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Forced Retirement Transition: A Narrative Case Study of an Elite Australian Rules Football

Player

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Abstract

Retirement from elite sport is a complex and often-problematic process. The current study explores a negative case study of an athlete recently retired from a team sport (Australian Rules Football) in order to generate knowledge on how to improve the retirement process. Three semi-structured interviews were undertaken less than 5 years post retirement, and archival career records were gathered from online sources. Data were coded to construct a narrative account of the participant's career and retirement. Narrative analysis also revealed that the retirement transition from elite sports for this athlete was problematic and caused considerable personal distress. We suggest that the means of improving retirement transition and reducing harm to players include fostering alternative life narratives and increasing self-complexity, utilising norm appropriate communication strategies, and recognising retirement as a potential grieving period for loss of community.

Keywords: retirement transition, athlete, case study, narrative, forced retirement

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Retirement and the subsequent transition from participation in elite sport is a significant event in an athlete's life. Many researchers have described the transition out of sport as a disruption to self-defining activities (Anderson & Morris, 2000; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). This transition may mark identity changes and can be filled with conflict and mixed emotions ranging from relief to crisis (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). Retirement from elite sports can be associated with negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and poor health. Factors that influence the athlete experience during retirement transition are age at retirement, lifestyle income, and the ego involvement of the athlete (Coakley, 2006). Compared with other career types, athletes typically retire at younger ages (Wylleman et al., 2004), and therefore establish a new career, which often requires new skill sets (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). The necessary adjustment out of elite sport and into a new career makes athletes vulnerable to lowered self-esteem, emotional discomfort, depression, and other psychopathology (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Wylleman et al., 2004). Drawing on an in-depth exploration of a case study of a professional athlete's experience of forced retirement, the aim of this paper is to generate knowledge and make recommendations for sport psychologists to better understand and support the retirement transition of athletes who experience forced retirement.

Sport-career transition is a process that may be an opportunity for personal growth and development in other life domains (Coakley, 1983). Researchers have suggested that professional athletes may experience some period of adjustment after any transition, with each individual's coping resources determining the transition adjustment outcomes (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Coakley, 2006). Various factors that moderate the ease of transition out of sport include athlete identity, the athlete's preparedness for retirement, and the degree of

choice (e.g., career-ending injury or not) the athlete had over the decision to retire (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCourteur, 2013; Wylleman et al., 2004). Athletic identity has been defined as the level of identification the athlete has with the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993). Athletes exhibiting exclusive athletic identity (i.e., how strongly people rely on their athletic identities and whether they identify themselves weakly with other important life roles; Martin, Eklund, & Muschett, 1997) are generally more vulnerable to transitional difficulties. These athletes typically take longer to adjust to retirement, and display higher levels of anxiety and stress than those athletes whom display lower athletic identity (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1998). Forced retirement (e.g., injury or delisting/cutting) has also been associated with more short-term and long-term transitional problems than voluntary retirement (Wylleman et al., 2004). Injury forced retirement is considered to be the most distressing and problematic retirement reason (Lotysz & Short, 2004).

Sport-career transition is a complex, dynamic process that requires continued dedicated research. Over the past 10 years, the area of sport-career transition has gained increased attention in the sport psychology research (Douglas & Carless, 2009; McKenna & Thomas, 2007; Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2014). The existing body of research suggests that researchers and practitioners need to respond to the multidimensionality of athletic retirement in order to develop appropriate knowledge and support for athletes in acquiring the necessary skills for making the sport-career transition as easy a transition as possible. Much of this literature has focused on the experiences of athletes from individual sports. The current study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on forced transitional retirement by discussing a detailed single-case study of an athlete who played a team sport (Australian Rules football) and his experiences of forced retirement. This is one of the first studies to explore **forced** retirement transition **from a team sport**, in an Australian context. **In addition, the concept of a professional footballer in Australian football is relatively new, meaning that**

the experiences of these men as professional footballers are largely unknown. Research has also suggested that retirement for these footballers requires them to adjust and negotiate their masculine identity (Agnew & Drummond, 2015). By exploring in detail a negative case of forced retirement in Australian Rules football, we hope to highlight the factors that contributed to a problematic retirement transition.

Method

Research Design

A realist approach guided this research, as we aimed to uncover patterns and narrative structures of the retirement experience (Willig, 2013). A narrative case study approach was utilised to investigate the retirement transition of an elite athlete. Case study is an idiographic approach to research used in many disciplines. It involves a single unit of analysis of a case, (in this case a recently retired Australian Rules footballer), that is in-depth, intensive and focused (Willig, 2013). A single-case study aims to explore the essence of the participant's experiences from their own perspective. This single case-study design was both revelatory and unique (Yin, 2009) because it was an in-depth, in-context exploration of an elite Australian football player's retirement transition, which revealed factors that led to negative psychosocial outcomes for the athlete (Cotterill & Schinke, 2017). Cases are studied for many different reasons. This case study can be understood as an 'instrumental case study' (Willig, 2013) because it is an exemplar of the phenomenon of interest with the athlete's experience of forced retirement demonstrating many problems resulting from this type of transition.

One way to understand a person's experiences is to understand the narratives that inform their life. Narratives can be understood as personally meaningful stories that are drawn from broader social discourses that help guide one's thoughts, feelings and behaviours

(Carless & Douglas, 2012). For example, a sports performance narrative has been found to be an important part of some athletes' identity and can be a source of dissonance when an athlete is not performing as they would like (Douglas & Carless, 2006). This study utilised both creative non-fiction story telling and narrative analysis techniques. The non-fictional story telling technique used here involved the authors and participant constructing and presenting a narrative in the participant's voice (Carless & Douglas, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2006). This method can allow for a more informative and enjoyable reader experience, the discovery of new information about a topic, and is an integral part of the analysis process itself. Tracy (2010) argues that evocative non-fiction storytelling can lead to greater transferability of the findings. Readers who personally connect with the story are more likely to apply the lessons from the story to their own life contexts. Moreover, narrative methodologies may facilitate naturalistic generalisation of findings by resonating with the reader's own personal experiences (Smith, 2018). During the coding process the researcher synthesised all relevant data relating to the participant's retirement process including significant quotations and, using their authorial presence (Agar, 1995), constructed a first person narrative that best represented the participant's story. According to Carless and Douglas (2008), in evaluating the merit of such an approach one must consider whether the story is coherent, empathic to the participant, meaningful, articulate and plausible.

Participant

The participant was a white middle aged, middle class man from Australia. He was married with children, was employed in the sports industry at the time of interview, and had recently retired from football. He was known to the first author (aiding in rapport building and resulting in richer data; Paton, 1990) prior to the research and was recruited using purposive sampling. The participant was informed of (and gave consent to) the nature of the research and the potential limits to confidentiality, which were explained both verbally and in writing.

Australian professional footballers lead public lives, and maintaining the confidentiality of the participant was extremely important. Thus, the identities of the participant, club and teammates, and family and friends were protected by using pseudonyms, and by removal (or slight adjustment) of any specific personal details (games played, position) that may identify the participant or others. Even in doing so there is the possibility that people who know him could recognise the participant. These limits to confidentiality were discussed with the participant before consent was given.

Australian Rules football is a full contact team sport requiring speed, strength, courage and skill from players. The game is played in 360 degrees with no restrictive zones on oval grounds ranging in size between 135 and 185 metres in length and 110 and 155 metres in width. The game features frequent physical contests, spectacular marking, fast movement of both players and the ball and high scoring.

Procedure and Materials

Ethical approval was granted from the University Ethics Committee. Data collection for this case study consisted of three forms. Three semi-structured interviews (90 minutes each in duration) were conducted less than 5 years post-retirement, with approximately 1-month gap between each interview. The questions were designed to allow the researchers to construct a creative and descriptive narrative as well as code the data for significant events, stages and processes related to subjective well-being. Interview questions included “can you give us an account of your footballing history beginning with your formative years as a junior footballer?” and “when did the preparation for life after professional football begin for you?”. The first interview generated much of the biographical and timeline data. The two subsequent interviews focused on expanding on topics that the participant and first author thought

significant in terms retirement outcomes. As the interviews progressed, the interview dynamic became more relaxed and authentic.

In addition, archival records in the form of career information, events and statistics were gathered from online sources to add more depth of information to the narrative descriptions. The participant's current (post-retirement) subjective **life satisfaction** was also measured before the first interview using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). **This short scale measures a person's subjective evaluation of his or her life. Consisting of five statements related to life satisfaction, respondents indicate their level of agreement with these statements on a 7-point likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The total score ranges from 5 to 35 and provides an overall measure of life satisfaction with lower values indicating lower levels of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985).** This measurement was used to objectively measure the participant's current **life satisfaction**. As the participant's subjective perceptions were central to the research aims, it was unnecessary to collect data from other external sources.

Analysis

The interviews provided a comprehensive description of the retired athlete's sport-career transition experience. The interviews were initially transcribed verbatim. Then the first author read and re-read the transcripts until familiar with the content and then wrote notes in the margins of the transcript pages, which reflected ideas on what the participant was saying, comments that were of interest and insights about the text (Minichiello et al., 1990).

Significant historical events were also noted in the margins. The first author then transferred the notes onto a new document in historical order from beginning of career through to retirement and post-retirement and re-wrote the story in a first person non-fiction style using as many of the participants own words as possible for authenticity. An 8000 (approx.) word

narrative was constructed and was shared with the participant and co-authors for checking. This narrative was then analysed for key narratives that informed the participant's retirement experiences. Specifically the authors recognised repeated words and phrases that were representative of a personal narrative. The narratives were then labelled and recorded. This analytical method is similar to the role of a story analyst (Smith & Sparkes, 2006). Finally, the original narrative was reduced in size by excluding parts that were non-essential to the narrative analysis. This was achieved by juxtaposing the full length narrative in the findings against the narrative analysis. Each co-author then removed sections they deemed non-essential. Sections were removed and at times reinstated during this process until all authors agreed on a final version.

Throughout the analytical process, the author would also revisit the original text to transfer relevant quotes. Internet searches were conducted to fill in missing historical data. In addition the first author met regularly (at least weekly) with the participant throughout this process to check elements of the story and to ask for more detail or clarification. The outcomes of this process were two-fold. First, there was the construction of a creative career and retirement transition narrative, which functioned to inform readers of the participant within context, and in-depth, as well as setting out the time-series of events, whereby John read and approved the final version of the narrative. Second, there was an explanation-building component, which identified relevant narratives for the retirement transition that contributed to 'negative' forced retirement outcomes. This stage of analysis involved relating content from the narrative to the participant's personal narratives, wellbeing, and to theoretical constructs (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

The results of the subjective **life satisfaction** questionnaire suggested that John had poor subjective **life satisfaction** levels (10). John's very low score on the subjective **life satisfaction**

scale, was consistent with his interview testimony. The key narratives related to John's negative experiences of retirement transition are summarised in Table 1. It seemed that forced retirement was a major contributor to John's negative experiences, which is the most problematic retirement reason (Ivarsson, Stambulova, & Johnson, 2016; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2004).

Table 1 about here

This section begins with a participant narrative (broken into four distinct parts: pre-retirement, career ending, retirement transition and post-retirement) to familiarise the reader with John's "lived experience" (Creswell, 1998, p.52). The narratives relevant to John's journey are presented after each section and then discussed in relation to reflections on improving athletic retirement transition (McLeod, 1997).

John's Story: Pre-retirement.

My name is John Smith. I was an Australian Rules footballer who played for the Y. Well I played for 14 years playing more than 250 games, winning four Best and Fairests (deemed to be the most valuable player at the club for the given year), All-Australian honours (selected in the All Star team for the given year), and numerous other awards.

When did it all start? Well footy started at school, I was about 8 and I loved it. I went to school close to Victoria Park (famous Australian football ground) and I'd come out of school and go and watch them train and I was a one-eyed Collingwood supporter. So from day one, whenever I can remember I just loved footy.

Look I had some talent, and that's such a vain thing to say, but I was talented and I wanted to play. I had a strong will to do what other people didn't want me to do, or what other people didn't think I could do and that's why I got there as quickly as I did. Even now... if you

think I can't do something I'll prove you wrong. I had just had this appetite for success even back then. It is a huge regret of mine that I didn't have that drive in other aspects of my life, which is what I'm encouraging my children to do.

I was pretty ruthless in the way I trained; I had to be ruthless, because you just had to take someone's spot even in a team environment. Some people can't grasp that concept because you're in a team environment, well if your happy to play second fiddle to someone don't play. You know I never, ever just wanted to be part of the team; nope I had to be a big time player in the team. Even in my first years I was 17-18 and I would go as fast as I could from our home ground to our training facility, and all these older blokes were saying "what's he doing?", warm up laps I couldn't just run at the back. I couldn't stand seeing someone in front of me in a warm up lap. I had to be leading by example; whatever you're talking about I had to be leading.

Sports performance narrative: "A Big Time Player in the Team". During John's playing career he was driven to be a "big time player in the team". This narrative is a 'performance narrative' noted by past research (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Performing as a big time player was an important element of John's sense of self-worth. Although John was adamant that he had no concerns for loss of athletic identity and suggested other aspects of being an Australian footballer such as "the contest", "the camaraderie", "the game day experience", and "the training" were essential, these facets are considered constituents of an athletic identity. Therefore it could be suggested that John's loss of performance identity was felt and grieved unconsciously rather than consciously (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000).

John's commitment to the performance narrative and investment in his performance identity appeared to be at the expense of other potential narratives. This was illustrated by John "I had just had this appetite for success even back then. It is a huge regret of mine that I didn't have that drive in other aspects of my life, which is what I'm encouraging my children

to do”. It appeared that investment in his performance narrative is a product of broader sporting culture and may be trained and learned within sporting environments. John either dismissed, or refused to acknowledge and work on, alternative life narratives (e.g. family, hobbies, work related narratives).

John’s story is similar to past studies where athletes with exclusive performance narratives struggled to adjust when faced with failure, retirement, and/or disappointment (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009; Cavallerio, Wadey & Wagstaff, 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2009; McKenna & Thomas, 2007). According to Carless and Douglas (2009) an athlete cannot just switch off a lived narrative, instead, alternate narratives require years of work to develop. While the sport performance narrative is often dominant in elite contexts, Carless and Douglass (2012) found that alternative narratives such as I did my best, I shared my journey with some great people, and I value my embodied experiences, could be more functional. As narratives are constructed within ones immediate social worlds, those people working with athletes should be mindful of the narratives that are promoted and endorsed.

John’s Story: Career Ending.

He [The Head Coach] coached me for three years and he was the coach at the end of my career, so I guess there is a little anxiety involved when I talk about him. I wouldn’t say “anx” but there was definitely mismanagement on his behalf and the footy club’s behalf.... This is one of those subjects where people would say “oh suck it up, harden up, and that’s what happens” because there definitely are no fairy tales in real life. But I feel I deserved respect from him (the head coach) and the club and needed to be told what they were thinking. So I played in the first two games that year and then suffered cartilage damage to my knee, and I had my knee operated on the next day, and I got back to training two days after the operation, running within five days and playing in two weeks, but I had a real pain in my knee still. The

doctor said it was just scar tissue, and obviously I had total trust in him wholeheartedly, he gave me a local injection just to ease my mind and played in round five [of 22 rounds]. By round six I counted 15 injections, in the one knee to try and ease the pain, and I remember lying in bed screaming to the point I wanted to go to hospital because of the pain. I never played AFL (football) ever again. I remember three weeks before the finals I had a game for N (affiliated lower level club) and that was my last ever game and I was best on ground and I'm thinking I'm going great guns and then I saw footage of the game on TV. That's when I realised I was finished for the year...I'm not finished but I was struggling here, I didn't realise how bad I was limping in the leg... It turned out I had bone fragments peeling off my knee and I never played again. I went through 14-15 weeks of rehabilitation trying to get over my knee, it was one step forward two steps back, but I never played again in the AFL, I don't know what happened. Was it mismanagement by the medical staff?

I'm disappointed at the time that I wasn't given enough respect and wasn't told until about six weeks out from the end of the season. We had a list management meeting and they didn't tell me they were undecided about my future.... You know I could have started selling myself to the public or to the media or to whomever I was going to be coaching. But no what they did was let me hang right up to the Grand Final... it was grand final week before I got told.... I walk into the meeting and there was three of them, the coach, list manager and captain, and the coach says "look we are not going to go with you next year... they were his words... and I said "is it because of my knee?"... and I then said "hold on I can't deal with this right now, I'm going to have to deal with this later because I'm going to have to deal with what just happened", and to the coaches credit he said "no worries" and so I walked out of that meeting (five minutes) and walked to my car, cried my eyes out, rang a few people and drove home. I texted the coach and said "I'm really sorry for walking out of the meeting but I just had to deal with it on my own... hope we will catch up for a beer soon and talk about it". And he rang me

“ absolutely, no worries, understand and you have got to understand it was as difficult for me as it was ... the most difficult thing I have done in footy (slang for football)” till this day I feel he was genuine. And that was it...

Sports performance narrative: “Suck it up. Harden up”. While John is critical of this pressure to be stoic and perceives it as coming from “outside”, it appears that it has been internalised. He seemed to avoid confronting the seriousness of his knee injury, despite watching vision of how it was adversely effecting his performance. Then when the time came, John did not actively engage with decision makers to address the retirement issue as highlighted by him walking out of the retirement meeting. He avoided what would have been an emotional and challenging confrontation and is only now taking ownership of his feelings in relation to being made to retire. This aspect of the sports performance narrative appears to be informed by hegemonic masculine discourses around being stoic, brave, and not leading on how much hurt John was experiencing (Connell, 2005; Gill, Teese & Sonn, 2014). This narrative can be linked to John’s apparent avoidance coping, which Billings and Moos (1981) describe as “attempts to avoid actively confronting the problem... or to indirectly reduce emotional tension by such behaviour as eating or smoking more” (p. 141).

Researchers have suggested that individuals who have multiple coping strategies and resources will tend to experience less stress than their peers during the sport-career transition (Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000). Living out restrictive hegemonic masculine discourses such as being hard and sucking it up may restrict one’s coping resources and result in, as with John, alcohol use (which is discussed in more depth later) to avoid the pain and the life adjustments that were required during retirement. This substance use (or abuse) may be linked to his predominant avoidance coping style considering researchers (e.g., Hasking, Lyvers, & Carlopio, 2011) have shown a positive association between alcohol use and avoidance coping. Attempting to fill the void created by delisting (being cut from athletic teams)

through these negative behavioural choices can cause former athletes to experience a poor sport-career transition (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000), and reduced levels of well-being (Fortunato & Marchant, 2008; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

John's Story: Retirement transition.

So me retiring was out of my hands. It was determined by the senior coach and his list manager and assistant coaches, and I guess at the end of the day they backed in (put faith in) some of the younger players. I thought at the time it was to do with my knee injury but I was subsequently told it was more to do with promoting younger players ahead of myself and moving forward.... I guess they thought the young guys were a better bet than an older bloke with a 50/50 knee. To be honest at the time I wasn't thinking about what my concerns were, but was more distressed that, after 16 years at a football club, that I wasn't shown the respect, and the first time I was finding out my career was over was in a five minute meeting with the senior coach and his assistants. I just thought I deserved better...

I truly believe they had made the decision to delist me mid/year or 2/3 of the way during the year. I would have loved to have been told then...I would have thought out of respect to me that they would have thought "let's have that conversation with John"... still it would have been a difficult conversation but not a devastating one like they did at the end of the year. But I just didn't get that opportunity and it still today sits foul with me that I wasn't given that opportunity. I wasn't given, granted that respect by the club that I had given so much to.

Sports performance narrative: No "I" in team. What underlined much of John's testimony was the almost unwavering trust he had in his club. There seemed to be an ideological contract between John and the club that he would show his loyalty by dedicating himself to training and performance and that in return the club would take care of the other elements of his career and always have John's best interests at heart. John continually

referred to a lack of respect in the way the club communicated and handled his forced retirement and John believed the club had breached this contract. It seems that trust and loyalty to the club or organisation is a constituent of the “no I in team” narrative. This story begins when an athlete is inducted into a team environment, she/ he then acts selflessly and loyally to help the team succeed, and is ultimately rewarded with success, friends for life, respect from team mates and coach, and adoration from those external to the club. Sporting organisations and their broader communities work hard to promote and foster this narrative as it is an ingredient of success. Unfortunately for John the ‘player as commodity’ is also a constituent of the “no I in team” narrative whereby individuals must make way for new inductees who might offer the team more. John was unable to separate his loyalty to his teammates from his loyalty to the club as he had not identified as a commodity of the club.

John also described an earlier event where he was demoted from the leadership group. John experienced this as a violation of the contract between player and club and a disrespect to the loyalty he had demonstrated. John’s description of being “cut at the knees” also signifies a perceived breach of contract where the club did not respect him enough help him prepare for retirement or prioritise his wellbeing. By living only part of the “no I in team” narrative (trust and loyalty to the club but not player as commodity) John perceived and allowed a strong degree of external control over the outcome of his professional football career. John still (even after a few years post-retirement) believed he would have been “in the driver’s seat” if given the opportunity. As such, John was reactive in the retirement process rather than proactive, which appeared to have negative consequences. It appears that John’s strong athletic internal locus of control did not transfer to everyday life and now his post athletic life. Ultimately, his exclusive athletic identity (Martin, Eklund, & Muschett, 1997) and reliance on the sport performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2009) may have contributed to this especially considering all energies from a young age were committed to

athletic pursuits, neglecting other elements of self. Perhaps the promotion of simplified sport related narratives (no I in team) also limits the development of self-complexity (i.e., the number of self-representations an individual possesses; Linville, 1985, 1987). John was unable to integrate his athletic self with his post athletic self and develop alternative narratives, resulting in avoidance, a lack of planning, and a tendency to shift all responsibility for retirement to external parties. It is possible for team sports athletes to live by the team first ethos while understanding and monitoring their status as a commodity of the club or organisation.

John's Story: Post retirement. The issue was never a loss of identity for me, of being a footballer... for me I just loved being a footballer, I loved being fit, I loved the contest, I loved the camaraderie of my teammates, the game day experience, the locker room experience, that's what I played footy for, in essence it's all that, that I missed the most, yeah sure I missed the notoriety and the money....

There was a massive shift after "retirement", I went into that meeting being a fulltime footballer and walking out of that room being an ex-player without a job. I had a trade behind me, but obviously I didn't have a business in that trade. Um I knew what I wanted to do, that is regards to coaching but those opportunities had dissolved because of the timing of my dismissal. At the end I had grasped I was at the end of my career and you get a payout at the end of the year and I knew that was coming and then I eventually managed to get a part-time coaching job at a club, but it wasn't until the end of that 12 months that it dawned on me that the financial situation was really serious. Look this payout was like superannuation, it's called an accumulative fund over the years that was paid by the Australian Football League Player's Association (AFLPA) but at the time mine was capped. This fund is an absolutely terrific thing. I guess for any player who has retired and has a decent accountant and manager and knows they have that money coming, it eases their financial concerns.

I guess the big challenge for me was “What is next?”. What is the next phase of where I am going to be and I guess there are a whole lot of different circumstances that each player has? I came out of football with kids and two mortgages, school fees...

I think what happened with my eminent withdrawal from footy was that I took my eye off the ball in regards to that aspect of my life. No one had the courage, respect or gonads to tell me I wasn't going on. I think in retrospect that 6 weeks could have been spent better to secure my future outside of playing.

When I finished football I was devastated, I was devastated, there is no doubt... the fact that it was over. The fact that I didn't know it was coming, the fact that I was left in the lurch. I felt that I was cut at the knees, the fact that I was moving on. Look, one of my great strengths, as a player was preparation, preseason, post season, during the season, before the game. Regardless of when it was, my preparation was immaculate So I didn't have the opportunity to prepare post footy.

So that is a massive shift for me. Because I was always the one driving the car, I was the one making the moves but now it ain't happening. ... because you're not the one driving the car, you're relying on other people and you know what happens then? When you rely on other people you get let down a fair bit of the time.

I think there is a really serious conversation that is required around it (retirement, delisting) and I think this is where football clubs need to take responsibility for their own actions in regards to being honest with people. I think longevity, certainly longevity should equate to respect and a conversation, and that conversation,, happens so it allows a preparation time.

In the years since I have ended my career I have had no self-satisfaction. I have achieved nothing in these years. For me there are two aspects to self-satisfaction. I get satisfaction from watching my kids grow up, my marriage; there is satisfaction in that, not with other people. Just my family. My kids, seeing them do what they do. You get emotionally involved in them, but from a personal point of view I've had no self-satisfaction, not one bit, honestly.

Look this is the first time I have ever talked about it since it happened. ... but when you look back at it or some of the treatment that I was given, by people that I was close to. My agent should have known, should have known that they were thinking about not going on with me because we should have been negotiating a contract during that period of time.

That was a difficult time because I wasn't a ...like the male's ego suggested that you could get through anything, go down the pub, have a beer, have a chat, have a laugh, and I just couldn't get over that part of it (delisting). And I kind of understood that something was going to give and that's when I sought out some professional help (counsellor).

Yeah I absolutely engaged in negative behaviour. Look there certainly two main elements, and they were family neglect...um... from a selfish point of view. There was a feeling of ashamedness... that I had been let go so...I didn't turn my back on the family but I guess I tried to allow them to get on with the normality of their life because mine was in such a spin... ... certainly alcohol was a big part of it... certainly it wasn't much more than that. I guess what I was trying to do was find that stimulation... I guess not even stimulation, to take your mind off where I was actually at. The reality was here, but you wanted to be over there, and what was over there was let's have a drink, let's go and talk to people that probably you shouldn't talk to. Engage with other people... whereas the reality of life was the people you should be talking to was at home not over there (pub, hotel). I say selfishness but it's like it's out of your control, you do things not for self-satisfaction but... for relief so you aren't even

meaning to do it but at the end of the day it still transfers into hurt for other people so you've got to acknowledge that...

...it's amazing how little people you thought would really care, look everybody has got their own lives, I acknowledge that but at the end of the day... "Are you okay theory", Jesus the number of people that would contact you when you were playing to the number of people that don't call when it's finished, it's phenomenal.

Listen I still haven't replaced all that my career gave me. You just can't. I tried to play basketball and couldn't do it, I tried to run and that couldn't do it, boxed and that couldn't do it. Even coaching, as much as it fulfilled what you did as a player it certainly didn't... just the adrenaline of what you did as a player and the camaraderie and the locker room and the anxiety it's just... I don't think anything will replace it unfortunately. This is what people get confused about they say "you must miss the money and the accolades and the bright lights". That's a part of it. A very small part of it. But I loved training, I loved the ice baths, I loved the Sunday morning rehabs, the game day experience, the anxiety, the nervousness, the challenge, the competitiveness, the blood, the sweat, and the tears. You just can't replace it regardless of what you're trying to do.

Sports Performance Narrative: 'what now'? It appeared that John was caught in an entanglement of the performance narrative, where he felt lost and unsure of the future post-retirement. John was attempting (with little success) to find meaning in his post retirement life. Perhaps if athletes cannot shift their energy to new narratives post retirement, they may be stuck reflecting nostalgically and mournfully on their athletic careers. This may be similar to what Cavallerio et al. (2017) described as an entangled identity where athletes become reliant on the sports performance narrative and unable to develop new identities. Cavallerio et al. also suggested that athletes may be in a stage of making sense of their lives and the possibilities

moving forward. John is only now starting to make sense of his after football life. What became evident as John's story unfolded was that his need for being a big time player became problematic when eventually the team no longer needed him and he became a lowly valued commodity.

Reflections on Improving Athlete Retirement Transition

Based on this case study, we focused on the factors that could promote a better retirement transition for elite athletes. The recommendations will be discussed under three banners; **Masculine restrictive communication, commodification versus trust and loyalty, and Grief: Retirement as loss of community.**

Masculine Restrictive Communication. There appeared to be masculine norms around being tough and hard and containing one's emotions at play in the club environment (Gill, et al. 2014). It could be that masculine narratives (e.g. Suck it up. Harden up) and discourses around appropriate communication restrict the types of communication strategies available to both athletes and staff in these environments. Moreover, there may be a general avoidance of "difficult" communications. John was unable to receive the bad news in person and preferred to talk over the phone. He reported that his coach described it as the hardest thing he had ever done in football. John gained great solace from that phone call suggesting that communication was important for him in working through the transition and that he preferred the communication to be in a less confronting context. We suggest that rather than attempt the difficult task of altering cultural norms around communication, sporting bodies and managers utilise masculine appropriate strategies (tailored to the masculinity of the athlete) for communication, with the athlete's wellbeing in mind (Agnew & Drummond, 2015; McDiarmid et al., 2017). Managers need not be limited by their current practices and can adapt communication strategies to the individual athlete and context. In John's case a one

to one conversation or phone call with the coach might have been most appropriate in the first instance rather than a formal group meeting. For John, the anger that stemmed from perceived inadequate or inappropriate communication was carried for a long period after retirement.

Commodification versus trust and loyalty. There appeared to be a dislocation between the two constituents of the “no I in team” narrative. The trust and loyalty to the club or organisation that John and other athletes display (which is endorsed and perpetuated by sporting clubs), and the athlete as a commodity narrative displayed by the club at the end of John’s career were incongruent. It appears that officials are able to shift quickly from one constituent to another leaving the athlete confused and angry. In John’s case this was communicated by the club/ coach as “we appreciate your loyalty and service but ultimately you are no longer an integral player in the team”. We recommend for athletes to learn and incorporate the athlete as a commodity as part of their athletic identity and team first identity. No I in team is an interpersonal narrative involving sacrifice with team mates for shared reward. This narrative is within the control of the athlete and can be maintained. An athlete’s team ethos can be transferred to other teams/clubs and indeed to other areas of life (e.g. family, a workplace or organisation). In contrast an athlete’s commodity value fluctuates as does their value to a particular club. As such developing complexity around this narrative may assist athletes in making career decisions around moving clubs and contract deals, and help them better prepare for retirement. We suggest that team sport athletes invest in an interpersonal narrative to be a good team member, which is transferable to other teams and contexts, rather than loyalty to an organisation or club.

Grief: Retirement as loss of community. For John, being an integral, loyal member of the team fostered a strong sense of belonging to his sporting club and community. Upon retirement, John lost this sense of belonging. John reported missing the social connections

and the adulation that he received as a professional athlete (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017). John also described a loss of income, competition, and drive for intense physical activity. Five years after his retirement John still felt these losses deeply. John's experiences support research where elite sports retirement was necessarily experienced as a loss (Carless & Douglas, 2009). McKenna and Thomas (2007) argue that retirement can result in social exclusion where the athlete is effectively locked out of their club or team and from their own sporting glories. John was unable to remain connected to his team once his career was terminated. This sense of grief may be more salient for athletes from team sports who may have a strong investment in their team culture and interpersonal relationships.

John's grief appeared to manifest in the phenomenon of 'declined social support'. John had difficulty explaining why he turned his back on significant others in the post retirement stage. While his wife, family and friends made themselves available to him, John was unable to accept this support. This may also relate to not investing, or contributing greatly, in these family aspects of his life stories and of his identity during his career. McKenna and Thomas (2007) reported that this process is a shift from investment in one's 'club family' to one's 'real family'. John took a long time to make the transition to identifying more with his own family rather than his club family. Fortunato and Marchant (2008) also proposed that forced retirees were going through a grieving process (Kubler-Ross, 1968) and were in denial, so the offered support was perceived as a threat forcing the athlete to acknowledge their grief, and so it is rejected. Other researchers have suggested that the grieving process is more individualised than previously thought, and that guiding people through a traditional stage based model (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) can often be problematic (Stroebe, Schut & Boerner, 2017). Instead, we might view the grieving process as a search for meaning and new stories to live out. It is important that organisations and

managers acknowledge and address the retiring athlete's grieving process and are aware of the 'declined social support' phenomenon.

Future Research.

While obtaining a player's perspective of retirement is beneficial, future research could also interview the player's agent, coach, fellow players, family, and friends. By triangulating accounts, confusions and misconceptions could be identified and better player transitions could occur. For example, in the current study John's player agent could have shared his insights on his role in the process, and her/his communications with John. The phenomenon of 'declined social support' requires more study particularly in athletes forced into retirement.

This research also had some limitations that must be noted. The research process, including procedures and analysis were influenced by the researchers' subjective contexts, and thus findings should be understood as a shared construction. While we acknowledge the possibilities of inaccuracies in recall, inaccuracies of recall are meaningful in social constructionist research, as they represent the ways in which the participant has reconstructed his/her story (Douglas & Carless, 2015). We believe that the creative biographical narrative presented here offers the potential for transferability to other contexts and naturalistic generalisation by connecting with readers' personal experiences.

In conclusion, this narrative single case study revealed that the athletic retirement process can be problematic especially when the athlete is forced into retirement and identifies exclusively with a sport performance narrative. Supporting previous studies, grief might be an integral part of the retirement process, especially for athletes from team sports. The suggested means of improving this transition and reducing harm to athletes include improved

communication, and better player retirement preparation through fostering alternative life narratives and increasing self-complexity.

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Table 1. Personally lived narratives during John’s Sporting Career and retirement.

Narrative	Explanation
<p>Pre-retirement Narrative</p> <p>Sports Performance: “A big time player in the team”</p>	<p>Being relied on by team mates</p> <p>Standing out from other athletes</p> <p>Relates to enjoyment of sport</p> <p>Creates a difficult adjustment when the athlete’s performance drops.</p>
<p>Career Ending Narrative</p> <p>Sports Performance: “Suck it up. Harden Up”</p>	<p>Linked to avoidance coping</p> <p>Lack of communication</p> <p>Not engaging in communication with club and decision makers</p> <p>Stoicism</p>
<p>Retirement Transition Narrative</p> <p>No “I” in Team</p>	<p>Fostered by sporting club</p> <p>Linked to the focus on performance, exclusive athletic identity</p> <p>Has two components which are difficult for the athlete to integrate; <i>Athlete as Commodity</i> and <i>Loyalty to the Club</i>.</p>
<p>Post Retirement Narrative</p> <p>Sports Performance: What Now?</p>	<p>Feeling lost and helpless</p> <p>Looking back on athletic career rather than forward</p> <p>Entangled identity</p>

