

Finding Empowerment in Transition: Advice from Former Female Athletes

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Abstract

Female athletes undergoing their transition away from collegiate sport often face an immense intrapersonal obstacle that exists at the intersection of various societal expectations, social comparisons, loss of identity, and drastic change in routine and social circles (Hardie et al. 2022). The combination of these challenges and expectations can lead to a myriad of mental and physical health issues (Buckley et al., 2019). And while the struggle these women face becomes increasingly well known, there remains a noteworthy lack of institutional support provided to athletes during their competitive years, in their transition window, and in the post-career phase (Oshiro et al., 2023). Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify ways in which female athletes can take more agency in mitigating the challenges of their transition when institutions fail them.

Using Zimmerman's (1995) psychological empowerment model and Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, participant responses were examined to identify how empowerment is achieved and/or regained by former female athletes at the intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral levels (Zimmerman, 1995). Further, using Schlossberg's (1981) theory we consider individual characteristics, characteristics of the transition environment, and adaptations to the transition that are nuanced and particular to the experience of former female athletes. The integration of this theoretical framework allows for novel insight to the process of achieving empowerment for former female athletes in transition.

A purposive criterion sample of 19 former female athletes participated in 60-90 minute, semi-structured interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Participants were required to meet the following criteria: (a) they identified as a female, (b) they are a former NCAA athlete, and (c) they are not currently pursuing professional sports opportunities. Data analysis was inductive and thematic, open-coding was used to analyze the raw data before collapsing codes and identifying (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research question was as follows: What advice would you give to a current female athlete, who is approaching her transition away from collegiate and competitive sport?

Results showed athletes need to reach a state of Acceptance regarding the end of their competitive careers, as soon as possible. This Acceptance is key as it helps athletes best pursue the next steps for empowerment in retirement, which is to Be Proactive in devising a new plan of action once their career comes to an end. Next, former female athletes insist that women "Don't Completely Stop", "Don't Go Cold Turkey" in their athletic participation and

exercise routines, as it further exacerbates body image issues and identity loss. While continuing some level of engagement in physical activity, participants recommend that women Embrace Rebuilding Your Identity – which involves sub-themes suggesting that women should Find What Makes You Happy and Pursue It, Find an Outlet for Your Competitive Spirit, and Remember You are More than Just Your Body. Lastly, despite the effectiveness that may result from these steps, participants acknowledge that no matter what one does, this transition is difficult. One of the best ways to mitigate the challenges of this transition is to Talk to Others, whether that is a professional counselor, former teammates, or peers going through a similar transition. Both theoretical and practical implications have been identified.