relationships (Manne et al., 2004) and can also help people

738 to form shared narratives of survival from which they draw further strength (Tedeschi &
739 Calhoun, 2004). Consistent with this idea, the findings of the present research suggest that, as
740 time went by, parents, partners, and the athletes came to see transition as a shared experience,
741 became more comfortable talking about issues that they were facing, and took comfort and
742 pride in the way that they had reorganized and renegotiated their lives together.

743 At a theoretical level, the present findings suggest that much can be learned by
744 examining the experience of transition from the perspective of those close to the person, as
745 well as from the perspective of the individual themselves. The majority of existing research
746 on the transition out of sport places relationships in the background, often characterising
747 relationships simply as resources that facilitate successful adjustment for the athlete. For
748 example, in describing social support as an 'available resource', Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994)
749 model of adaption to retirement locates the process of transition within the individual athlete.
750 This does not recognise the possibility that transition may be a shared experience that
751 involves changes in close relationships and has consequences for the athletes *and* for the
752 people in their close social networks. There is a need, therefore, for more complete
753 theoretical approaches that can help us to understand the complexity of the interpersonal
754 processes that are involved in the transition out of sport.

755 In this respect, family systems theory (Broderick, 1993) may offer a useful framework
756 through which to conduct further research. Family systems theory suggests that each family
757 member is part of an interdependent system. That is, when one family member experiences a
758 change in their life, the other family member(s) also experience a change in their life, and the
759 system as a whole changes (Broderick, 1993). This is the case for all types of relationships
760 within a system (Cox & Paley, 2003). As such, systems theory offers an overarching
761 framework to explore athletes' relationships with multiple different family members.

762 The most simple and fundamental unit in family systems theory is the relationship
763 between two people, for example, the relationship between romantic partners or a parent and
764 child (Brown, 1999). The findings of the present research support the basic premise of family
765 systems theory that suggests that the quality of these dyadic relationships, and their ability to
766 reorganise and adapt to change, is based on open communication, successful resolution of
767 conflict, and the reciprocal nature of social support (Cox & Paley, 2003). These
768 characteristics are important for athletes' relationships with both parents and partners. It is
769 important to acknowledge, however, that previous research has outlined that the nature of
770 romantic and parental relations differs in important ways, including the level of closeness and
771 intimacy within a relationship, style and strength of attachment, and sources of stress and
772 conflict (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Further research on the interpersonal aspects of
773 transition could, therefore, choose to focus more closely on dyadic 'sub-units' in athletes
774 social networks to take into account these differences, while at the same time recognising that
775 dyadic relationships form part of a larger, interconnected system.

776 The interconnected nature of relationships is emphasised in the family systems
777 concept of 'nonsummativity'. This suggests that the overall family system is more complex
778 than simply the sum of each family member's, or dyad's, experiences, behaviours, and
779 characteristics (Crittenden & Dallos, 2009). Thus, as well as looking at the interpersonal
780 aspects of transition at the 'micro level' (e.g., partner and parent dyads), future research may
781 also wish to explore athletes' overall network of social relationships that may include
782 partners and parents, as well as siblings, and children. Exploring transition in this way may
783 provide a way to investigate the complex interactions between the individual, dyadic, and
784 collective aspects of transition, as athletes and members of their close social network
785 negotiate complex emotions, competing aspirations, shared goals, and social support over an
786 extended period of time.

787 Limitations, future research, and implications for practice

788 The conclusions above should be taken in the context of a number of limitations to the
789 present research. First, it was only possible to conduct a single interview with each parent or
790 partner, which may not be sufficient to explore and understand the complex experiences that
791 are involved in transition. Furthermore, it is important to note that some of the parents and
792 partners became emotional during the interview and clearly found it difficult to revisit some
793 of their experiences. IPA relies on the participants' willingness to disclose and explore their
794 experiences and it is possible that some parents and partners were reluctant to do so in order
795 to avoid reliving any unpleasant emotions associated with their transition. Consequently,
796 interesting and meaningful experiences and narratives may have been lost. In order to address
797 these limitations, future research could consider longitudinal designs to explore patterns of
798 support as the process of retirement unfolds. This may also give the researcher the
799 opportunity to build rapport with participants and facilitate disclosure.

800 As previously discussed, a systems approach may be a useful theoretical framework
801 to inform the design and delivery of future research. Such a framework might point to the use
802 of dyadic (joint) interviews that invite parents, partners and athletes to explore their
803 experience(s) together in order to provide a more detailed understanding of transition out of
804 sport; ideally, within a longitudinal design as suggested above. A family systems/dyadic
805 approach may also be useful for designing interventions to support athletes and their
806 partner/parent during transition. According to theories and models of dyadic coping (e.g.,
807 Berg & Upchurch, 2007), people in close relationships interdependently and mutually
808 influence each other's adjustment to stress. In 'common dyadic coping' (Bodenmann, 1997)
809 both members of a partnership participate in the coping process in order to find problem-
810 focused or emotion-focused solutions to stressful situations. On the basis of evidence that
811 couples experiencing a life transition are more likely to maintain the quality of their

812 relationship and their own wellbeing if they engage in common dyadic coping (Rottmann et
813 al., 2015), interventions designed to promote adjustment during transition could aim to
814 support athletes *and* those close to them through, for example, joint problem solving, joint
815 information seeking, self-disclosure and sharing of emotions. Such interventions may help
816 athletes and their parents or partners to recognise the personal and shared aspects of transition
817 and help them to work through issues together for the benefit of all those involved.

818 Dyadic interventions could be integrated into existing programs designed to support
819 transition. Current career transition programs have traditionally been aimed at developing
820 social, educational, and career-related skills and tend to focus on the development of
821 transferable skills that can help athletes to transition from sport into a new career (Park,
822 Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Transition programs also include support and counselling
823 components (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), but the present findings would suggest that this
824 multidimensional approach could be strengthened by including a greater focus on the
825 relational aspects of transition, the shared challenges that athletes and family members face,
826 and the potential for joint coping efforts.

827 **Conclusion**

828 The present research used an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore
829 parents and partners' experiences of athletes' transition out of elite sport, and so provided
830 insights into the interpersonal nature of the transition. In particular, parents and partners often
831 experienced uncertainty and upheaval in their own lives as they adjusted to changing roles
832 and dynamics in their relationship with the former athlete and renegotiated their own identity.
833 The process of providing support to the former athlete was complicated by parents and
834 partners' own difficulties during transition and they often felt unsure about their role as a
835 supporter. Most parents and partners felt that, to some extent, their transition was still an
836 ongoing process. However, opportunities for mutual disclosure and sharing emotions

837 increased as time went by and this helped parents and partners to gain a positive perspective
838 on the transition and a sense that their relationship with the former athlete had strengthened
839 and grown. Taken together, these findings highlight the way that the transition out of sport
840 can be explored at the level of the family or partnership and presents a more complex
841 conceptual view that may offer a basis for future research.

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