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26 particular, relationships have long been considered to be of central importance to the quality  
27 of transitions that people experience (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). For example, research on  
28 the transition to retirement in later life has found that better quality relationships are  
29 associated with greater satisfaction with retirement (Sherry, Tomlinson, Loe, Johnston, &  
30 Feeney, 2017).

31 Transitions can also be shared experiences, with research highlighting how one  
32 individual's transition can influence the lives of others (Holdworth, 2004). For example,  
33 being made redundant from a job or a child leaving the family home may not only have an  
34 impact on those experiencing the transition directly, but also those people with whom they  
35 share close social bonds (e.g., Doiron & Mendolia, 2012). Despite these findings, there is  
36 little understanding of how the transition out of sport is experienced by people who share  
37 close relationships with athletes. This represents a significant gap in knowledge and more  
38 research into the interpersonal nature of close relationships may help to further understand  
39 the process of transition and associated outcomes.

40 The research that has addressed interpersonal aspects of transition has tended to  
41 concentrate on athletes' appraisals of the availability and quality of social support (see Park et  
42 al., 2013, for a review). Close family members, particularly parents and partners, are often an  
43 athlete's most important source of support and, in general, athletes who feel supported by  
44 parents and partners during their transition find it easier to adjust to the changes that they  
45 experience (Gilmore, 2008; Park et al., 2013). However, some athletes suggest that support  
46 from parents and partners can vary in quality and not all athletes feel that they receive the  
47 support that they need (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Lagimodiere & Strachan, 2015).  
48 Furthermore, there is evidence that the changes that athletes experience during transition can  
49 lead to difficulties in their close relationships (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004). For example, athletes

50 have reported tension and conflict in their relationships because they perceived that close  
51 others did not understand what they are going through (Brown et al., 2018).

52         There is strong evidence to suggest that parents and partners play an important role in  
53 the process of transition (Brown et al., 2018); however, there is little research on how parents  
54 and partners experience the process of providing support and how this may influence their  
55 wider experience of transition. Research outside sport suggests that people often face a  
56 number of challenges when they provide social support, including feeling anxious about their  
57 role and the possibility of giving inappropriate or ineffective support (Goldsmith, 1992).  
58 Providers of support can also experience deterioration in their own wellbeing as they take on  
59 the burden of the recipient's difficulties or distress (Coyne, Ellard, & Smith, 1990). These  
60 factors may act as barriers to parents and partners' ability or willingness to offer appropriate  
61 support to athletes during transition. Furthermore, this may lead to significant relational  
62 challenges that could have a negative impact on the experience of transition for both parties.  
63 Indeed, athletes have reported tension and conflict in their relationships because they felt that  
64 family members did not understand what they are going through (Fortunato & Marchant,  
65 1999).

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

75 important information about the challenges that close family members may face during  
76 transition.

77         Despite making a significant contribution to understanding relational aspects of  
78 transition, Lally and Kerr's (2008) study only focused on the parents of athletes. However,  
79 research suggests that other family members, particularly spouses/partners, can also play an  
80 important role in the process (Brown et al., 2018; Chow, 2001). Although athlete-parent and  
81 athlete-partner relationships may differ in fundamental ways, exploring these relationships in  
82 a single study provides the opportunity to further explore the relational aspects of transition,  
83 identify similarities and differences in the experiences of parents and partners, and develop a  
84 more holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Noohi, Peyrovi, Goghary, & Kazemi,  
85 2016).

86         Furthermore, Lally and Kerr's (2008) study largely focused on parents' responses to  
87 their daughters' retirement. There is still considerable scope, therefore, to explore the  
88 interpersonal processes involved in transition. In this respect, an interpretive  
89 phenomenological approach (e.g., Smith, 1996) might be of potential benefit. The  
90 phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity, in particular, can help to understanding how  
91 shared experiences are characterised by interactive meaning-making that is co-created (De  
92 Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007). In addition, the phenomenological focus on agency and identity  
93 can expand our understanding of the personal meaning that transition can have for parents  
94 and partners and positions them as important participants in the phenomenon, worthy of study  
95 in their own right.

## 96 **The present research**

97         The purpose of the present research was to build on the limited research on parents  
98 and partners' experiences of the transition out of elite sport. Specifically, an interpretive  
99 phenomenological approach was used to explore the interpersonal nature of transition and the

100 way(s) that retirement from sport can affect close relationships. Furthermore, the present  
101 research aimed to understand how parents and partners of athletes managed and interpreted  
102 their role in the process of transition, including their possible role as providers of support.

### 103 **Method**

#### 104 **Methodology and philosophical underpinning**

105 The study was designed and conducted according to the principles of interpretive  
106 phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996). IPA shares philosophical assumptions with  
107 critical realism (Fadé, 2004). The present research was conducted, therefore, from an  
108 ontological perspective that recognises a pre-existing 'real' world but acknowledges that it is  
109 impossible to describe objective reality (Danermark, Ekstrom, & Jacobsen, 2005). Rather, the  
110 aim is to explore and understand the nature of subjective experience and how people make  
111 sense of that experience as they engage with a pre-existing world (Smith, 1996; Smith,  
112 Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As a result, the present research was conducted from a perspective  
113 that is congruent with epistemological relativism (Willig, 2016).

114 IPA is grounded in hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenology and views language  
115 as important for describing and understanding the meaning of experience. Furthermore,  
116 interpreting experience involves a 'double hermeneutic' process whereby the researcher is  
117 attempting to understand the participant's attempt to make sense of their world (Smith et al.,  
118 2009). Findings are, therefore, the researchers' interpretation of the participants' experiences.  
119 IPA was considered appropriate for investigating parents and partners' experiences of the  
120 transition out of sport because it draws on a phenomenological philosophy that seeks to  
121 explore the intersubjective nature of the world as experiences unfold over time (Smith et al.,  
122 2009). Thus, IPA was used to explore the interpersonal nature of social relationships during  
123 the process of transition.

#### 124 **Participants**

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

134 Four long-term partners of former athletes (one male and three females) aged between  
135 30 and 47 ( $M = 37.75$ ,  $SD = 6.95$ ) and three parents (one male and two females) aged  
136 between 55 and 67 ( $M = 60.66$ ,  $SD = 7.50$ ) volunteered to take part in the research. The  
137 former athletes had all competed at an international level for between 5 and 15 years ( $M =$   
138  $12.50$ ,  $SD = 3.88$ ). At the time of the interviews with their parents and partners, the former  
139 athletes had been retired for between 3 and 12 years ( $M = 6.42$ ,  $SD = 3.90$ ).

#### 140 **Procedure**

141 Following institutional ethical approval, former athletes were contacted through social  
142 media and the authors' existing contacts. The aims of the study were discussed and the  
143 former athletes were asked to think of a family member who had played an important role in  
144 their transition and to provide permission for us to invite the nominated person to take part in  
145 the study. Not all of the former athletes who were contacted wished to invite someone to  
146 participate. Also, several parents and partners who were approached declined to take part. In  
147 these cases, the former athletes and/or their parents and partners said that they wished this  
148 time to remain private, did not want to revisit a difficult time in their lives, and/or felt that  
149 discussing issues around transition may cause some distress. Three of the former athletes who

150 were contacted participated in research that has been reported in another publication (see  
151 Brown et al., 2018). Interviews were conducted with the nominated parent or partner who  
152 agreed to take part. Face-to-face interviews were used because IPA is well suited to methods  
153 that provide participants with the opportunity to offer in-depth, first person accounts of their  
154 experience (Smith et al., 2009). All of the interviews were conducted by the first author using  
155 a semi-structured interview schedule.

156 Guidelines on conducting interviews from a phenomenological perspective (e.g.,  
157 Bevan, 2014; Smith et al., 2009) were used to develop questions to explore the context,  
158 structure, and meaning of participants' experiences. For example, participants were asked:  
159 "Can you tell me about (athlete's name) sporting career?", "Can you tell me about the  
160 circumstances surrounding (athlete's name) retirement?", and "Can you tell me about what it  
161 was like for you when (athlete's name) retired?" Although an interview schedule was used, it  
162 was implemented in an open and flexible way and participants were encouraged to lead the  
163 interview by discussing experiences and issues that were most pertinent to them. Participants  
164 were interviewed for between 70 and 95 minutes ( $M = 83.57$ ,  $SD = 7.74$ ) and the interviews  
165 were transcribed verbatim. Participants and the athletes with whom they were associated  
166 were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

### 167 **Data analysis**

168 The readings of the transcripts were informed by interpretive phenomenological  
169 philosophy including concepts related to agency, identity, intersubjectivity, and the  
170 processual nature of experience (Ashworth, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). These concepts became  
171 more prominent during the latter stages of analysis in which the researchers engaged in a  
172 reflexive 'dialogue' between their psychological knowledge and the data to gain the  
173 interpretive analysis that is crucial to IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

174 Analysis of the transcripts followed the guidelines described by Smith et al. (2009). A  
175 particular feature of IPA is its commitment to idiographic enquiry; therefore, the analysis was  
176 conducted on each case separately before conducting a cross-case analysis. The first stage of  
177 the analysis involved reading each transcript several times before a detailed set of notes and  
178 comments were recorded to capture salient features of the account. Notes focused on  
179 describing the experiential content of the account, the language that was used by the  
180 participant, and conceptual interpretations that aimed to provide a deeper understanding of  
181 the meaning that was attached to each person's experience.

182 These notes were used to develop emergent themes that served to condense the data  
183 and capture the structure of the participant's account. Next, a process of abstracting and  
184 subsuming the themes enabled them to be clustered together to form superordinate themes  
185 that represented shared meaning or a central concept. This cross-case analysis identified  
186 patterns, similarities, and differences across the themes and superordinate themes for each  
187 participant that were used to develop higher-order concepts. The aim was to provide a  
188 coherent account of the data but still maintain the idiographic focus that is central to IPA.

189 Writing up the final analysis also formed a key part of the analytical process as it  
190 facilitated a deeper engagement with the participants' accounts and enabled further  
191 interpretation of the data. In line with the philosophy of IPA, the accounts were co-  
192 constructed between researcher and participants and the final report represents the  
193 researchers' interpretations of the experience of transition for these participants (Smith et al.,  
194 2009). Our claims, therefore, should be regarded as tentative, rather than a 'true' account of  
195 parents and partners' experiences of transition.

### 196 **Research quality and methodological rigor**

197 The present research draws on a pluralistic and flexible stance for assessing the  
198 quality of research, rather than a defined 'checklist' applicable to all qualitative research

199 (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, we aimed to maintain the quality of this research by  
200 considering the criteria developed by Smith (2011) for evaluating research using IPA. These  
201 criteria suggest that 'good' IPA research is that which is faithful to the theoretical principles  
202 of the approach, is rigorous and transparent in the design and delivery of the study, offers a  
203 focussed and in-depth analysis of a specific topic, and provides sufficient evidence for each  
204 theme through appropriate sampling of extracts. We therefore selected an appropriate sample  
205 for the aims of the research, developed meticulous data collection and analysis procedures,  
206 and carefully selected the extracts chosen to evidence our analytical claims. Specifically, a  
207 research diary (anonymised extracts of which are available on request) was kept by the first  
208 author to document analytical decisions and to facilitate a reflexive approach to the research.  
209 This helped to highlight any prior assumptions and ideas about the research topic and any  
210 emotional reactions to the data during collection and analysis. The primary analysis  
211 conducted by the first author was then 'audited', with the other authors acting as 'critical  
212 friends' (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this respect, the other authors read and, in some  
213 cases, coded transcripts; discussed the context and meaning of the transcripts; and helped to  
214 develop themes, the structure of the cross-case analysis, and this report of the findings.

## 215 **Results**

216 The present research sought to explore the experience of transition out of elite sport  
217 from the perspective of the parents and partners of athletes, rather than the athletes  
218 themselves. However, we start by providing some description of the athletes' experience, as  
219 described by their parents and partners, in order to provide context. Athletes' experiences of  
220 transition were idiosyncratic and their reactions to retirement depended on the specific  
221 circumstances that surrounded their exit from elite sport. However, there were several  
222 common features of athletes' transitions that related to issues such as disruption of identity,  
223 loss of self-esteem, difficulties establishing a new career, and the changing nature of their

224 relationship with their parents and partners. Many of these have been described in previous  
225 research focusing on athletes' experience of transition (e.g., Park et al., 2013) and so here we  
226 focus on the experience of transition from the perspective of the parents and partners of the  
227 athletes.

228         The changes and difficulties in the athletes' lives meant that parents and partners  
229 experienced changes in their own lives that were often difficult to navigate. In effect, parents  
230 and partners experienced their own transition. At times, parents and partners felt that their  
231 relationship with the athlete was distant or detached, with each person in the relationship  
232 experiencing a similar, but somewhat separate transition. However, parents and partners also  
233 described times when they felt close to the athlete and transition seemed to be more of a  
234 shared experience. During these times, they worked through challenges together and parents  
235 and partners were willing and able to offer support to the athlete. This interpretation of the  
236 parents and partners' accounts is captured by an overarching theme that was labelled 'parallel  
237 and shared experiences of transition'. This overarching theme provided the context for three  
238 other interwoven themes that form the structure of the analysis that follows: (i) initial  
239 experiences of transition, (ii) experiences of being a supporter, and (iii) integrating  
240 experiences into current life. Table 1 summarises these themes.

#### 241 **Initial experiences of transition**

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

244         **Appraisals and reactions.** Six parents and partners reported that the athletes  
245 experienced a difficult start to their transitions. Parents and partners reported that this led to a  
246 difficult period for them and their relationship with the athletes as they tried to make sense of  
247 changes in their own life. Parents and partners often experienced intense emotional reactions  
248 to the athletes' retirement, including anger, sadness, and worry. Parents, in particular, often

249 experienced a sense of sadness and anger that the athlete's career was ending, often in  
250 difficult circumstances. For example, in the quote below, James talks about his experience  
251 when his daughter retired because she was not selected to compete at a major event. James'  
252 emotional state at the time is reflected in his description of wanting to find a physical outlet  
253 for his anger. Furthermore, during the interview itself, James seemed to re-experience the  
254 same emotions as he described how he felt:

255

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

262

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

273

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

276 **Dani:** Just nervous I think...I thought he would find it very, very difficult because it  
277 would be such a complete change of lifestyle and a completely different way of life. I  
278 wondered what he would do for a job and about how it would be, him being at home  
279 more, having had him not been at home very much.

280

281 **The impact of transition on the self.** Parents were fully engaged in the athletes'  
282 sporting careers by providing them with support and sharing in their experiences. They were  
283 also often invested in the athletes' careers in a financial way – for example, paying for travel  
284 to competitions in the early days and travelling to watch major events as the athletes  
285 progressed to international level. Parents were also invested in an emotional way. They  
286 enjoyed the success that the athletes experienced during their career, they felt part of that  
287 success, and sport became part of their own identity. Perhaps as a consequence of developing  
288 an identity related to sport, when the athletes left their competitive careers behind, parents  
289 seemed to experience a transition of their own. Here, Jane describes what it was like for her  
290 and her husband when their son retired:

291

292 It was hard because it had been a big part of our lives...we'd spent ten, fifteen years  
293 of going to competitions and enjoying the success, it was a cut off for us as well. So it  
294 was quite hard, it left a big gap in our lives really....it was just a void, you find things  
295 eventually, it takes a few months or a couple of years and then, you know, your life  
296 moves on...he starts to forge his own life, he'd gone to live with his girlfriend, and  
297 things change.

298

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

303

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

309

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

314

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

319

### 320 **Experiences of being a supporter**

321           Parents and partners provided examples of the specific types of support that they  
322 offered to the athletes to help them to deal with their transition. Their reports suggest,  
323 however, that social support was not simply an exchange of resources, but was negotiated

324 according to the complex dynamics of each close relationship and the often challenging  
325 context surrounding each transition.

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

333

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

338

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

342

343         He's never been a paperwork man, ever. 'Cos he's obviously just got up and trained  
344 all day. But all of a sudden he's having to fill in forms and do CV's and that kind of  
345 thing, so I've tried to help him with that...I looked on the internet for jobs and things  
346 for him, things he could do.

347

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

354

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

361

362           **Negotiating support.** The interpersonal processes and relational dynamics involved  
363 in transition were complex and not always easy for parents and partners to navigate. As  
364 Emily put it, "it's just something that you muddle through". Some of the parents and partners  
365 struggled to identify the appropriate type and amount of support to provide. They were  
366 sometimes worried about striking the right balance between being supportive and caring, and  
367 being honest and realistic about what was happening. For example, despite wanting to  
368 provide unconditional support to his daughter, James was concerned about giving her space  
369 so that she could work through, and make sense of, her transition. Similarly, Jane provided  
370 emotional support to her son but she was also worried about "molly coddling" a grown man.

371

372           Most of the parents and partners, in some way, felt uncertain and uneasy about their  
role as a supporter. For example, Jo's life with her partner had been structured around sport

373 for over 10 years and she was worried about how she would help her partner to negotiate  
374 transition. The quote below suggests that Jo understands the changes that retirement will  
375 bring, but this gives rise to a sense of uncertainty and worry around her perceived  
376 responsibility to provide support.

377

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

383

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

387

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

393

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

396

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

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

406

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

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

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

421

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

426

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

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

436

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

442

### 443 **Integration of the experience into current life**

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

447           **The ongoing process of transition.** Parents and partners' transitions often extended  
448 over long periods and many viewed the process of adjustment as something that was ongoing.  
449 The partners of athletes, in particular, expressed worries about financial security and had  
450 concerns about the athletes' career and relationship with work. For example, Emily felt that  
451 her partner (the former athlete) was not prepared for a career outside sport and that he fell  
452 into insecure work as a result:

453

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

459

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

461

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

469

470           The questions that Dani asked suggested that she was still wrestling with issues  
471 around insecurity, despite her partner retiring some years previously. There was a sense that

472 Dani would like the security that would come if her partner had a 9-to-5 job, but she also  
473 recognises that many years as an athlete might make this difficult for him. There is perhaps a  
474 discrepancy between her ideal of a secure future and the reality that she faces and she  
475 appeared to be consciously working through what this means for her. She raises the question  
476 of how long transition should last and hints that it could be a never-ending process. This is  
477 perhaps difficult for her as this would perhaps also mean a never-ending transition of her  
478 own.

479 **Personal and relational growth.** Despite ongoing challenges, the passage of time  
480 and the chance for reflection seemed to bring positive meaning to some parents and partners'  
481 experiences and they expressed a sense of growth in themselves, the former athlete, and their  
482 relationship. The quote below highlights both the meaning that Jo ascribes to her experience  
483 of transition (i.e., a stronger relationship with her partner) and also the deliberate processes of  
484 meaning-making that were used to attain and maintain this feeling. For example, a key part of  
485 the strength of her relationship with her partner was being able to talk and communicate  
486 openly with each other and putting time aside to be together:

487  
488 We've only ever got closer and stronger cos we've been through so much together...  
489 we spend a lot of time in a stressful environment...but we're very good at recognizing  
490 when that happens [stress] and it only takes an evening of having a chat about it and  
491 saying 'right let's look at the diary – we need to make sure we put some time aside  
492 just for us', I guess just to remind yourself of what's important.

493  
494 Sometimes parents and partners' positive feelings were tempered with sadness and/or  
495 disappointment at how they handled the initial experience of transition. For example, Tony  
496 said:

497

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

502

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

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

512

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

517

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

522

**Discussion**

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

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

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Our finding suggests that the difficulties that parents and partners experienced were often magnified because the majority of the athletes experienced a difficult start to their transition. There is strong evidence to suggest that the extent to which athletes have control over their decision to retire influences their subsequent adjustment to retirement (Park et al., 2013). That is, athletes who retire for unplanned reasons such as injury or de-selection are more likely to experience difficulties (Park et al.). Although the distinction between planned

547 and unplanned retirement was often blurred in the present research (e.g., one athlete pre-  
548 empted the loss of funding, another retired due to a loss of form), parents and partners tended  
549 to report that athletes typically struggled, regardless of the manner in which they retired.

550         The difficulties that athletes' experienced were often associated with a loss of self-  
551 esteem, which appeared to be related to uncertainty around their sense of self. These feelings  
552 of loss were mirrored by parents and partners, emphasising the idea that transition was a  
553 shared experience. Parents, in particular, described feelings of loss in the initial stage of their  
554 transition and compared their experience to that of bereavement. This is similar to the way  
555 that many former athletes have described their transition (e.g., McKenna & Thomas, 2008)  
556 and also supports the findings of Lally and Kerr (2008) – the only other study to explore the  
557 impact of transition on parents directly – who reported that the parents of retired gymnasts  
558 struggled to fill the gap that their daughter's retirement left in their life, even many years after  
559 they had retired.

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

572 Previous studies on transition have reported that some athletes experiencing a difficult  
573 transition say that their parents and partners sometimes struggle to support them (Brown et  
574 al., 2018; Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Gilmore, 2008). The present research extends these  
575 findings by exploring the process from the perspective of parents and partners directly and  
576 suggests that athletes' reports of absent, or ineffective, support may be explained by what has  
577 been referred to as the 'dilemma of helping' (Coyne et al., 1990). That is, supporters often  
578 find it difficult to balance their own needs at the same time as attending to those of others.  
579 Research on life transitions outside of sport has found that supporters may find it difficult to  
580 listen to, understand, and act on another person's distress while struggling with their own  
581 difficulties (Harris, Pistrang, & Barker, 2006). This reflects the findings of the present  
582 research which highlight the difficulties that some parents and partners faced when trying to  
583 manage their own transition while attempting to help to the former athletes with theirs.

584 This is not to say that parents and partners did not want to support the former athlete;  
585 they often expressed a strong desire to provide help, but were concerned and worried about  
586 the right course of action to take and many parents and partners felt ill-prepared to intervene.  
587 Providing support was complicated because parents and partners were experiencing  
588 disruptions to their own identity, uncertainty about the future, and often found it difficult to  
589 understand what the former athlete wanted from their life after sport. Thus, trouble  
590 communicating and difficulties managing expectations within the relationship posed  
591 additional challenges to providing support. Furthermore, parents and partners' attempts to  
592 provide support sometimes came at considerable cost to their own well-being. This finding is  
593 consistent with research on social support outside sport, which suggests that providing social  
594 support to others can cause anxiety and distress as providers take on the burden of the  
595 recipient's difficulties (Goldsmith, 1992; Wortman & Lehman, 1985).

596           Despite the challenges and uncertainty that parents and partners experienced, they felt  
597 that they had played a positive role in the athletes' transitions. Effective support seemed to be  
598 underpinned by a sense of trust, open communication, and the feeling that parents, partners,  
599 and athletes were working through issues together. These factors played a stronger role as  
600 transition progressed as opportunities for mutual disclosure became more frequent. Research  
601 suggests that disclosing thoughts and emotions regarding a stressful experience to a  
602 supportive other can facilitate post-traumatic growth (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009).  
603 Furthermore, studies have found that self-disclosure can contribute to growth by enhancing  
604 feelings of closeness in relationships (Manne et al., 2004) and can also help people to form  
605 shared narratives of survival from which they draw further strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun,  
606 2004). Consistent with this idea, the findings of the present research suggest that, as time  
607 went by, parents, partners, and the athletes experienced growth because they came to see  
608 transition as a shared experience, became more comfortable talking about issues that they  
609 were facing, and took comfort and pride in the way that they had reorganized and  
610 renegotiated their lives together.

611           At a theoretical level, the present findings suggest that much can be learned by  
612 examining the experience of transition from the perspective of those close to the person, as  
613 well as from the perspective of the individual themselves. The majority of existing research  
614 on the transition out of sport places relationships in the background, often characterising  
615 relationships simply as resources that facilitates successful adjustment for the athlete. For  
616 example, in describing social support as an 'available resource', Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994)  
617 model of adaption to retirement locates the process of transition within the individual athlete.  
618 This does not recognise the possibility that transition may be a shared experience that  
619 involves changes in close relationships and has consequences for the athletes and for the  
620 people in their close social networks. There is a need, therefore, for more complete

621 theoretical approaches that can help us to understand the complexity of the interpersonal  
622 processes that are involved in the transition out of sport.

623 In this respect, family systems theory (Broderick, 1993) may offer a useful framework  
624 through which to conduct further research. Family systems theory suggests that each family  
625 member is part of an interdependent system. That is, when one family member experiences a  
626 change in their life, the other family member(s) also experience a change in their life, and the  
627 system as a whole also changes (Broderick, 1993). Furthermore, family systems theory  
628 describes the concept of 'nonsummativity', which suggests that the overall family system is  
629 more complex than simply the sum of each family member's individual experiences,  
630 behaviours, and characteristics (Crittenden & Dallos, 2009). Thus, exploring transition from a  
631 systems approach may provide a way to investigate the complex interactions involving the  
632 individual and collective aspects of transition as athletes and members of their close social  
633 network negotiate complex emotions, competing aspirations, shared goals, and social support  
634 over an extended period of time.

### 635 **Limitations, future research, and implications for practice**

636 It is important to recognise the limitations of the present research. First, it was only  
637 possible to conduct a single interview with each parent or partner, which may not be  
638 sufficient to explore and understand the complex experiences that are involved in transition.  
639 Furthermore, it is important to note that some of the parents and partners became emotional  
640 during the interview and it was clearly difficult to revisit some of their experiences. IPA  
641 relies on the participants' willingness to disclose and explore their experiences and it is  
642 possible that some parents and partners were reluctant to do so in order to avoid reliving any  
643 unpleasant emotions associated with their transition. Consequently, interesting and  
644 meaningful experiences and narratives may have been lost. In order to address these  
645 limitations, future research could consider longitudinal designs to explore patterns of support

646 as the process of retirement unfolds. This may also give the researcher the opportunity to  
647 build rapport with participants and facilitate disclosure.

648         As previously discussed, a systems approach may be a useful theoretical framework  
649 to inform the design and delivery of future research. Such a framework might point to the use  
650 of dyadic (joint) interviews that invite parents, partners and athletes to explore their  
651 experience(s) together in order to provide a more detailed understanding of transition out of  
652 sport.; ideally, within a longitudinal design as suggested above. A family systems/dyadic  
653 approach may also be useful for designing interventions to support athletes and their  
654 partner/parent during transition. According to theories and models of dyadic coping (e.g.,  
655 Berg & Upchurch, 2007), people in close relationships interdependently and mutually  
656 influence each other's adjustment to stress. In 'common dyadic coping' (Bodenmann, 1997)  
657 both members of a partnership participate in the coping process equally in order to find  
658 problem-focused or emotion-focused solutions to stressful situations. On the basis of  
659 evidence that couples experiencing a life transition are more likely to maintain the quality of  
660 their relationship and their own wellbeing if they engage in common dyadic coping  
661 (Rottmann et al., 2015), interventions designed to promote adjustment during transition could  
662 aim to support athletes and those close to them to engage in common dyadic coping through,  
663 for example, joint problem solving, joint information seeking, self-disclosure and sharing of  
664 emotions. Such interventions may help athletes and their parents or partners to recognise the  
665 personal and shared aspects of transition and help them to work through issues together for  
666 the benefit of all those involved.

667         Dyadic interventions could be integrated into existing programs designed to support  
668 transition. Current career transition programs have traditionally been aimed at developing  
669 social, educational, and career-related skills and tend to focus on the development of  
670 transferable skills that can help athletes to transition from sport into a new career (Park,

671 Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Transition programs also include support and counselling  
672 components (Wylleman & Lavalle, 2004), but the present findings would suggest that this  
673 multidimensional approach could be strengthened by including a greater focus on the  
674 relational aspects of transition, the shared challenges that athletes and family members face,  
675 and the potential for joint coping efforts.

## 676 **Conclusion**

677         The present research used an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore  
678 parents and partners' experiences of athletes' transition out of elite sport, and so provided  
679 insights into the interpersonal nature of the transition. In particular, parents and partners often  
680 experienced uncertainty and upheaval in their own lives as they adjusted to changing roles  
681 and dynamics in their relationship with the former athlete and renegotiated their own identity.  
682 The process of providing support to the former athlete was complicated by parents and  
683 partners' own difficulties during transition and they often felt unsure about their role as a  
684 supporter. Most parents and partners felt that, to some extent, their transition was still an  
685 ongoing process. However, opportunities for mutual disclosure and sharing emotions  
686 increased as time went by and this helped parents and partners to gain a positive perspective  
687 on their transition and a sense that their relationship with the former athlete had strengthened  
688 and grown. Taken together, these findings highlight the way that the transition out of sport  
689 can be explored at the level of the family or partnership and presents a more complex  
690 conceptual view that may offer a basis for future research.

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