Citation


URL

https://oro.open.ac.uk/91337/

License

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from Open Research Online (ORO) Policies

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding
Negotiating identity: how elite athlete mothers navigate their journey through sport.

By Candice Lingam-Willgoss

BSc. (Hons), MSc.

February 2023

The Open University
Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the transitional experiences of elite female athletic mothers from different sports and how those experiences impacted on their identity. Through the adoption of a phenomenological approach, underpinned by a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with five elite female athletes. Two athletes competed in winter sport and the remaining three were distance runners. All participants had become mothers during their elite careers and returned to compete at the same level. Three of the athletes had retired; one retired during the study and one was still competing. In-depth interviews were analysed using thematic analysis allowing key themes to be identified within each athlete’s story. Results revealed six identity-related themes: transitioning to elite sport; being an athlete; organisational stressors; injury; motherhood; retirement. In addition, two other key themes related to management of transition emerged: social support and the nature of the sport. The main conclusions of the study were that winter sports athletes experienced more cultural, organisational and logistical challenges through their career. Furthermore, all five athletes successfully transitioned from athlete to mother athlete but the support received differed between sports. Findings also extended the research related to the way athlete mothers negotiate multiple identities and how they felt combining identities was beneficial to them as athletes at the psychological level. Future research should examine further the differences between different types of winter sport as well as the physical implications during the return to sport phase following childbirth.
Acknowledgements

My first thanks are to the five incredible athletes who shared their stories with me, without whom there would be no study. Next, to my supervisors Sam Murphy, Karen Howells and Martin Polley who gave me endless feedback and support throughout this journey. My lead supervisor Caroline Heaney has been integral to both this thesis, but also a friend offering unwavering support when at times I felt this was insurmountable.

To Jess who shared her PhD journey with me, who kept me sane and told me more times than I can count that I can get this done.

Mike - thank you for your patience, for taking an interest and for being proud of me. To my mother, who taught me the value of hard work and brought me up to believe that anything was possible. My dyslexia saw me struggle at school and without your belief in me at a young age I don’t think my academic path or this study would have even begun. To my daughter Isabella: you are my greatest achievement, but this is possibly a close second! Thank you for putting up with a busy mother and for your humour and support.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my father. He saw me start my PhD journey but sadly hasn’t seen me complete it; he was my biggest champion and, in the dark days over the last 12 months, he has given me the motivation to continue. Papa this is for you x
# Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 2  
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 3  
Figures .................................................................................................................................. 8  
Tables ................................................................................................................................... 8  
Preface ................................................................................................................................... 9  
  
Sport, Motherhood and Me: My PhD in context .................................................................... 9  

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................... 13  
1.1 Setting the scene ................................................................................................................. 13  
1.2 Transitions in sport .............................................................................................................. 13  
1.3 Female sports performance ................................................................................................ 14  
1.4 The elite female and athletic identity .................................................................................. 16  
  1.4.1 Research with women .................................................................................................... 16  
1.5 Winter sports ...................................................................................................................... 18  
1.6 Distance running .................................................................................................................. 20  
1.7 Aims of the thesis ............................................................................................................... 21  
1.8 Methodological approaches ............................................................................................... 22  
1.9 Structure of the thesis ......................................................................................................... 22  
1.10 Chapter Conclusions ......................................................................................................... 24  

Chapter 2 – Literature Review and Theoretical Overview ..................................................... 25  
2.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 25  
2.2 What are transitions? .......................................................................................................... 28  
2.3 Identity, gender and athletic identity .................................................................................. 29  
2.4 Models and Theories of Career Transitions ...................................................................... 34  
  2.4.1 Social Gerontology Models .......................................................................................... 34  
  2.4.2 Thaonatological Models .............................................................................................. 35  
  2.4.3 Transition and Conceptual Models .............................................................................. 36  
  2.4.4 Career Stage Models ................................................................................................... 39  
2.5 Transitions in Sport ............................................................................................................ 41  
  2.5.1 Early transitions .......................................................................................................... 41  
  2.5.2 Within-Career transitions ............................................................................................ 45  
  2.5.3 The end of the road – Retirement from sport ............................................................. 63  
  2.5.4 Life after sport .............................................................................................................. 65  
2.6 Influencing factors ............................................................................................................. 66
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.6.1 Type of sport</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.2 The culture of sport</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.2 Level of participation</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Managing Transitions</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.1 Social support</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.2 Planning</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7.3 Resilience</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Chapter Conclusion and Research Questions</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 – Methodology and Research Methods</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Research paradigm and method: a rationale</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1 Feminism and Poststructuralist feminism</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Methodological Approach</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1 Phenomenology</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2 In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3.2 Interviewing women</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 The pilot study</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 The main study</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.1 Aims and Research objectives</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.2 Time frame</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.3 Participants</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.4 Sport classification</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.5 Data Collection</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.6 Interviews</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Data Analysis</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7.1 Thematic analysis</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7.2. Using software in qualitative research</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 Emotional Reflexivity</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9 Chapter Conclusion</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 – Athlete stories</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Penny</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Wendy</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Yvonne</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 7
7.4 Coping with retirement
7.3 The loss of athletic identity
7.2 Changing Priorities
7.1 Planning

Chapter 6 – From athlete to mother athlete
6.1 Introduction
6.2 Planning and wanting to be a mother
6.3 Challenges and changes during pregnancy and the post-partum period
6.4 The impact of motherhood
6.5 Managing motherhood and sport successfully – influencing factors
6.6 Conclusion

Chapter 5 - Life before motherhood: being an athlete
5.1 Introduction
5.2 Early sporting involvement
5.3 Developing athletic identity
5.4 Transitions and Challenges to Identity
5.5 Life transitions
5.6 Conclusions

Chapter 4
4.5 Rebecca
4.6 Gemma
4.7 Conclusions

Table of Contents

4.5 Rebecca ................................................................................................................. 126
4.6 Gemma .................................................................................................................. 129
4.7 Conclusions .......................................................................................................... 132
Chapter 5 - Life before motherhood: being an athlete ................................................. 133
5.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 133
5.2 Early sporting involvement ................................................................................... 134
  5.2.1 Family influence and support ........................................................................ 135
5.3 Developing athletic identity .................................................................................. 141
5.4 Transitions and Challenges to Identity ................................................................. 144
  5.4.1 Becoming elite ................................................................................................. 145
  5.4.2 Major events ................................................................................................... 151
  5.4.3 Funding and organisation pressures ............................................................... 153
  5.4.4 Cheating in sport: the impact on clean athletes ............................................. 157
  5.4.5 Illness and injury ............................................................................................. 160
  5.5 Life transitions .................................................................................................... 171
  5.6 Conclusions ......................................................................................................... 172
Chapter 6 – From athlete to mother athlete ................................................................. 174
  6.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................... 174
  6.2 Planning and wanting to be a mother ............................................................... 175
  6.3 Challenges and changes during pregnancy and the post-partum period .......... 179
  6.4 The impact of motherhood ................................................................................. 189
  6.5 Managing motherhood and sport successfully – influencing factors .............. 197
    6.5.1 Type of sport ................................................................................................. 197
    6.5.2 Support .......................................................................................................... 201
    6.5.3 Balancing identity ....................................................................................... 206
  6.6 Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 209
Chapter 7 – Being ready to say goodbye ................................................................. 211
  7.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................... 211
  7.2 Making the decision to retire ............................................................................. 212
    7.2.1 – Voluntary or Forced retirement ............................................................... 212
    7.2.2 Performance decline and injury .................................................................. 219
    7.2.3 Changing Priorities .................................................................................... 221
  7.3 The loss of athletic identity ................................................................................ 224
  7.4 Coping with retirement ..................................................................................... 225
    7.4.1 Planning ........................................................................................................ 225
Figures

Figure 2.1. Gender-specific themes describing career pathways of Swedish professional handball players (Ekengren et al., 2020).

Figure 2.2. Conceptual model of adaptation to career transitions (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998).

Figure 2.3 The holistic athletic career model (HAC) (Wylleman, 2019).

Figure 3.1 Thematic map showing six main themes related to identity.

Figure 3.2 Thematic map showing two main themes which influenced the quality of transition.

Figure 5.1 Yvonne’s pathway to elite level.

Tables

Table 3.1 A table to show pseudonyms assigned and participant information.

Table 3.2 A table to show the locations of interviews.

Table 8.1 A table to show the key and unique findings of the study.

Table 8.2 A table to show potential future directions of research in this field.

Table 8.3 A table to show key recommendations based on this research.
Preface

Sport, Motherhood and Me: My PhD in context

Sport has always been a part of my life, and for many years it was my life, and part of me always knew it was something I wanted to try and pursue as a career. I remember when studying sport became a possibility and I became aware that sport science degrees existed. It was through my undergraduate and postgraduate degree in sport science that I started to discover a passion for both the psychological and sociological aspects of sport: approaches that I knew little about and had never previously studied. The natural progression for me was a PhD, something I started in 2005, although life had other plans and pregnancy and motherhood ultimately meant this was not sustainable with the demands of a full-time job. Fast forward 10 years and while my ideas for research had always hovered in the background, nothing excited me sufficiently to want to explore it further. A chance comment from a colleague and the request for a light journalistic piece sparked something inside me, fundamentally underpinned by a desire to both understand my own experiences in sport but also to explore a clearly under-researched area.

I am a mother, I am an academic and I am a sportswoman; I had frequent conversations with friends about fitting it all in, feeling guilty, feeling like maybe we all wanted too much and trying to have it all. These conversations, coupled with my interest in women’s sport, led me to my PhD, an area I am passionate about that allows me to theorise and better understand the experiences of female athletes. The aim was to be able to provide better information and support to elite athletes who want to combine career success with motherhood. While the idea was born out of informal conversations, a brief look at existing literature in this area highlighted how my experiences and those of people in my friendship group were not unique. Whether it was juggling sport with a career or the management of other multiple roles, the cultural
expectations placed on women have often made this seem unattainable if they are to be successful in the mother role.

A second dimension of this study draws on my interest in winter sports, something developed at a young age during my career as a junior elite athlete, in alpine ski racing. I started skiing at three years old on family holidays, but it was not until a club spotted me skiing at the age of 12 that I started to take things more seriously. My transition to an elite performance environment was accelerated during this time, as the demands of training and competition required a significant commitment very early on from me and my parents. By the age of 14 I was going away to training camps, that linked to the junior circuit during every school holiday, and not spending much time at home or with my parents. That commitment meant I spent several Christmases away from my family. The environment was a tough one. I was up early for a run, race training all day and then in the evening it was strength work and ski preparation. It was a total shock to my system and, while I loved skiing and the buzz of racing, this was very different. Skiing consumed my life for five years. I was improving and finishing in the top five of most races until a chronic knee injury and the harsh reality that to make it as a GB skier was going to be difficult, saw me decide to retire from racing at the age of 17. While I grew disillusioned by the performance environment, skiing will always be my passion. I love the juxtaposition of control and vulnerability, something inherent in high-risk sports. Skiing generates emotion in me: I still miss it almost every day.

If I am honest, I only truly understood the impact of my experiences in sport and ultimate retirement much later in life, when I started to study sports psychology and gradually read more about the impact of transitions. This process has afforded me a much richer understanding of my feelings when I decided to retire from sport. I now accept why I felt a mixture of sadness and relief, and a period where I felt lost and did not know who I was anymore. At school, I was ‘Candice the skier’, the girl who went away on training camps in her school holidays, who
got up early to do laps of the hockey pitch and had her own key to the sports hall so she could go and train before school. If I could no longer be her then who was I?

Retirement from skiing left a massive void in my life. In many ways, retiring athletes are saying goodbye to who they were, using terms such as ‘retired’ or ‘former’ to qualify their previous career identity. This loss of identity impacts who we are: it links to our esteem, confidence, and our sense of self. A unique aspect of my retirement was that, once retired, I could not race: ‘yes, I can ski, and I love it, but I can’t race’. It was thoughts like these that made me want to explore the experiences of other female athletes from more niche sports. Did they feel like I did? Whereas a runner can retire from elite sport and still run regularly and still enter races, I can’t ski every day and I can’t race. More and more questions started to form in my mind and, along with the impact of the type of sport, another kept coming to the forefront of my mind: did becoming a mother change things?

I had often reflected on how becoming a mother had influenced my relationship with sport, for example the way my approach to skiing changed, even at a recreational level once I had my daughter. I suddenly became more cautious, more measured, I held back a little and was suddenly aware of my fragility - something that had never crossed my mind before. This led me to consider whether the whole life experience of an elite high-risk sports athlete will be different to that of an athlete from a low-risk sport. From this, my project was born. It explores the transitional experiences of five elite sportswomen, two winter sports athletes and three distance runners, throughout their careers and with a particular focus on their journey surrounding pregnancy and motherhood. This thesis provides more understanding of this area and identifies how female athletes can be better supported during the range of transitions they may experience in their careers. Finally, the challenges associated with motherhood and a career in elite sport are given visibility. Such enhanced visibility will serve to inform athletes,
governing bodies and those within performance environments about what is needed to ensure female athletes are fully supported when combining an elite career with motherhood.

Reflecting on my sporting career, and in particular my retirement, clarifies to me how perspective is very important. With age and time comes an acceptance that time as an athlete is a gift, a time to treasure, but that there is always a new chapter to embrace. I have embraced my most recent chapter as a PhD student, but like all life events it hasn’t always been easy, and combining work, study, family, sport, and life is a constant juggling act. I have at times felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of this piece of work, and worried about whether it would be good enough, yet, in moments such as this, I remind myself that I have achieved what I set out to do: I wanted to explore the experiences of athletic mothers and through those stories learn something I might share to help others. I have had the pleasure of talking to five incredible elite female athletes to learn about their lives and give clarity to their stories. To ensure authenticity and context there is a whole chapter of this study dedicated to telling their life stories, and highlighting key events, as without knowing them and their careers their perceptions and lived experience would be hard to understand. I hope you enjoy learning about their journeys as much as I did.

Happy reading.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene

While there is an abundance of literature pertaining to career transitions in sport, a predominant focus has been on retirement, comparative studies or those focused solely on the experiences of male athletes (e.g., Hattersley et al., 2019; Von Rosen et al., 2018). This research aims to redress this imbalance. The focus here is to investigate how elite female athletes navigate the shifts in identity that coincide with key transitional events. With more female athletes choosing to combine motherhood with an elite career, their experiences surrounding pregnancy and motherhood will be the predominant focus. For the purpose of this research an elite athlete has been defined as someone who has competed at international level (Swann et al., 2015). As well as a lack of literature pertaining to elite athletic mothers, exploration of this area highlighted how there was limited research that focused on winter sports athletes, subsequently, this was identified as an area where female athletes may lack support. The route to this study was a highly personal one: as a woman who has spent many years negotiating multiple identities, as explored in the Preface, and has a passion for winter sports, this was a natural research avenue to pursue. The personal investment in this research is not only connected to the magnitude of the task of a PhD but also to a deep-seated desire to inform change for athletes combining motherhood with elite sport within winter sports.

1.2 Transitions in sport

Before turning our focus to the specific issues related to female sports performance it is key to foreground this section with a broad overview of transitions. Stambulova (2010) described a transition as a turning phase for an athlete, that often carries with it a new set of demands for the individual to negotiate. These potentially life-changing events populate the lifespan of the athlete, although research within this area has focused predominantly on the retirement stage
and the emotional processes that athletes go through during the final transition out of sport (Lavallee, 2000). Retirement literature frequently cites this stage as the one which sees the most profound psychological, physical, and emotional repercussions, in part due to the loss of identity suffered by athletes (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). However, it is important to recognise the significance of the range of other transitions athletes may experience during their career, although there are relatively few studies that have chosen to investigate the whole sport career of an athlete from initiation to discontinuation (Debois et al., 2014). Furthermore, Knights et al. (2016) noted that research into this area has mainly looked at the negative aspects of transitions and has failed to acknowledge that there are potentially positive outcomes from all transitional events. Two areas where there are significant gaps in the transition literature are related to within-career transitions and the experience of female athletes. These gaps become even more pertinent once placed in the context of research by Tekavc (2017), which suggests that female athletes will typically experience more transitions during their career and a more challenging career path than male athletes; perhaps linked to a need to balance sport with other roles. An example of these other roles is discussed by Guppy et al (2019) who revealed there remains an uneven allocation of tasks within a household, including housework and childcare which highlights how societal norms can result in a gendered division of tasks. The findings of Tekavc are of importance as they provide one of very few studies that have focused solely on the transitional experiences of female athletes.

1.3 Female sports performance

Equality in society and within sport remain societal challenges yet to be overcome, with sport remaining a heavily gendered area that still positions women as the outsiders (Fink, 2008). However, with the growth in female participation in sport, the focus and interest in elite female athletes has developed (Castanier et al., 2021), with a significant rise in both the professionalism and the profile of elite female sports and athletes (Fink, 2015). However, there
remains a disparity between male and female sports in terms of opportunity and exposure, as well as within the sports performance literature (Emmonds et al., 2019). Many of the findings suggest that there remain unequal power relations perpetuating the subordination of women (Burton, 2015). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the growth of professionalism within women’s sport has afforded women the opportunity to be full-time athletes which, in turn, has encouraged a growing body of research within sport science and sport medicine. This research seeks to understand more of the gendered experiences of female athletes. For example, Brown et al.’s (2021) research focused on both the experience and perception of menstruation on training and sport performance: 17 elite female athletes from a range of different sports were interviewed, with results suggesting that all athletes had had to manage the stages of their cycle appropriately due to a range of factors, for example, mood disturbance. Notably, even those athletes who did not experience discernible changes did report this time to be a potential distraction during times of competition. This study also identified a lack of openness when it came to discussing more sensitive issues unique to the female athlete such as the menstrual cycle. This has highlighted a need to develop more positive conversations in order to facilitate more open and honest understanding between athlete and coach, especially when their coach was male. While female specific research such as mine has become more established in recent years, the predominance of research that includes female athletes is still comparative in design, examining gender differences rather than exploring solely the female journey (e.g. Subijana et al., 2020). There is a need then for broader research that considers the experience of elite females and the way they perceive and navigate their journey through sport. Through gaining a deeper understanding of the athletic journey, all those involved in performance sport, from athlete to coach, to parent or partner, can ultimately provide better support.
1.4 The elite female and athletic identity

Underpinning any exploration into the psychology surrounding the athlete’s journey is the concept of identity, with research regularly focusing on how the negative psychological and emotional impact of transitions are closely connected to challenges to athletic identity (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). Athletic identity is both simple, in that it is fundamentally the attachment that the athlete has to their sport (Brewer et al., 1993), but also complex when the lens is shifted to look more closely at how athletic identity is established and managed. McGannon et al., (2012) examined the development of identity from a female perspective, and, through drawing on cultural sport psychology (i.e., Ryba et al., 2010), illustrated how cultural narratives can influence the development of identity as individuals can feel pressure to adhere to a predetermined narrative surrounding their identity. This is a point that becomes salient during the transition from athlete to both mother and athlete. Furthermore, Tekavc (2017) touches on the impact of gender, which can be seen to pervade the whole athletic journey, seeing female athletes negotiate more transitions during their career which may carry with them additional challenges to their identity.

1.4.1 Research with women

While the personal drivers to research this area and focus on female athletes have been covered, it is important to give context to the research environment that was created and how somewhat dated stereotypes may still have an impact on research with women. Reinharz and Chase (2003) discuss how social norms dictate how women often develop set perspectives and expectations that subconsciously dictate actions and thoughts, for example, to earn less than men, if partnered with a man to do more than half the domestic work, and to take on the role of nurturer (Guppy et al, 2019). As Bahlleda (2015) discusses, these expectations are based on long held historical factors that have seen human experience being characterised by male domination and control. Like race and class, ‘gender shapes institutions, ideologies,
interactions, and identities’ (Reinharz & Chase, 2003, p. 73), so when interviewing women there are additional considerations to ensure that all women are heard equally, in contrast to a being marginalised (LaVoi, 2016). Traditionally, women have felt that they have lacked a voice, and the interview can be a means to give a voice to their ideas and thoughts. The personal nature of interviews also means they can be emotive and traumatic depending on the topic area covered. However, a highly relevant point out of Reinharz and Chase’s (2003) writing is that elite women who are also viewed as powerful women may respond differently to interviews. Typically, these women are comfortable being heard but are also unlikely to have disposable time due to their careers and other commitments. One might ask whether the time pressures they face has inadvertently led to the lack of research within this field, a lack of research which has been acknowledged even quite recently as a point of concern. Mujika and Taipale (2022) present an alternative explanation for the lack of focus on women through their reflections on their previous research on women or between men and women. Mujika concluded that her involvement with elite female athletes didn’t translate to a balanced ratio of research papers, with as little as 6% of her research focused on women. Some explanation for this was presented by Taipale whose research solely focused on women, sex difference and training. She recognised how at the start of her research journey people steered away from researching women because they were more complicated due to the hormonal fluctuations that could impact physiological research. However, conversely they reported that research that is conducted with women sees the participants fully invested in research as they have a real interest in their own physiology and performance.

Likewise, Elliott-Sale et al. (2021) highlight how there still seemed to be limited demand for research examining female-specific sport data, with a large proportion of research conducted with male athletes limiting the application to females. Cowley et al (2021) examined the ratio of male and female participants in sport and exercise science research and concluded that with
only 6% focused solely on women, females remain significantly underrepresented. As such, most conclusions made from sport and exercise science research will tend to only be applicable to men, subsequently there is a risk that findings are being generalised to try to explain female athletes’ responses and behaviours. Of relevance to this study is the gap in the transition literature broadly related to female athletes and, more specifically, their experiences of career transitions; there is no research specifically looking at the transitions of elite females within the winter sports environment. Research that has looked at winter sports has been nation-centric failing to include participants from multiple nations such as Chroni et al.’s (2019) exploration of the transition from athlete to coach within Norwegian winter sports.

Within the next section, a brief overview of winter sports and distance running has been given. The purpose of this is two-fold; firstly, in serving to illustrate some of the differences between the two sporting environments, and secondly, in aiming to give context to later discussion.

1.5 Winter sports

Winter sports often take place or are played in cold conditions, on snow or ice, with suitable locations often being at moderate to high altitudes. These sports are characterised in this way due to the cold conditions required to maintain the appropriate environment which has tended to typify the winter months in most countries. This thesis focuses on the experiences of elite British athletes, and, unlike other European countries, the UK does not have a strong tradition of winter sports athletes. Subsequent entry into these more niche sports tends to occur in less traditional ways, unlike those who transition into more mainstream sports such as rugby or athletics, which typically occurs at school age. While research such as Kerstajn et al. (2018) has examined early transitions into winter sports of Slovenian and Italian athletes with a focus on the management of dual careers, there is no such research from a UK perspective.
The environments that these sports take place in can, in many cases, be termed extreme and, as such, athletes will have different considerations to their summer sports counterparts, meaning that research looking at winter sports has tended to focus on some of these factors. For example, Sue-Chu (2012) examined the impact of the longer-term effect of prolonged cold air exposure on winter sports athletes, with the majority having a high prevalence of respiratory symptoms: their research concluded that the potentially irreversible damage that lower airway cold exposure can cause should support the development of better preventative measures. This provides just one example of how the environmental extremes that athletes are exposed to can impact them; however, there are several other complex physiological changes such as increased energy expenditure and exacerbated fluid loss that can also occur (Meyer et al., 2011). While there are climatic and environmental challenges presented by winter sports, athletes will also experience many of the same challenges common to all elite athletes, such as the transition to senior or elite-level performance or injury. However, what is uncertain is whether these transitions are experienced and lived differently. One transition area where winter sports have received more attention is in relation to injury incidence such as On et al.’s (2019) research looking at shoulder injuries in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games. Although this was a somewhat limited study with only 14 athletes, they did conclude that more research would be helpful when looking at injury prevention. A later study by Xu et al. (2021) was even more specific keeping the focus on snow sports. Xu et al.’s (2021) study looked at injury incidence and predictive factors and focuses closely within the narrative on the high level of risk associated with snow sports. They concluded that the highest injury rates were seen in freestyle skiing, alpine skiing and snowboarding, with injuries tending to be moderate to severe. Research looking at the causes of injury has unsurprisingly concluded that the high-speed and high-impact collisions and crashes that are regularly seen during training and competition often result in high incidences of musculoskeletal injuries (Xu et al., 2021).
most cases injuries tend to be moderate to severe but they can also be fatal (Weber et al., 2016). The risk associated with winter sports was of particular interest within this thesis, especially for those athletes who had returned to training and competition after becoming parents when they know there is a risk of severe or even fatal injury.

1.6 Distance running

Distance runners were chosen as the other group to focus on, in part because of the different logistics related to the sport but also as in contrast to winter sports, distance running in the UK has been recognised since the 1970s as the most visible leisure activity (Yair, 1990). England Athletics (2022) recognised road running to be the most popular and accessible sport in the world, with British runners accumulating a total of 10 billion miles in a 12-month period (Moreton, 2021). The ease of accessibility has seen numbers increase in recent years, and recreational distance runners are accepted as a key group within leisure and exercise settings (Shipway and Holloway, 2010). The accessibility of running allows recreational and elite athletes to compete together, for example, major city marathons are something that has raised the profile and visibility of running within the UK (Shipway and Holloway, 2008). The simplicity and accessibility of running have also seen the creation of several recreational style events, perhaps most notable being Park Run. Hindley (2020) notes how Park Run has developed most significantly in the last decade to become a global social movement and, like a big city marathon, allows a sharing of leisure space by all levels of performer. Furthermore, the success of British distance runners over several decades has presented a range of role models for aspiring athletes, for example, Mo Farrah and Paula Radcliffe. The prominence of running in the UK from school level, and recreational competition such as Park Run to the elite level has allowed a deeper pool of talent to emerge. This contrasts the limited access and visibility of most winter sports, which are prohibitive due to a range of factors including cost and location. The majority of existing research exploring sport and motherhood has focused on
distance runners with them being given voice in a large proportion of the motherhood and sport literature at both recreational and elite level (e.g. McGannon et al, 2012; Darroch et al, 2019). This focus on runners is largely down to the fact that more runners seem to make a return to elite competition. This is perhaps due to the reported compatibility of running during pregnancy, with research supporting how running is safe to do during pregnancy, furthermore it is also easily modified and carries minimal risk, allowing athletes to maintain a certain level of fitness (Tenforde et al, 2014). Furthermore, the simplicity of running, being an individual sport that requires no set location perhaps makes it more feasible to make the return to sport.

1.7 Aims of the thesis

While research within the female performance domain is slowly developing, there are still significant gaps within the literature pertaining to high-performing females. This lack of research has resulted in the application of evidence from the male performance domain (e.g., sport science practices such as injury prevention interventions) to female sports (Emmonds et al, 2019). These trends are seen within the transition literature, both between gender and also between types of sports with the experiences of male athletes in team sports environments predominantly being the focus (Ekengren et al., 2021). It is these gaps in the research that this thesis seeks to address, with its main focus being to examine the establishment and development of athletic identity and to explore how female athletes negotiate career transition, with a primary focus on the transition to motherhood. To do this, four key research questions will be addressed:

1) How is athletic identity developed during the early stages of the elite female athlete’s career?

2) How do elite female athletes negotiate career transitions and challenges to athletic identity?
3) What is the impact of motherhood on identity and how is this managed?

4) How do female athletes negotiate retirement from sport?

1.8 Methodological approaches

The qualitative approach adopted within this research has drawn upon the traditions of both phenomenology and life history narrative. In-depth interview underpinned the data collection element of this study to ensure that the rich and detailed stories of each athlete were captured. Research within the field of transitions has traditionally followed this qualitative approach, as it allows a holistic appreciation of the athlete’s world to be developed. Debois et al. (2012) case study research into the transition of an elite fencer highlighted the importance of considering the whole athlete’s world, accounting for socio-cultural, sports systems, and personal and social contexts to provide a backdrop to the narrative. The value of this approach was seen in the richness of the data Debois et al. (2012) collected and provides further support to the methodological approaches taken.

1.9 Structure of the thesis

The main aim of this study is to examine the way that elite female athletes negotiate shifts in identity during the range of career transitions they experience, with a focus on the transition from athlete to mother athlete. Furthermore, it is hoped that the conclusions can inform practice by illustrating what factors can facilitate a smooth and positive transition. To preserve their narratives, the chapters of this thesis have a combination of theoretical, critical, and descriptive sections to ensure that context remains.

Chapter Two provides a critical review of the relevant literature as well as a theoretical overview. The chapter opens with a broad overview of transitions and identity before shifting focus to key models and theories of career transitions. The main focus of the chapter examines the range of transitions that athletes experience from early entry to sport to the range of within-
career transitions such as injury and motherhood to retirement. The final section explores the literature which examines a range of influencing factors that make the journey through sport so complex, culminating in a focus on how transitions are most appropriately managed, with a predominant focus on support.

In Chapter Three, the focus moves to the methodological approach taken within this thesis. The positioning of the qualitative methodology within the interpretivist paradigm is discussed and a mixed approach of both elements of phenomenology and life history narrative is examined. Throughout this chapter, the researcher’s desire to understand the lived experiences of each athlete is discussed in the context of the research approach. The latter half of this chapter has a focus on the thematic analysis carried out, with thematic maps to illustrate the main themes related to 1) identity and 2) quality of transition.

Chapter Four provides a summary of each athlete’s story, which gives context to the analysis of the key transitional events within their career. These stories are descriptive in nature and aim to provide a more holistic appreciation of each athlete. While it is hard to capture every aspect of the whole athlete on the page in the same way as listening and living the interview process, it is hoped that these contextualise the later analysis and discussion with Chapters Five to Eight.

Chapters Five to Seven present the key findings of the study. Chapter Five focuses on entry into sport and career transitions. The experiences of the five athletes are considered with distinctions drawn between runners and winter sports athletes. Chapter Six provides a sole focus on the transition from athlete to mother and athlete and for all participants was the most detailed transition they discussed. Finally, Chapter Seven looks at the end of each athlete’s career and retirement from the sport, or, in the case of those still competing, their future plans. These chapters also contain significant findings related to the management of transitions and
the negotiation of positive transitions. These three chapters all place the findings in the context of the current transition research, highlighting the nuances of the experiences of all five athletes.

Chapter Eight provides a discussion on the thesis, drawing on both findings and previous literature. The key implications for athletes, coaches and governing bodies are discussed and presented. As expected, this thesis has raised further questions and these, as well as the limitations of the current study, are addressed. Finally, this chapter presents reflections on the research process from the perspective of both the athletes and the researcher.

1.10 Chapter Conclusions

The need to redress the balance in terms of the lack of evidence-based research examining the experiences of elite female athletes, especially within winter sports settings, was a primary purpose of the research. Furthermore, there is no research that looks at elite winter sports athletes over their lifespan or considers how they navigate the transition into motherhood. This research will provide insight into this area and aims to provide all stakeholders in the athlete’s network with a better understanding of how to support and prepare elite females during their sporting career and after. This chapter has sought to provide an overview of the direction of this thesis and highlights the importance of pursuing research in this field. The methodological stance has been introduced and placed in context to justify the approaches taken. An overview of the thesis has been provided to guide the reader over the coming chapters.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review and Theoretical Overview

Transition: ‘an event or non-event, which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships’

(Scholossberg, 1981, p.5)

2.1 Introduction

Career transitions in sport have received significant research attention in recent years, although this has predominantly focused on male athletes - or compared male and female athletes. There are few female athlete career studies (Andersson and Barker-Ruchti, 2018). However, the importance of exploring the female athletic journey is paramount. Research by Tekavc (2017) found that the female career path was often more difficult with female athletes reportedly struggling with a variety of challenges from high training demands, balancing sport and education as well as a generally lower level of confidence than male athletes. Furthermore, female athletes often report less support both financially and professionally and they tend to prioritise education and future planning ahead of their sport, with the transition to parenthood still potentially marking the end of a female athlete’s career due to the significant impact this has on all aspects of life (Tekavc, 2017).

Ekengren et al.’s 2020 comparative study clearly illustrated the different themes that can emerge throughout the male and female athletic journey. Through exploration of the narratives of 18 elite handball players who were either retired or at the end of their careers, they examined the career paths of the athletes within the framework of Wylleman and Lavallee’s (2004) model. They concluded that there were several gender-specific themes, as detailed in Figure 1
**Figure 2.1.**

Gender-specific themes describing career pathways of Swedish professional handball players (Ekengren et al., 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>24</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>31 (W)</th>
<th>36 (M)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Discontinuation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men's career themes</td>
<td>&quot;I told myself I would be a prominent player&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I realised &quot;it costs&quot; to become a skilled player&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I needed education as a back-up plan but the combination was not easy&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I was ambitious but had to admit that handball wouldn't build a future&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I was stressed about adjusting abroad and how I ought to be as a Swedish woman&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;When retired, I enjoyed being at home and only missed the team spirit&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's career themes</td>
<td>&quot;I never thought about a career in handball&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I wanted to be something more than just a &quot;handball-girl&quot;, but handball was too important&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I was not true to myself putting education ahead of handball&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I had to juggle handball and pregnancy&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I had to study abroad and how I ought to be as a Swedish woman&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;When retired, I enjoyed being at home and only missed the team spirit&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These themes exemplify that through all stages of their journey female athletes both perceive and live their experience in sport in very different ways. More broadly their findings support those of Tekav (2017) concluding that female athletes had more challenging career paths from the outset when they seemed to lack confidence in whether they were good enough to pursue an elite career to motherhood proving a disruption to their career and signalling the end of their sporting journey.

The psychological and emotional impacts of transitional experiences largely stem from the attachment that an athlete can have to their sport which results in the development of an athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). The concept of athletic identity ‘the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role’ (Brewer et al., 1993 p. 237) underpins our understanding of the athlete experience and subsequently is at the forefront of this study. Research investigating career transitions has tended to focus on athletic retirement as this transition often carries with it the biggest psychological challenges for a performer (Lavallee and Robinson, 2007). However, recently researchers have started to adopt a holistic approach to transitions and examine this from a life-span approach (Stambulova, 2010). Ekengren et al.’s (2019) research also supports the adoption of a holistic approach to the area as this facilitates a better understanding of context and enables the athletes’ experience to be viewed holistically. The holistic athletic career model (HAC) (Wylleman et al., 2013) provides the most comprehensive framework in which an athlete’s career is seen to contain stages or transitions that relate to five fundamental areas: athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational and financial developments. Substantial research within this field has adopted the HAC to underpin research as it allows for a focus to remain on the athlete as a whole person and can guide data collection accordingly (Stambulova, et al., 2015).
This chapter will review the research that has looked at individual transitional periods, for example, the move from junior to senior competition (e.g., Samuel and Tenenbaum, 2011), pregnancy (e.g., McGannon et al., 2012) or injury (e.g., Ivarsson et al., 2017). It will also discuss models which have a focus on the whole career (e.g., Wylleman, 2019). In doing this the gaps within the literature will be highlighted. Toward the end of the chapter, the focus moves to discuss factors that can impact transitions, including the level of competition and type of sport (e.g., Park et al., 2013) as well as review potential resources and coping strategies available to athletes (e.g., Cosh et al., 2015).

2.2 What are transitions?

Most aspects of human life are marked by significant events and periods of change. In the context of this research, these are termed transitions. In early life, these transitional episodes tend to start with those connected to educational progression and move on to include experiences linked to changes in personal circumstances: careers, children, and retirement (Wheaton, 1990). In some instances, these transitions are life-changing events and, when placed in the context of elite sports, can carry great significance. This increased significance can be attributed to several factors, some stemming from the uncertain nature of sport and the inherent injury risk as well as the fact that several impactful transitions are often experienced at a relatively young age (Stambulova, 2010). The emotional implications of these transitional experiences have resulted in most research in this field focusing on the negative aspects of transitions, failing to recognise that there are equally many positive responses to transitions in sport (Howells & Fletcher, 2016; Knights et al., 2016). A further limitation of current research is the focus on specific transitions rather than a holistic career approach (e.g. Debois et al., 2014), with most of the research still heavily focused on retirement (Kuettel et al., 2016).
Before transitions can be examined more closely it is important to recognise that they can be categorised as normative or non-normative (Morris, 2022). Normative transitions are those which tend to be developmental, predictable, and anticipated, for example, the transition from junior to senior level sport (Schlossberg, 1984). These ‘expected’ transitions tend to also be more planned in nature and viewed in a positive way and less likely to need assistance or support to navigate successfully (Sinclair and Orlick, 1993). Although it is important to recognise how some athletes will need support even through these potentially planned events.

In contrast non-normative transitions or crisis transitions, such as injury (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004) often require substantial support as they are unplanned, unpredictable and in turn involuntary, and tend to occur either within or at the end of an athlete’s career (Hollings et al., 2014).

As discussed within the opening of this chapter the concept of athletic identity underpins our understanding of the myriad of transitions athletes will experience within their careers. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the literature surrounding career transitions in sport focuses heavily on the significance of identity (Lingam-Willgoss, 2021) to which this chapter now turns.

2.3 Identity, gender and athletic identity

Before looking at athletic identity in more depth it is key to consider the concept of identity more broadly. Erikson (1968) described identity as a largely unconscious and constantly evolving perception of who someone is both as an individual and in terms of where they fit in broader society and remains intertwined with culture. Two dominant theories have emerged that seek to explain the concept of identity further: identity theory (Stryker, 1980) and social identity theory (Fink et al., 2009). The basic premise of identity theory is that it is role-based, made up of self-conceptions and identification of the self with expectations and conforming to
a social role: subsequently, the self is composed of multiple identities. The later social identity theory shares many similarities but focuses on how social identity is a person’s identification with a particular social category or group such as a sports team (Fink et al., 2009). The development of social identity takes place through several processes: social categorization (the process of organizing individuals into social groups) social identification (an individual identifying as a group member), and social comparison (comparison of the individual's group with other groups)

Identity can be viewed as who someone is and is a multi-faceted conception of the self. Furthermore, within any discussion of identity it is key to recognise how different facets of identity intersect with other social categories such as social class, race and gender. Of relevance to this study is the impact of gender identity and gender more broadly on the experiences of elite female athletes. Gender is widely accepted to be a social construct that in turn allocates a set of suitable behaviours to the male or female sex: these behaviours largely conform to societal expectation of how men and women should act (Appleby and Foster, 2014). More specifically, gender identity reflects how an individual understands themselves in terms of the cultural definitions of female and male (Wood and Eagly, 2015). However, it is key to note how gender identity can be fluid and may develop or change during the lifespan. The complexity with gender identity in the context of sport comes when the demands of sport challenge the conventions of a given gender and in turn challenge traditional gender ideologies, for example, women competing in combat sports which is deemed incompatible with the cultural definitions of a female (Kavoura et al, 2019).

Where all individuals will have both identity and a gender identity all athletes will have at some level of athletic identity. However, it wasn’t until the early 1990s that Brewer et al. (1993) conceptualised the idea of athletic identity. They defined athletic identity “as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role and is a much more conscious aspect of self-
concept” (Brewer et al., 1993 p. 237). Like social identity, they also concluded that identification of this identity was informed by the feedback of others such as teammates and spectators. Brewer et al. (1993) identified three influencing factors that have a bearing on the strength of athletic identity: social identity (the strength of the identification with the athlete role), negative affectivity (emotional response to failure in the athlete role), and exclusivity (lack of other social roles). The intense engagement that is required within elite sport can result in athletes developing an exclusive athletic identity or unidimensional identity, predisposing athletes to being more vulnerable to adjustment difficulties and heightened levels of stress and anxiety (e.g., Kerr and Dacyshyn., 2000; Martin et al., 2014). These factors illustrate why tensions can appear when identity is disrupted or threatened, both of which are commonplace during transitional periods and explains why athletic identity is frequently referred to when exploring the range of transitions athletes experience (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). For example, when faced with a crisis transition, such as a career-ending injury or forced retirement, athletes often experience a form of bereavement as they grieve the loss of their athletic self, emphasising the importance of preparing for a redefinition of their self-identity to lessen the impact of this (Hattersley et al., 2019). However, a complexity remains, with research conclusively reporting that athletes with a strong athletic identity are more committed to their sport and perhaps causally have better athletic performance (e.g., Brewer & Petipas., 2017; Horton & Mack., 2000), meaning that having a strong athletic identity is fundamental to success. This relates closely to the fact that higher athletic identity seems to positively correlate with those competing at higher sports levels (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006), with the higher recognition received serving to reinforce athletic identity (Rasquinha & Cardinal, 2017). This tension between the cost/benefit of having a strong athletic identity reinforces how this is still an area that requires further exploration and understanding.
Poucher and Tamminen (2017) offer one of the very few studies that have examined the development and management of identity during the varying stages of the athletic journey. Within their study, they explored how male and female active and retired athletes from a range of sports managed their athletic identity. Through individual interviews with 13 participants, they concluded that athletes took responsibility for the management of their identity through their personal actions and use of strategies to manage transitions such as increases in training load or raised profile from success. However, it was also recognised how athletes found it somewhat challenging to manage multiple identities as it was often hard to segregate the different parts of their life. In cases where athletes were unable to do this, the researchers found that there was a tendency to over-commit to their athletic role, something potentially detrimental during their retirement. While Poucher and Tamminen’s (2017) study had both male and female participants, they did not report any gender differences in the management of identity. While there are studies that have looked at gender differences, research solely looking at female athletes is somewhat limited, however, there is some research that has sought to examine how female athletes negotiate their identity in sport.

McGannon et al.’s (2012) qualitative study explored the development of identity from a feminist perspective. Through textual analysis, they examined the impact of the media on the construction of Paula Radcliffe’s identity as both mother and athlete. In line with social learning theory their findings recognised how external influencers can impact the development of athletic identity, concluding that the media is powerful in shaping athletic identity and in turn, can dictate how the public views an athlete. It is important to recognise that this study focused solely on the representation of one elite female who was celebrated in terms of her commitment to motherhood and her career. This limited focus on a highly successful athlete does present a challenge if trying to generalise these findings. McGannon et al. (2012) also concluded that cultural norms surrounding women and motherhood are still perpetuated by the
mainstream media which can also influence athletic identity. The impact of gender ideology, that being people’s views on gender, is frequently cited within research focusing on female athletes and athletic identity as gender can be seen to permeate all aspects of a female’s athletic experiences leaving them to negotiate several potentially conflicting identities in sport practices (Krane et al., 2014). More recently Kavoura at al. (2015, p.96) explored dual career policies and practices with Finnish female judo athletes. Their findings suggested that the way women negotiate identity is influenced by patriarchal beliefs and traditional gender stereotypes. These patriarchal beliefs are embedded in the culture of martial arts where the concept of fighting is at odds with the idea of femininity. It remains an environment where such beliefs are perpetuated by coaches and sees female judokas accept the notion that women are weaker due to biology. This was discernible in the way that the athletes strategically negotiated their multiple identities. These negotiations of self and identity saw the athletes accepting their given positions and their findings concluded that the athletes in their study albeit unwittingly became ‘agents in the reproduction of patriarchal power’. This study also highlights how different cultural norms and beliefs may have an influence, in this instance the Greek culture which still sees women repressed and family at the heart of maintain the status quo of traditional roles and values (Kavoura et al, 2015).

The limited focus that has been given to elite female athletes’ experience of transition and their negotiations of identity highlight a gap in the research that requires further exploration to allow a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences throughout the athletic journey.
2.4 Models and Theories of Career Transitions

Various models and theories have been applied to help understand the complex area of athletic development in sport, although the unpredictable nature of non-normative transitions means they can be harder to depict in frameworks and models (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Before exploring sport-specific models and theories it is useful to give thought to other approaches that have been applied to help our understanding of transitions in sport which broadly fit under the banner of social gerontology or thanatology.

2.4.1 Social Gerontology Models

Models of social gerontology are concerned with concepts connected to the study of ageing and are often applied to retirement from sport. Broadly, models and theories within this area address how the athlete adapts to the social reorganisation faced during retirement. Burgees’ (1960) Activity or Substitution Theory posits that roles that are lost are replaced or substituted by others that allow activity levels to remain and continue. By way of contrast, Disengagement Theory (Cummins et al., 1960) offers a more structured and functional theory suggesting that the process of withdrawal due to age is a mutually beneficial experience for both individuals and culture as it allows the social system to remain stable. In the context of sport, this could allow the athlete to feel that retirement is a natural process and, as such, perceive it in a more positive way. While these theories do have some applications to sport, for example, they tend to have some relevance to retirement, they are still somewhat limited, (Gordon & Lavallee, 2011). Later theories such as Social Breakdown theory (Kuypers & Bengston, 1973) suggest that the loss of role can carry with it a change in identity due to a shift in external labelling which, if not positive, can lead to the individual withdrawing from society. This has close links to the concept of athletic identity and it being a strong predictor of whether retirement from sport is either a positive or negative experience. For example, research by Martin et al. (2014) looked at the changes in athletic identity at different phases of the careers of 62 elite Australian
athletes. They concluded that there was a natural decrease in athletic identity as retirement grew closer which facilitated a positive transition out of sport with increased life satisfaction in retirement. These findings illustrate how retirement doesn’t always result in adjustment difficulties but highlights how developing new interests outside of sport can support the transition out of sport. The development of new interests outside of sport relates to Dowd’s (1975) Exchange theory which presents a more positive perception of retirement and has strong links to Activity theory (Burgees, 1960), suggesting that through rearrangement and reordering successful transition can be achieved. This theory, when linked to sport, lends support to both the development of other interests outside of sport and emphasises the importance of retirement planning which can allow for reorganisation to be in place before retirement occurs.

2.4.2. Thanatological Models

Where theories of social gerontology relate to ageing, thanatological models relate experiences to social death. Social death refers to the concept of being treated as if you were dead or non-existent, something particularly salient for athletes who often experience a loss of identity and feelings of isolation following retirement (Brewer, 1993). These models link closely to concepts of social awareness which were developed to help understand the interactions with the terminally ill. These concepts were given clarity by Glaser and Strauss (1965) who suggest that there are four varying levels of awareness: closed, suspicion, mutual pretence and open. These concepts when placed in the context of sport can provide a better understanding of how social awareness can impact retirement. For example, when closed, the athlete is unaware of imminent retirement while, with suspicion, the athlete suspects something due to subtle changes; mutual pretence, where all know that retirement is imminent, but no one acknowledges it; and open, where all those involved acknowledge retirement is near. From this, we can surmise that those who have a more open awareness are likely to have a more positive retirement experience (Lingam-Willgoss, 2021). More well-known among these
theories is that of Kubler-Ross, as her 1969 stages of death/grief response model has frequently been applied to help explain how athletes process transitions such as injury or retirement. This model suggests that both injury and retirement carry the same feelings of loss as grieving and that athletes will progress through different emotional stages while coping with an injury or mourning the end of their career: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. There is some support for grief response models such as this, for example, Van der Poel and Nel (2011) found some relevance when looking at post-injury responses of 21 elite athletes. Their findings indicate that athletes experience several of the stages of the model, although bargaining remains an exception. This is one example of how typically researchers only find partial support for this model, with broader criticism being the rigidity of progression between stages, as well as failing to be sport specific (Walker & Heaney, 2013). A further criticism of this model is the negative view it gives of retirement, for example, like some of the other models discussed, this approach carries the assumption that retirement will always demand serious adjustments and have negative implications.

2.4.3 Transition and Conceptual Models

While there is value in developing a comprehensive understanding of all theories related to this area, the somewhat negative lens through which gerontology and thanatology view transition limits their application to sport settings. This negative perspective largely stems from retirement being viewed as a single event which literature unequivocally accepts carries with it a significant challenge (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Wholly more positive are the transition models which take a more life-span view of transitions and include retirement as part of a process rather than a single event within the athlete’s career. Schlossberg’s (1981) Model of Human Adaptation to Transition identifies three interacting factors that influence the transition experience: characteristics of the individual; perceptions of transition; and characteristics of pre-transition and post-transition environments. This theory also illustrates how it is important
to recognise how perception plays a key role in the process, with individual variables having different salience depending on the type of transition, which can be as important as the actual transition itself. For example, a retiring athlete may view the experience as a crisis, a relief, or a combination of both, depending on their perception of their situation (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). While these theories have some application and value, the lack of sport-specific focus remains a prime limitation (Gordon & Lavallee, 2011).

In contrast, conceptual models of career transitions are far more comprehensive and were developed specifically for sport. Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) Model of Adaptation to Career Transition explored the whole retirement process including causes, influencing factors, coping resources, quality of adjustment and treatment. This model illustrates that four of the most common causes of career termination are related to age, deselection, injury, and free choice.
By viewing retirement in this way some explanation for positive transitions out of sport is provided, as the model highlights how athletes require the relevant resources, coping skills as well as a new identity if they are to successfully negotiate their transition out of the sport (Choi & Kim, 2021). While retirement is the transition to have received the most attention both from theory and literature, athletes will experience multiple transitions during their careers. The wide range of potential transitions athletes experience initiated a shift in research focus towards the end of the 1990s with researchers adopting a life-span perspective. This approach saw theories developed to encompass not just athletic transitions but those in other non-athletic
domains of the athletes’ lives (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). This holistic approach to understanding the athlete and their transitional experiences allows more conception of the interaction between different domains.

2.4.4 Career Stage Models

Career stage models or life-span development models propose that there are key transitional periods within an athlete’s career and, while they don’t always explain the process, they do identify the normative transitions that an athlete is likely to face. These models have seen much development but started with Bloom’s (1985) model which focused on three clear career stages: initiation, development and perfection. A limitation of this model was the lack of inclusion of retirement as the final stage in the athletic journey, something Salmela added in his 1994 adapted version of the model. One of the leading researchers within the transition field, Stambulova (1994, 2000), developed this yet further within her stage model to include other predictable stages (normative transitions): the beginning of sport specialisation; transition to intensive training; transition to high achievement and adult sport; amateur to professional; culmination to end of career and the end of a sports career. However, there are limitations to the models discussed as they have a sole view of the athlete’s transition in sport. This led Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) to develop a more rounded holistic model that allows the strong concurrent interactive and reciprocal nature of athletic transitions and those that fall under academic, psychosocial, and professional areas to be appreciated. This holistic lifespan approach advocates a developmental perspective on career transitions that considers the whole person across their lifespan. Recently Wylleman (2019) developed this further to include financial and legal transitions as is seen in Figure 2.2.
The strength of this model is that it allows for athletic career transitions to be viewed in the context of the life transitions that the athlete will face. Furthermore, this illustrates how, while athletic identity is often the focus within literature, athletes will be negotiating several potentially conflicting identities that may shift during their lifespan and everyday lives. Application of this model has been shown to facilitate a deeper insight into an athlete’s...
experiences by allowing transitions to be explored concurrently (e.g., Defruyt et al., 2020; Tekavc et al., 2015). For example, Ekengren et al. (2020) examined the experiences of 18 male and female Swedish professional handball players through the HAC lens, allowing them to gain information about the athlete’s whole life. Furthermore, this model supports studies adopting a qualitative approach to exploration especially those traditions aligned with narrative and life history research. Transitions in sport will underpin the elite athlete journey and by viewing these in the context of other life factors the interactional impact can be considered and a full understanding of the athlete’s life explored.

2.5 Transitions in Sport

The athletic level of the holistic athletic career model (Wylleman, 2019) encompasses a wide range of different transitional events that athletes may experience, from early entry into sport to retirement. These will be broadly split into early transitions (those that take place in childhood and early adolescence), within career transitions (those that occur during the athlete’s career when a commitment to sport has been made) and end of sport (including retirement and life after sport).

2.5.1 Early transitions

Typically, most athletic journeys begin at the stage when young children first embark on sport, with early transitions in sport tending to occur during early childhood where children typically participate in a range of different activities, from sport to play activities, which is referred to as sampling (Côté et al., 2009). Research within the early sampling literature has concluded that key motives for children’s participation at this stage include fun, playing with friends, but also achieving success in a socially desirable and highly valued area (Gould & Horn, 1984; Strandbu et al., 2016). This final point is interesting as it suggests that, even at a young age, children could aspire to having an athletic identity, highlighting how this could develop as soon as athletic involvement in sport commences (Ballie & Danish, 1992). This early engagement
in sport means family are often highly influential in these early transitions, which can be seen in the context of the HAC model which illustrates the strongest psychosocial support coming from parents, siblings, and peers (Wylleman, 2019). Furthermore, the family have a fundamental role in early socialisation into sport often facilitating the development of sport as being a natural part of life (DeLuca, 2014). Likewise, Cheung (2019) recognised the importance of teachers as role models and in particular the impact of an active versus a less active teacher on preschool children. In terms of physical activity, those children with active teachers were in turn more active. These findings even with pre-school age children highlight how role modelling physical activity starts at a very young age. Strandbu et al. (2020) discussed the influence of family during these early stages and concluded that having a ‘family sport culture’ was not just influential in terms of support but also in terms of the likelihood of participation. The significance of family sport culture links to the earlier work of Coakley (2006) who examined the concept of family habitus and the impact this can have on children’s socialisation into sport. Coakley’s (2006) use of family habitus refers to a ‘historically and socially situated system of dispositions and the family activities associated with them’ (pg 9). In essence the concept suggests that the combination of a belief system and a lifestyle, that includes factors such as social class, family life, and sport participation will influence family life. The concept of family habitus emphasises the family’s fundamental role in early socialisation which sees sport develop as a natural way of life (Strandbu et al, 2019). For example, DeLuca (2014) examined children’s type of sport choice within swimming and tennis concluding that children can be drawn to certain sports based on a family tradition and these can form part of the young child’s lifestyle. Furthermore, it is important to recognise how the impact of family is also closely connected to the resources available, including cultural, physical and economic, all of which can influence a child’s participation (Dagkas and Stathi, 2007). The impact of culture was touched on by Kavoura et al, 2014) who focused on Greek
girls’ participation in judo. They concluded that Greek girls learn from past generations which sports are suitable for them to participate in. If they choose to engage with Judo they are challenging the stereotypical gender norms which can lead to gender-based discrimination at both school and federation level. These findings suggest that in some cultures even with a supportive family culture other societal norms may make participation too challenging.

When considering the relationships between family sports culture/family habitus and participation it is key to acknowledge the role of gender. As Heinze et al. (2017) discussed gender roles can be particularly salient in sporting contexts, with gender norms tending to support boys’ participation. Findings within this area all suggest that the presence of a strong family sports culture may in fact be more important for girls than boys if they are to maintain participation (Strandbu et al, 2019).

The importance of family habitus and role modelling for girls was discussed by Laird et al. (2018) who examined the influence of social support networks on physical activity participation within a group of 18 13–15-year-old girls. Their findings suggest that adolescent girls are influenced by three primary social networks, these being social support, modelling, and connectedness. In keeping with the HAC model, they concluded that support and modelling opportunities tended to come from parents but also teachers, with active parents often presenting the strongest role modelling influences. The impact of modelling was also seen in Rodrigues et al.s (2018) study looking at the impact of active parents on both boys’ and girls’ participation. Notably, girls with physically active mothers were engaged in more sports, more regularly than those with inactive mothers. The importance of role modelling at a young age was echoed by Ronkainen et al. (2019) who examined the experiences of 17–18-year-old Finnish athletes - of the 25 role models chosen nine were family members and six were parents, illustrating further the impact of family habitus on early sports participation. An interesting finding within their study was the differences in role models chosen by the male and female
athletes. Male athletes predominantly sought out elite athletes as role models, in contrast to female athletes who tended to model themselves on those they perceived themselves most similar to (often their mothers). One area of the HAC that has received somewhat limited research attention relates to the influence that siblings can have on sports participation. One recent study by Osai et al. (2020) sought to explore this area in the context of organised youth sports. Their research examined the way that older siblings could have an influence on younger siblings’ participation, however, their findings suggest that the differentiation dynamic decreased the likelihood of engaging in the same sport as an older sibling regardless of the gender of the siblings.

The sampling of different sports at school tends to occur within more mainstream sports, for example, football, netball, and athletics, however, not all sports allow for a sampling approach. There are a range of sports that require children to focus more intensely, all year round from a young age, something termed ‘early specialisation’ (Baker et al., 2009). This transition from sampling to early specialisation is often seen in sports such as gymnastics and swimming due to the intense training regimes required even at the initiation stage due to peak performance often being achieved at younger ages than in other sports. This tradition of early specialisation in certain sports can present a challenge when viewed through the HAC lens, as when the athletic level may rapidly transition into the mastery stage other levels may remain at the first stages, potentially causing disruptions to identity. In contrast to the concept of early specialisation, there are also several sports which preclude childhood engagement and, as such, athletes may experience initiation in adulthood, for example, rugby.

While (early) specialisation can occur at a young age, it typically occurs during the teenage years and marks a significant transition in the athlete's journey. The shift to more focused training, underpinned by skill development, can also see changes in the individual’s view of themselves whereby their identity as an athlete becomes strengthened. The significance of
specialisation is that this early transition is linked to the associated investment as it signals a commitment to the sport and, when managed appropriately and positively, is a key predictor of the individual’s success at elite level (Stambulova et al., 2012). However, training and performance at this more committed level carry with them unique challenges, for example, as Røynesdal et al. (2018) noted the pressure associated with fitting in with standards within a performance environment can be a source of stress to athletes and must be managed carefully. Interestingly, Franck et al. (2016) concluded that a high athletic identity and strong motivation to move to the next level could help mediate these challenges. However, this transition is likely to elicit some anxiety largely related to the uncertainty about what senior sport will be like (Morris et al., 2017).

2.5.2 Within-Career transitions

While the early transitions into sport may be difficult, the transitions that occur during an athlete’s career have the potential to present more significant challenges. Within-career transitions are rarely limited to a single episode, with athletes experiencing several throughout their sporting journey, for example, a change of team or injury. A further variable to consider is that these transitions often happen in parallel to many other changes that relate to the psychosocial and academic level resulting in a change in the support network and educational impact, as illustrated by the HAC (Wylleman, 2019). While there are a wide range of within-career transitions, three of the most significant and pertinent within the context of the current study are the focus of the next section. These have been chosen both due to prominence in the literature as well as being the transitions most relevant to the athletes within this study. Notably pregnancy and motherhood receive the most attention as these were the primary focus of this study.
2.5.2.1 Transitioning to senior level sport

The transition from junior to senior sport is perhaps the most predictable of all transitions that athletes will make (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011) and will be an integral part of the athletic journey. However, research suggests that athletes often view this as the most challenging transition throughout their journey (e.g., Stambulova, 2009). The transition to senior level sport is of great significance as it represents not just a change in focus but also a shift of environment, which is likely to carry with it an increase not just in training demands but a more structured and competitive sports domain. This transition can also represent a point when the athlete is training to reach an elite level in their sport, which can stimulate an enhancement of the individual’s athletic identity and which impacts the athlete’s perception of themselves. Franck et al. (2016) examined the adjustment patterns of over one hundred club-based male and female Swedish athletes from both team and individual sports. Their findings suggested that athletes have three potential profiles when adjusting to senior level: progressive, regressive, or sustained, which are developed based on internal resources such as athletic identity and high motivation as well as the coping strategies employed by the athlete. An interesting finding was the relative importance of external factors such as social support which, while important, were secondary to the internal resources. The findings of this study illustrate the complexities of this early transition to senior level sport and the importance of this transition for the athlete. It is important, though, to recognise that not all athletes make a smooth or successful transition to senior level sport. Research by Hollings et al. (2014) examined this transition with 11 junior male and female track and field athletes. Their findings concluded that several factors, including early senior success and a strong unidimensional identity, predicted a successful transition to senior and ultimately elite-level sport. Conversely, those athletes who did not progress to elite level struggled to manage conflicting demands in a range
of spheres of their lives. These findings further support those of Franck et al. (2016), emphasising the importance of a strong athletic identity, especially during the early years.

Finn and McKenna (2010) investigated this area from the coaches’ perspective of the transition of male athletes to first-team competition in English team sports (football, rugby union, rugby league and cricket), which is somewhat comparable to a move to senior level. They recognised that this early career transition had the potential to be extremely demanding: both athletically and socially. These demands are similar to those discussed by Røynesdal et al. (2018), for example, fitting in with the standards of a first-team environment. Hayman et al. (2014) examined the transition to senior level sport amongst adolescent golfers and found that a combination of individual, social and environmental factors all played a role in making this a positive transition. They concluded that this was a transition with positive emotions if the athlete in question had genuine potential to be elite and, as an individual, remained focused and supported on this as their main outcome goal, similar to the findings of Hollings et al. (2014).

In contrast, Boccia et al. (2021) examined the transitions of elite male and female world-class throwers with their findings suggesting that having potential and being considered elite at junior level may not always predict a successful senior career. Note that in this study the term ‘elite’ was defined as those in the top 50 for their age at junior level, which perhaps suggests why the transition to senior elite level was low and not predicted by junior success.

While having a high athletic identity has tended to result in a much more positive transition to senior level (Franck et al., 2016), it is important to recognise how this is still likely to be a challenging period. The overall significance of this event may elicit some anxiety as it represents a key life transition, marking the point in time when sport must become a priority in the athlete’s life (Hayman et al., 2014).
As the athlete progresses through their early career, they are likely to experience several other typical transitions in their journey and, as they find their way into the senior or elite environment, change events will occur that may serve to enhance or challenge their identity. One of the most significant challenge transitions they are likely to face is injury which by its very nature will be non-normative and unplanned.

### 2.5.2.2 Injury

Often recognised as one of the most prevalent non-normative transitions in the athlete's journey, injuries are commonplace due to the physical nature of sport (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). Sports injuries can range in severity, but research suggests they are only significant to athletes if they have to miss training or competition due to injury, this suggests that the impact of injury becomes more significant the longer it takes the athlete to return to sport (Scolnik et al., 2018). Research by Perera et al. (2019) looked at the prevalence of injury in elite Australian female cricketers over two seasons and found that 77.7% of players reported at least one injury, with the average time out for an injury ranging from 15.5 days for lower-level knee injuries up to 110.5 days for spinal stress fractures. Most injuries saw players unable to play for four weeks or more. High injury rates have also been found in research focused on elite female Dutch youth athletes from a range of sports (football, basketball, and gymnastics) reporting that at any given time 47.9% of athletes reported an injury of some kind (Richardson et al., 2017). A final illustration of the regularity of injury for elite athletes was shown in research by Palmer-Green and Elliott (2015) which revealed that 39% of the 2014 Great Britain Winter Olympic team experienced an injury during the Sochi Games. The significance of these injuries usually results in a period out of sport but can also lead to deselection, a drop in performance level and, in some cases, career termination (Park et al., 2013). Furthermore, it has been well documented that the impact of injury can result in a number of negative psychological responses, including depression, fear, boredom and sadness (Russell et al., 2018). At its most extreme injury can
indicate the end of an athlete’s career as they may be unlikely to return to their pre-injury form (Forsdyke et al., 2016). As well as these psychosocial factors Petitpas and Danish (1995) recognised that there may be a range of other accompanying emotions such as identity loss, fear, anxiety, and loss of confidence. Typical of all transitions, the impact on identity can underpin the multitude of negative emotions that are evident: injury prevents athletes from participating and subsequently threatens their athletic identity. This threat was seen in multiple guises in research by Scolnik et al. (2018) who looked at the psychosocial effects of injury in female athletes, specifically focusing on their identity both in and out of sport. Focus groups conducted with the six athletes revealed that not only did injury cause the athletes to re-evaluate their athletic identity but also their identity as females. The athletes discussed how they perceived visible injury as a non-feminine characteristic and that the inability to exercise diminished their body ideal and they felt less feminine and more unattractive during periods of injury. An interesting conclusion was that the athletes in the study all still appeared constrained by societal values related to their bodies. While these findings suggest the impact on their physical perception may have also threatened their identity they concluded that social support in the form of sport-specific care was essential to both physical and emotional recovery.

While injury research is vast, there has been a limited focus on young athletes’ experiences of injury. The importance of this becomes relevant when focusing on the impact of injury history, with theories suggesting that a history of injury can lead to a more realistic cognitive appraisal of injury (Brewer, 1994). Von Rosen et al. (2018) focused their research on injury perceptions and consequences in adolescent elite athletes (it is worth noting that within this study they termed national level adolescents as elite) from a range of sports (including track and field, downhill skiing, and handball). Male and female athletes from 15-19 were monitored and interviewed with findings suggesting that injury risk was higher in female athletes than it was in male athletes. Like older athletes, injury led to negative psychological responses such as
anger as well as isolation and heightened self-criticism. However, a key conclusion was that due to the significance of sports in adolescents’ lives there was potential for them to lose their understanding of their identity and question their reasons for continuing in sport. The significance of this loss of identity is potentially more crucial for young athletes due to identity exploration and development tending to occur during adolescence (Haraldsdottir & Watson, 2021). These findings imply that young athletes potentially need more additional support during a period of injury than older athletes.

When examining sport-related injury it is also important to step back from the negative narrative that is so often voiced and to view it more positively. For example, Wadey et al. (2013) discuss how injury may lead to a period of growth for the athlete. They examined coaches’ perspectives on how injury can facilitate growth, concluding that athletes can experience four growth dimensions following injury: personal, psychological, social, and physical. Of these, personal growth was deemed the most significant, with this resulting in athletes shifting in their general outlook on life as well as developing a firmer belief that hard work pays off. More recently, sport injury related growth was examined by Everard et al. (2021) who explored the narratives of 15 elite track athletes using life-story interviewing and timelining. Their findings suggested that six distinct narrative typologies emerged surrounding injury: ‘resilience’; ‘merry-go-round’ (cycle of highs and lows); ‘longevity’ (progressive from bad to good); ‘pendulum’ (alternating between longevity and performance); ‘snowball’ (a downward trajectory of decline – physical and mental); and ‘MoreToMe’ (sport and injury are viewed in the broader context of life and other roles). In the context of injury, these narratives all bear equal relevance, however, in the broader context of transition and identity, three key narratives have more pertinence. The development of resilience through sport has long been discussed and, in the context of the athlete narratives, they all felt resilience protected them from any adverse impact of an injury. The athletes all viewed injury as part of sport that they
had developed coping strategies for such as knowing the value of hard work during rehabilitation and resilience. The snowball narrative typified the experiences of almost all the athletes, this narrative in contrast to suggesting growth proposes that the more injuries and more recurrent an injury the more a downward trajectory is seen in terms of both physical and psychological wellbeing. Finally, the MoreToMe narrative resonates with other transition and identity research that has shown the value of having multiple identities in transitions out of sport (e.g., Torregrosa et al., 2015). The MoreToMe narrative was seen by athletes who viewed sport and injury in the broader context of their lives when they had multiple roles and identities which offered a form of protection against the negative impact of injury even when they are career-ending. Career-ending injuries result in the athlete retiring and are discussed later in this chapter.

The high probability of injury during an athlete's career, along with the psychological and emotional implications, has seen a wealth of research within this area, however, injury is not the only transition that can threaten identity due to the physical impact and time out of sport it can result in. Pregnancy and motherhood can also signal a change in training and a significant shift in physical ability as well as time out of sport and, with more elite female athletes combining careers in sport with family, the importance of research within this area is ever growing.

2.5.2.3 Pregnancy and Motherhood

One of the most significant transitions that can occur in a woman’s life is becoming a parent, however, this remains an under-researched area in the context of elite sport (Tekavc et al., 2020). With more elite female athletes (e.g., Laura Kenny and Serena Williams) seeking to combine their elite careers with motherhood, the importance of research within this area may be considered paramount. While some athletes decide to blend parenthood and an elite sports career, the decision to start a family has more often coincided with a clear decision to retire
from competitive sport due to the potential disruption it can create (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Research by Tekavc et al. (2015) focused on the experiences of elite Slovenian athletes and highlighted that most female athletes decided to start a family after they retired from sport, in stark contrast to the male athletes who typically combined these two roles. A further comparative study by Ronkainen et al. (2016) looked at the retirement experiences of male and female distance runners, concluding that cultural norms still dictated that elite females viewed pregnancy as carrying with it an expectation that they would retire. In contrast, male athletes felt it was both ‘acceptable’ and ‘worthwhile’ to maintain their career and combine it with parenthood. The differences in the experiences of male and female athletes were the focus of Ekengren et al.,s (2019) research which focused on Swedish professional handball players. Through reanalysis of a series of career-based interviews composite vignettes were created highlighting key features of the athletes’ lives. Eight themes (see figure 2.1) were identified within the female athletes’ narratives which illustrated how females view their careers in sport, with one having relevance to the area of pregnancy and motherhood. Theme seven reflects how female athletes recognised they had to juggle their pregnancy with sport to make it work – in contrast to this, when male athletes were asked about parenthood the theme identified was framed in a wholly negative way ‘handball suffered when I became a parent’ illustrating the differing perceptions on parenthood and sport. Moreover, female athletes discussed how they accepted that pregnancy was the end of their career, with those who tried to come back finding it put too much strain on family life; they found it hard being away from their family, touching on feelings of guilt, suggesting cultural norms are still evident. These cultural norms are still apparent in Tekavc et al.s 2020 study that examined the transition to motherhood of eight elite Slovene athletes, focusing on how they combined motherhood with their elite careers. Their findings revealed that the athletes felt ready to get pregnant, but also were timing their pregnancy to fit around competition. Their findings revealed that there were three clear stages
during this transition: pre-pregnancy and pregnancy; return to competition; and being a mother-athlete. The earliest stage carried the most contradictory feelings, with the athletes being both enthusiastic about parenthood but also feeling regret as they were unable to engage in elite sport. However, three of the athletes in the study viewed their pregnancy as a time to rest and recover from years of overexertion, and one athlete made the decision to use her rehabilitation from injury period as a time to get pregnant. They also discussed the expectations placed on them by their social environment related to social norms in terms of physical activity and pregnancy. These findings further emphasised how social culture still dictates what behaviours are appropriate for mothers.

Most studies that look at the balancing of motherhood with a career in elite sport identify the concept of mother guilt. Sutherland (2010) explored mother guilt concluding that it is often viewed as an inherent part of motherhood by society and linked closely to fear of negative self-evaluation. Research by Liss et al. (2012) defined this further by linking mother guilt to a need to achieve the idealized standards of the perfect mother, which can ultimately have a detrimental effect on mothers. While Liss et al. (2012) focused on the broader concepts of guilt experienced by all mothers, these are in some ways magnified in a sporting context, something echoed in research by McGannon and Schinke (2013) looking at the relationship between physical activity and motherhood. Their research adopted an in-depth case study approach following a newly active woman (‘Joan’) with young children over a 16-week period. They concluded that women accept that, when they have children, they will feel guilty about anything they do for themselves. A key finding of this paper was how women sought to manage this guilt; ‘Joan’ would choose to exercise at work so that it did not impact on her family life, a form of guilt management. While this example sits within a recreational context the desire to minimise the impact on family illustrates how women may seek to protect their mother identity by seeking to conform to the norm of a selfless mother, accepting sacrifices for their family
(Mailey et al., 2014). More recent research has shown how this mother's guilt is still present. Bean and Wimbs (2021) explored the experiences of women who were balancing motherhood with marathon training. While at a recreational level the commitment to an event such as this draws parallels with the experiences of elite-level performers. Two clear themes emerged from their findings that support those in previous studies. These were related to identity conflict and management strategies. The decision to combine these two roles led to considerable internal conflict as all the mothers still prioritised their running due to the importance of their runner identity. Although this proved problematic, with the women still feeling as though their runner identity was threatened. For example, one runner discussed how the shift from being defined as a runner who did adventure and long-distance running to one who only managed 5km was hard on her ego. While all participants recognised that they shouldn’t feel guilty, they all still felt guilty about trying to balance multiple identities and not prioritising their mother's identity, choosing running over another family-related task.

While Beans and Wimbs (2021) focused on recreational runners, the experience of elite athletes appears to mirror this. McGannon et al. (2015), undertook an ethnographic content analysis of media sources related to ten elite athletic mothers from the USA. Of relevance in the context of mother guilt was the athlete and mother as conflicting identities which illustrated the polarised nature of these two roles. Media portrayals of the elite mothers were that they were in distress and felt guilt due to taking time away from their children for their sporting careers. Furthermore, the subtle implication was that pursuing a career in sport could lead to them being inadequate mothers, something that served to reinforce the guilt. Darroch and Hillsbury (2017) further exemplified this in their research that explored the experiences of 14 elite distance runners and their return to training and international competition following giving birth. A predominant theme through their narratives was the guilt associated with motherhood when they started to return to training, where running required them to be selfish: motherhood needed
selflessness, presenting a tension between their athletic career and motherhood. Throughout their narratives, it was evident that these tensions stemmed from there being a constant compromise at play – to compromise training meant their athletic goals were impacted, while training more resulted in more mother guilt. This could explain why McGannon et al. (2015) found that ‘Kara’, a long-distance runner, was more ‘at peace’ with her training if she felt she had done what was required of her as a mother.

The concept of guilt was also prominent within Spowart et al.’s (2008) research which has pertinence to the current study, it having a focus on a winter sport. They examined the experiences of snowboarding mothers who acknowledge that their desire to continue with their recreation saw them resist the traditional motherhood discourse. Snowboarding was framed as a sport that could be seen as contradictory to the traditional notion of motherhood, with Humphreys (1996) describing it as a sport which embodied freedom, hedonism, and irresponsibility. The conflicting fit of snowboarding with motherhood led to all the mothers discussing guilt when leaving their children to go snowboarding for the day or weekend. However, they recognised how this was related to how they felt they were being perceived, and that perhaps others would think they were a bad mother, with one mother saying she didn’t admit to having a child when asked. This point suggests that it is still societal norms that underpin women’s feelings about returning to sport when a mother, and that this can influence their feelings and lives at a subconscious level. These studies all suggest that balancing identity and managing guilt are challenges faced by athletic mothers.

The balance of the mother identity with the athlete identity was explored by Palmer and Leberman (2009) who focused on the experiences of nine elite females from a range of sports, who had all become mothers and continued to compete. The women discussed how they put energy into negotiating guilt, due to limited time and lack of organisational support because their athletic identity was so integral to who they were as people. It was essential to them that
their multiple identities were managed appropriately, something they termed ‘identity management’. These findings share similarities with those of Bean and Wimbs (2021) as the runners in their study strove to maintain their runner identity as well as their mother identity. While this balancing act can result in some tension, research suggests that it can have positive implications. McGannon et al.s (2012) study focused on the experiences of Paula Radcliffe during her return to competitive sport following the birth of her first child. They concluded that to successfully manage identity it could be that the two roles of mother and athlete are viewed as a ‘newly melded identity’ something which allowed Radcliffe to achieve both career and maternal success and negated conflict between identities. Furthermore, their findings suggest becoming a mother gives the athlete a different perspective on sport which allows them to become a better athlete when they have also wanted to be a mother as they then feel complete in all areas of their life. These findings echo those of Appleby and Fisher (2009) who discussed how the runners in their study all felt that the integration of their two identities of mother and athlete served to enrich their overall identity and signalled a form of self-enlightenment which allowed them to see motherhood as a strategy that took competitive pressure off. This shift in perspective was also discussed by Darroch and Hillsbury (2017) who found that all the runners in their study linked motherhood to a changing of priorities and that this was what underpinned their change in perspective. For example, ‘Sandra’ talked about how being a mother took the pressure off her within sport as her children were more important. Whereas ‘Larissa’ discussed how she felt it was important for her son to see her as a strong female athlete, passionate about what she did. This concept of role modelling to her child was seen in the narratives of the other athletes and illustrates how there can be subtle benefits to pursuing these two roles.

The concept of role-modelling is not new, with Appleby and Fisher (2009) looking at the experiences of 10 elite distance runners discussing how this role-modelling aspect of their sport involvement allowed athletes to feel that they were fulfilling the good mother standards through
their sports participation. Likewise, McGannon et al. (2017) saw a similar finding with recreational athletes. Through exploration of 29 blog stories, they concluded that women felt empowered through running and that their mother-runner identity allowed them to be a role model to their children, thereby enhancing their ‘good mother’ status.

The positive side of combining a career in sport with motherhood was further emphasised by McGannon et al. (2017). Their research focused on the comeback of Kim Clijsters following becoming a mother and illustrated a shift in how sporting mothers were presented by the media. Her success was positioned in a positive way showing that it is possible to combine elite sport with motherhood. These findings as well as the narrative provided within McGannon et al.’s (2012) study contrasts with more traditional narratives related to motherhood which can imply that a career (whether in sport or not) is incompatible with motherhood. These findings suggest that, while motherhood does present challenges at the psychological level, there are ways to manage these and still pursue a (successful) elite career. Furthermore, the juggling of multiple roles may make them better as parents, allowing them time to themselves (McGannon et al., 2018)

A key theme in both the narratives of elite and recreational athletes is how sport and motherhood were managed. While this was ultimately driven by the athletes' own intrinsic desire, many discuss the importance of support. For example, Bean and Wimbs (2021) talk about two sides to this, as support meant a return was an option, as well as being essential when the athlete made the commitment to return. The athletes in their study recognised how social support, namely spousal support was integral to their management of guilt. The spousal support that was provided was both tangible in the form of childcare as well as emotional, providing encouragement and motivation. Where support is often recognised as instrumental to facilitating positive experiences at elite level, having a lack of support is often more complex, with the potential to present several barriers. For example, Appleby and Fisher (2009)
recognised how it wasn’t just emotional support from partners that was important but financial support was also key, a lack of which may present a barrier. The importance of financial support was discussed by Darroch et al. (2019) who explored the support given to elite distance runners during pregnancy and the postpartum period from governing bodies and sponsors. Athletes from five countries (Australia, Canada, Ireland, UK, and USA) reported a lack of support from corporate sponsors and governing bodies during pregnancy and the postpartum period, with athletes feeling there was an assumption that pregnancy was the end of their career. The lack of support saw the athletes lose their sponsorship which carried financial implications. This loss of governing body support also highlighted how the lack of clear policy saw pregnancy being treated in the same way as an injury or viewed as a clear sign that the athlete was finishing their career and as such did not warrant support. To mitigate for this the runners tried to manage and plan their pregnancies around competitions to reduce the financial impact and ensure they had adequate spousal support in cases where they had lost support from their governing body. While complex, the findings illustrate not only how female athletes face more stress and uncertainty in their careers than their male counterparts but, more broadly, how the lack of equity in practice in elite sporting environments disadvantages women.

The issue of planning that was raised in Darroch et al.’s (2019) study is not unique, with research looking at mother-athletes finding that the timing of both the decision to have a baby and getting pregnant coincided in many cases with the four-year Olympic cycle (Tekavc et al., 2020). By timing their pregnancy, the athletes were able to minimise the impact of their time out of sport and minimise the number of major competitions missed. By maintaining a relatively high training volume during pregnancy, athletes allow themselves the chance to return to high-intensity training postpartum, resulting in a more rapid return to competition (Erdener & Budgett, 2016; Kardel, 2005;). However, Pullen et al. (2022) highlight a further challenge that elite females may face when it comes to managing early pregnancy in an elite
environment. While elite athletes may want to maintain training there is clearly a need for this to be modified, however the athletes in their study discuss how they often felt unable to voice their desire to become pregnant or discuss modifications to their training due to the very male environment they were in. The maintenance of regular exercise was a factor discussed by Tekavc et al. (2020) who reported that all the athletes strove to maintain basic fitness to facilitate a quicker and more successful return to sport, although, all the athletes reduced training load during pregnancy and also their level of athletic participation. However, a further point to consider is the impact of the type of sport and how this often dictated the point at which training was discontinued, for example, those in contact sports stopped earlier due to safety reasons. However, it is important to recognise that, while athletes tend to manage to maintain a level of training, there will nevertheless be a decline in fitness and physical capabilities which, like injury, can take time to regain (McGannon et al., 2012). For example, Tekavc et al. (2020) reported that all participants in their study identified a significant decline in physical capabilities, related to endurance, strength, and balance. In addition, some of the women reported high levels of pain during their return to exercise phase. While some research has looked at the experiences of the returning mother, there is still limited guidance on how to return to exercise after childbirth, most notably when the return is to elite-level competition (Deering et al., 2020). This was recently addressed by the BASES Expert Statement on pregnant and postnatal athletes which called for evidence-based guidelines (Atkinson et al., 2022). Sundgot-Borgen et al. (2019) investigated the experiences of Norwegian elite athletes compared to non-elite but active women (active control group) during their return to sport. Their findings concluded that most athletes and a third of the active control group made a return to sport or exercise by six weeks postpartum, however, their findings raise a concerning point that the elite athletes reported stress fractures and concerns with body image, as well as feeling dissatisfied with the advice they were given. These relatively recent findings suggest that there
is still a lack of understanding, knowledge, and support during this potentially vulnerable period, suggesting that more needs to be done during this phase of the athlete journey to facilitate the athlete’s return both in terms of knowledge and broader support. Recent research by Massey and Whitehead (2022) adopted a case study approach to examine the experiences of two elite athletes during the 16-month period following childbirth and their return to sport. Of the two athletes one had planned her pregnancy and the other had not. However, they both talked at length about their physical identity, both in terms of the changes to their body and uncertainty related to their return to sport, which in turn impacted their overall athletic identity. While research has sought to specifically examine in more depth the experiences during pregnancy of elite sportswomen (e.g., Martinez-Pascual et al., 2016) these findings indicate that there is still work to be done in terms of the impact of pregnancy on physical identity to support women as they negotiate the change to their body.

While some findings suggest that the practice of motherhood is more compatible with life after elite sport, combining these two roles is much more readily embraced especially with optimal fertility often falling at the same time as peak performance (Jette, 2011). The desire to combine motherhood with an elite sport career requires careful planning on the part of the athlete, with the right support systems in place and, if managed appropriately, can see women have both maternal and career success. Where motherhood unquestionably presents a significant challenge in terms of the disruption to identity and reprioritisation there are other, more subtle, transitions that can require an athlete to reappraise or adjust their sense of self.

2.5.2.4 Other Within-Career Transitions

While injury and motherhood may represent significant transitions within the athlete journey there are a range of other career transitions that athletes must face, for example, a change in level of performance, change of team or deselection. Neely et al. (2018) explored the experiences of female athletes following deselection from a range of team sports. Their
findings revealed that the athletes questioned their ability following deselection as well as their identity, but that the impact of this was mediated over time by the forming of new social relationships at a different level or a recognition that life after sport can present new opportunities, however, reaching this point was a gradual process. These findings suggest that, like other transitions in sport, athletes need to be given time to renegotiate their sense of self.

Changes to the coaching network around an athlete are a frequent occurrence within elite sports. Extensive research looking at the importance of the coach/athlete relationship within the athletic development literature (e.g., Jowett, 2007; Kuhlin et al., 2020 and Shipherd et al., 2019) suggests these changes have the potential to cause disruption. Gomez et al. (2021) examined the impact of coaching changes within an elite football environment and found that in some contexts change can have a positive impact. They concluded that when a change was felt necessary to improve performance – for example, a team who has had poor results - the change in coach could result in a dramatic improvement in performance. These findings suggest that, when a change is needed, a new coaching set up can facilitate enhanced performance. It is important, though, to recognise that this research took place in a team sports environment and the importance of the coach/athlete relationship may be more significant in an individual sports environment as those athletes will spend more time with their coach and their interactions and relationship can be even more important (Gullu et al., 2020). Jowett and Meek (2000) examined a somewhat nuanced coach/athlete relationship that may occur between married couples. Through in-depth interviews, they examined the relationships of four married coach/athlete dyads concluding that the closeness of the relationship facilitated the co-oriented view of relevant and important issues. Furthermore, research into social support (e.g., Brown et al., 2019) has found athletes who felt loved, and cared for, and that they could trust their coach was of fundamental importance to them. From the coach’s perspective, they
acknowledged how knowing the athlete so well allowed them to be more effective, as they knew how to get the best from them.

Like the shift in the coaching environment, the shift in the coaching base can also present athletes with a challenge to negotiate. In recent years the globalisation of sport has seen an interest develop in research focusing on cultural transitions related to player migration, with teams and players training and competing in another country. Samuel et al.’s (2019) case study research focused on the experiences of the Israeli men’s U18 national handball team during a season when they trained and competed in Germany. Their findings suggest that both on (e.g., injury) and off-court (e.g., cultural differences) factors had to be managed by players which resulted in players perceiving this transition as both significant and positive. Most significant during this transition to playing abroad was a strengthening of athletic identity experienced by players as this move to another country and immersion in a high-performance environment signalled a commitment to a career in handball. In contrast, during this time other identities diminished such as those related to their student and ethnic identity. It was concluded that the way this transition was managed so positively was through the development and maintenance of a high athletic identity. Conversely, Stambulova et al. (2020), who also adopted a case-study approach when looking at player migration, found that this transition could have a negative impact on identity. Their research looked at the transitional experiences of a female basketball player (‘Jenni’) of Scandinavian and African American descent, and her migration to the USA. Unlike the findings of Samuel et al. (2019), ‘Jenni’ suffered an identity crisis. While those in her direct network sought to support her, they inadvertently added to her identity concerns, for example, by marginalising layers of her identity. It is possible that this negative experience was the result of the young age that Jenni was when she moved to the USA (16 years old) and that she travelled alone, in comparison to the handball team who were a little older and made the transition as a unit. Jenni also had to make an educational transition by
joining a new school so had to manage several significant events in conjunction at a time when her identity was developing.

It is beyond the scope of this research to examine all potential transitions that could be experienced by athletes within their career due to the unique differences between sports and athletes, for example, team vs individual, competitive demands, and different life experiences. However, it is evident that within-career transitions can elicit both positive and negative reactions which can be impacted by individual, situational, and environmental differences. For many of these transitions, there is very limited research due to the subtlety of the transition and the lack of generalization. This is perhaps why the most heavily researched area connected to transitions is retirement, as it remains the transition all athletes will experience.

2.5.3 The end of the road – Retirement from sport

Retirement from elite sport represents potentially one of the most challenging transitions of an athlete’s career as they say goodbye to their life as an athlete and transition into a new domain. The physical demands of elite-level sport also mean that retirement tends to occur relatively early in life, which can present additional challenges to retirement from the traditional workforce as athletes will all have to embark on another ‘form’ of career (Hattersley et al., 2019). The challenge that retirement from sport can pose is the reason that this final stage of the athletic journey has received the most research interest specifically from a psychological perspective (Wylleman, 2019). Retirement sees athletes having to adjust to several psychological, social, and vocational changes as they confront a life outside of sport (Wylleman, 2019). The challenges faced by the retired athlete link closely to the loss of athletic identity but also several other factors such as losses of self-esteem, self-image, and peer support (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), potentially eliciting emotions such as depression and loneliness (Wylleman, 2019). However, these losses and emotions are not restricted to psychological ones, with Stephan et al. (2003) reporting that the first six months post-
retirement often saw a decrease in the athlete’s perceived physical condition, physical self-worth, sports competence, and physical attractiveness compared to active elite athletes because of decreased training and social recognition of the “performing body.” This shift in self-perception links closely to athletic identity which appears to be one of the strongest predictors of the quality of retirement at any level of competition. Cosh et al. (2015) explored the experiences of elite Australian swimmers and concluded that those with a strong athletic identity often experience more difficulties when they move into retirement. Likewise, research focused on varsity-level athletes concluded that higher athletic identity was a potential risk factor for developing certain psychiatric symptoms such as depression and anxiety following retirement (Giannone et al., 2017).

While athletic identity can underpin the quality of the retirement experience it is also important to reflect on the context of retirement and understand why athletes retire: while many athletes may have planned their retirement, for some the decision will be taken away from them and, as such, the impact can be quite different. One of the most common causes of career termination and abrupt retirement is injury (Park et al., 2013). The forced nature of this type of retirement can result in the most significant adjustment difficulties with several negative responses such as isolation, anxiety, and depression (Walker and Heaney, 2013). While unplanned or forced retirement tends to predict a challenging transition out of sport, even a chosen retirement which has been planned and one the athlete feels ready for needs support and planning to ensure it is positive.

The positive impact of retirement planning on retirement experiences is explored by longitudinal research considering the experiences of 15 elite swimmers (Torregrosa et al., 2015). This research concluded that as well as retirement planning, voluntary retirement and available social support were also precursors to a positive retirement experience. In contrast to this, involuntary or forced retirement, lack of planning, and a unidimensional (athletic)
identity could result in a more problematic transition (Torregrosa et al., 2015). Developing a more rounded identity (multi-dimensional) extends to the way athletes develop their support networks outside of sport. Research by Warriner and Lavallee (2008) examined the experiences of seven retired elite-level gymnasts and concluded that it wasn’t just a loss of identity but also a loss of the relationships connected to an identity (solely based in sport) that led to a negative experience. However, this loss could be somewhat mediated when social circles were developed outside of sport which subsequently facilitated more positive adjustment to life after sport. For example, those athletes who have already started to focus on new careers that will be the focus of their retirement are likely to have started to develop a new social network to support their identity after sport. These findings were similar to those of Wojciechowski (2018) who found that even with student athletes creating new social networks and replacing or shifting the sport focus early in the process of retirement assisted the retirement experience. In turn, this allowed them to start to develop a new identity outside of their sport away from the structure and support that a team environment presents.

2.5.4 Life after sport

Retirement from sport may signal the end of the athlete’s sporting career but the young age that athletes tend to retire means that they are likely to embark on another career pathway as they navigate their life after sport (Hattersley et al., 2019). This explains why retirement is often seen as part of a process rather than an event (Ryan, 2019). However, the nature of competitive sport is one that facilitates the development of a multitude of different competencies and skills. Vitali and De Brant (2019) conducted extensive research with a range of athletes who had either retired or were close to retirement to explore the range of competencies they felt they developed during their careers. In contrast to earlier research that has looked at youth skill development through sport (i.e., Holt et al., 2017), Vitali and De Brant (2019) surmised that athletes became most aware of the competencies they developed towards the later stages of
their careers. Data from those retired athletes suggests that the strongest competencies recognised are related to goal orientation, dedication to succeed and collaboration. There are countless examples of elite athletes who have had a highly successful second career. For some athletes a natural career path is one that sees them remain in sport, transitioning to coaching or leadership roles, for example, Frank Lampard made a successful transition from player to manager (Chroni et al., 2020). This form of transition that sees the athlete remain in sport in some ways allows maintenance of athletic identity albeit not that of an elite athlete. However, it is important to recognise how many other athletes seek alternative career pathways that allow them to capitalise on the plethora of transferable skills they developed during their careers. As well as those discussed by Vitali and De Brant (2019) athletes tend to work well as a team, communicate effectively, have a strong work ethic and can perform well under pressure (e.g., Wylleman. 2019)

2.6 Influencing factors

Whether normative or non-normative in nature, transitions require athletes to undergo some form of adjustment to a new set of demands (Stambulova, 2000). The challenge and significance of these adjustments can be influenced by several different factors, including type of sport, level of participation and culture, and may determine whether the transitional experience is either positive and progressive or challenging and disruptive.

2.6.1 Type of sport

Research looking at the differences across sports is still somewhat limited, with several studies focused on one sport in isolation. However, this research still has value, for example, studies within gymnastics have identified that there are potential differences in experience when early and later specialisation sports are compared (Cavallerio et al., 2017). Their research concluded that retired gymnasts still held winning and being perfect as key values and took these into their
new life outside of sport, suggesting even in retirement athletes can feel governed by the same norms that they learnt in their sport. The performance environment around elite-level gymnastics also provides a very good example of the additional challenges that can be connected to early specialisation sports as well as youth sport which can see unequal power in the coach/athlete relationship. This unequal power may see coaches seek to diminish potential distractions by encouraging a sole focus on sport, resulting in the development of a unidimensional identity. The development of a unidimensional identity was explored within the gymnastics environment by Clowes et al. (2015). Their findings found that gymnasts are a particularly vulnerable group, in terms of their susceptibility to negative retirement experiences due to their sole athletic identity and limited social networks outside of sport. Conversely, research by Plateau et al. (2016) found that athletes from gymnastics and swimming environments felt liberated when they retired, especially in relation to their body image and eating behaviours. However, their findings also noted that this level of acceptance took time and athletes had to re-learn their bodily needs and change their perceptions of their body image. These findings suggest that there will be unique challenges for those athletes involved in sports that carry with them pressures about weight and body image.

Further differences between sports can also be observed when looking at team and individual sports. Lagimodiere and Strachan (2015) explored the difference between the experiences of male hockey and rugby players with a focus on both types of sport and the popularity of sport. While all athletes were involved in team sports, the pre- and post-retirement experiences of the athletes were very different in several ways, including identity formation, preparation, and social influence. They concluded that these differences could be related to the popularity of the sports, with those involved with more popular team sports (i.e., rugby) potentially experiencing more adjustment struggles connected to a higher athletic identity, stronger connection to community and a loss of public recognition and support. Recent research by de
Subijana et al. (2020) looked at the differences between team and individual sports athletes. Through questionnaires with over 400 retired athletes, they found several significant differences in the experiences of the athletes from the different groups, with individual sports athletes retiring much earlier than their team counterparts. Furthermore, team sports athletes were more likely to manage a dual career and balance their athletic career with work, which may explain why they had lower training hours than individual sports athletes. Team sport athletes generally had longer careers, and managed retirement better, which could be explained by the fact that they had already an additional identity established in the workplace, meaning they were better positioned in retirement.

Type of sport can also be classified according to the level of risk involved, a pertinent classification in the context of this study. McEwan et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis examining the relationship between personality types and high-risk sports athletes. They concluded that high-risk sports athletes scored much higher on sensation seeking and extraversion as well as impulsivity, suggesting that high-risk athletes perhaps have higher levels of confidence in their ability. This difference in confidence may also impact on the way athletes approach transitions. Earlier research by Slanger and Rudestam (1997) also concluded that sensation-seeking explained the behaviours of extreme sports participants from a range of sports including skiing and rock climbing. However, the main differentiating variable was in terms of self-efficacy with the high-risk sports athletes having much higher perceived self-efficacy, directly suggesting that athletes drawn to these sports may have higher confidence. These differences that are seen between sports in terms of team vs individual, low vs high risk, illustrate how this is an area that needs further exploration. There remains a gap in the research looking at the impact of transitions within different sports with no research looking at winter sports specifically or comparing the experiences of winter sports athletes to those of athletes from more mainstream sports.
2.6.2 The culture of sport

While the implications of the type of sport on transitions have been discussed, there are subtler differences that are evidenced within sport that must also be considered, as these can have a significant impact on the athlete. The cultures that develop around different sports are largely underpinned by the social norms that have developed. These social norms dictate both the social attitudes of approval and disapproval (Sunstein, 1996) as well as provide the standards of both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. In turn, these standards will then determine how a group act (Breger et al., 2019).

Underpinning social norms within sport is the gendered nature of sport. Connell (1995) discussed how sport continues to operate as a space to both define and reproduce hegemonic masculinity which as well as supressing all other forms of masculinity serves to subordinate women. Through the structures, policies and behaviours embedded in sport organisations this subordination sees women positioned as the outsiders and underrepresented in leadership positions at all levels of sport (Fink, 2008; Burton, 2015). Furthermore, Ely and Meyerson (2000) recognised how typically masculine behaviours associated with men are viewed as being superior to those behaviours most associated with women. This has seen men tend to be in positions that hold high social value, for example, coaching or other leadership roles (Breger et al., 2019). These unequal power relations can result in the development of toxic cultures that can see the dominance, control, exclusion, and abuse of women and younger athletes (Breger et al., 2019).

The placing of men in positions of power can result in poor experiences for female athletes who are experiencing pregnancy and motherhood as those in control lack understanding. The significance of body politics is evident as there is a lack of awareness of the realities of supporting the pregnant athlete as there remains a focus within research on the male body. While this may not always create a toxic culture it presents a challenge. Pullen et al. (2022)
found that athletes felt that they didn’t have anyone to talk to about their pregnancy due to the lack of females in leadership positions in sport. This again points to the issues that may arise when women are not in positions of power within the female sports environment. This can subsequently lead to a poor experience for female athletes and suggests why they may decide to retire rather than challenge the status quo and gender norms within sport by combining motherhood with their career.

More broadly the standards set will also determine whether the environment that is created around the athlete is effective or ineffective, which can explain why the athlete’s journey through sport is often shaped by the culture. At the heart of the development of a sports culture is the coaching set up around the athlete, and research has frequently discussed the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in sport. The coach’s primary role is to support athletes to achieve their goals and also to support their development in a holistic way - allowing them to grow physiologically, socially, and psychologically (Jowett & Slade, 2022). However, it is important to recognise how not all coach-athlete relationships are beneficial, and that poor quality relationships will often have a more significant impact. Gendered power relations between athlete and coach, can lead to instances of humiliation, excessive physical training and denial of support can all have lasting effects on the athlete welfare. (Stirling & Kerr, 2013).

The impact that negative coaching relationships and negative sports culture can have on athletes has seen a shift in recent years, from a focus on coach-athlete relationships and the culture of sport to looking more at the welfare of athletes more broadly. This focus was bred from the recent revelations within certain sports, related to the abuse of athletes within some cultures (Kerr & Kerr, 2020). Specifically, athlete welfare focuses on promoting the health and wellbeing of the athlete, where the athlete is positioned first – and the other considerations are secondary.
A further cultural challenge that can be presented is the impact of doping within elite sport. In the context of transitions in sport the relevance of doping may seem somewhat removed, however, the impact that doping can have on those within sport is essential to understand as it can have long-term career implications. Smith et al. (2010) explored athlete attitudes to drugs in sport using narrative-based case studies, concluding that athlete attitude is largely shaped by the culture of their sport, suggesting that the challenge may be worse within some sports. For example, subsets of sport have been recognised as having significant problems. Recent findings have concluded that the problem is of particular significance within middle-distance and long-distance events, with recent statistics from the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) (2021) reporting that, of the 465 athletes who are currently suspended from competing in athletics worldwide, 258 (55.5%) are middle-distance or long-distance runners. While cheating in sport has quite clear implications for the athlete who is caught, the impact on those within the culture is important to recognise, as these events do not occur in isolation and the use of performance-enhancing drugs impacts a wide range of other people (Dunn & Thomas, 2012). Research looking at this is somewhat limited as elite athletes can feel unable to talk about these negative experiences in sport, perhaps waiting till the end of their career to voice their concerns to avoid any negative scrutiny (Engelberg et al., 2015). Erickson et al. (2016) explored the impact of drug-taking beyond the sanctioned athlete, through the exploration of the stories of two athletes they illustrated the implication of being within a culture of drug-taking. For example, one athlete felt concerned about attending a major event in case their results were manipulated. Furthermore, they recognised how they had missed out on getting a place in the final due to a drugs cheat gaining that space. The longer-term implications of this include key events including a cut in funding, the need to get a part-time job and ultimately an impact on the ability to train and the level at which she could compete. The impact of this is perhaps best summarised in her own words:
'The thing is, since then, four competitors have been banned from that final for using performance-enhancing drugs. That's half the finalists! 50%! I did not actually realise it was so bad. I just presumed that it's one person every so often who would choose to go down that route. Clearly that's not the case. Their results have been annulled now, which actually means the worst I would have got is 5th in that race. That means I would have got the other half of my funding – and that's for two years as well. A difference of £13000 a year. That one race alone resulted in a loss of £26000 for me'. (Athlete quote from Erickson et al. 2016)

More recent research looking at the perceptions of doping in distance running has found similar findings. Shelley et al. (2021) examined the experiences and views of British elite distance runners. The athletes in their study all felt that the doping crisis hadn’t improved and was in fact not prevented in an effective way. They all perceived it as a major issue and, like Smith et al. (2010), they concluded it was borne out of certain cultures. Perhaps the most notable finding was that the athletes had similar reflections on the impact of doping to those in Erickson et al.’s (2016) study concluding that doping had impacted their careers irreversibly and was a constant challenge to their pre-event preparation, most notably psychologically. The more far-reaching implication of this can see the whole career path of an athlete alter, potentially creating additional transitional challenges.

2.6.2 Level of participation

Transitions in sport are not unique to those at an elite level, however, research suggests that athletes who compete at elite level have a stronger commitment towards training, resulting in a higher athletic identity (Park et al., 2012). Samuel and Tenenbaum (2011) looked at the ways that athletes perceived and responded to transitions and concluded that those who reach and remained at elite level experienced more transitions (e.g., moving to a higher level, major accomplishments, injury, deselection, changes in public perception) that can disrupt their
athletic engagement, adjustment and require personal change. They also recognised that other factors related to finance, position and status meant elite athletes also considered a change in events as much more significant and requiring special consideration. However, it is important to recognise that amateur athletes can also experience negative transitional experiences. MacCosham et al. (2015) focused on the experiences of amateur athletes in competitive sport and reported that athletes at this level reported a sub-optimal leisure lifestyle, meaning that they were unsuccessful in balancing ‘casual leisure’ with serious leisure. The researchers termed casual leisure as those things that would be done for fun and without structure whereas serious leisure was all activity connected to their main sport. The challenge at lower levels is that the athlete is often juggling work as well as their sport and, as such, sport consumes all their free time which, like with an elite athlete, can produce the development of a unidimensional identity.

2.7 Managing Transitions

While transitions are varied, they all require athletes to manage a change of events whether planned or unplanned. Where unplanned transitions have the potential to cause most emotional and psychological distress, even those that are planned can require athletes to negotiate new demands and in turn present a challenge. The uncertainty and lack of preparation surrounding unplanned transitions have seen Stambulova (2000) term these as ‘crises’. These crises can see athletes adopt different coping strategies: avoidance (potentially withdrawing from activity), acceptance (adapting and compromising to stay in the situation) or fighting (changing attitude and situation). However, research suggests that in most cases, these strategies are underpinned by support from different people within the athlete’s sporting network (Wylleman, et al., 2013) as well as the athlete’s own coping and management strategies.
2.7.1 Social support

The importance of social support within the athlete network has received extensive research focus, with results conclusively finding that the right support has a positive impact on all aspects of athletic development. Research by Rees and Hardy (2000) explored social support experiences of both male and female high-school sports performers, with findings indicating that there were four broad dimensions of social support: emotional (providing comfort and security during times of stress resulting in the athlete feeling cared for); esteem (strengthening a person’s sense of esteem or competence); informational (providing advice or guidance); and tangible (providing the necessary resources, financial or physical). It is also important to note that these four dimensions rarely occur in isolation with a combination being required at different points in the athlete's journey (Rees & Hardy, 2000).

Within elite sport, social support has been found to have a fundamental role to play at all stages of the athletic journey, from positively influencing athletes in stressful situations, such as burnout, to facilitating well-being over time (DeFreeze & Smith, 2014). The value of social support during stressful events has meant it is frequently cited as fundamental to successful athletic return, for example, post-sports injury (Mitchell et al., 2014) and when supporting athletes during retirement (Brown et al., 2018). The importance of support means there is a need to ensure networks are established early in the athlete’s career as research suggests that social support has a significant impact and influence on youth sport experiences in connection to motivation, participation, and athletic development (Sheridan et al., 2014). Sheridan et al.’s (2014) findings also concluded that support for younger athletes must be highly proactive as often young athletes are unaware or naïve when it comes to appreciating the future challenges they may face or the need for social support. Mortensen et al. (2013) touched on this need to be proactive, suggesting that there is still a stigma attached to asking for help but recognised that by implementing support systems at an early age it can both normalise and prepare athletes.
This notion that asking for help carries a stigma is not one limited to youth athletes, with more recent research by Brown et al. (2018) suggesting that, even when facing the challenge of retirement, athletes found it difficult to ask for help due to attached stigma but conversely recognised that when providing support to other retired athletes there was a positive adjustment to life after sport. This example perhaps shows the complexity of this area, where talking to a former athlete may not be seen as support whereas seeking out more ‘formal’ support from a coach or psychologist may be perceived differently.

The differences in where support comes from was examined by Adams et al. (2015), who explored athletes’ perceptions of social support during within-career transitions and recognised how parents, coaches and team-mates all had vital roles to play in the provision of support. Their research focused on the transition from junior to senior level of 70 male university-level students’, concluding that support was perhaps most crucial at the developmental stage when athletes make this early career transition. This transition often sees the formation of a stronger athletic identity as training intensity and volume increases and more support is needed. Furthermore, they identified that emotional support was the most salient and potentially the most available due to it not requiring any specialist knowledge or experience. This type of unstructured, less formal support from family and friends was the focus of Brown et al.’s (2018) phenomenological analysis which looked at eight former British elite athletes’ experiences of social support during retirement. They concluded that who provided the support could impact on the quality of the transition experience, because if the athlete felt genuinely cared for and understood then the experience tended to be much more positive. This suggests that emotional support provided by family and friends is effective due to the emotional investment they are likely to have in the athlete. Related to this notion of friends and family providing emotional support, research by Morris et al. (2017), looked at the pre-transitional and post-transitional experiences of athletes as they moved into senior sport. Their findings recognised that when
family and friends provided other forms of support, for example, informational, it could have a negative impact and present an additional source of stress due to over-involvement, subsequently placing unnecessary pressure on the athlete. The youth players in the study all reported how they would rather have emotional support from family and friends as opposed to technical support which could be viewed as criticism. Who provided support underpinned the research of Poucher et al. (2018), with a key aspect of the methodological design being that the athletes had to nominate who they perceived to be their primary support partner. Their research looked specifically at the provision of support to female Olympic athletes. They examined the experiences of five elite females and their main support providers, through semi-structured interviews. Athletes recognised how dependent they were on their main support provider with both athletes and support providers recognising that high levels of support were needed for athletic success.

The unequivocal importance of support networks has also been found to be fundamental to those athletes balancing dual careers. Harrison et al. (2019) examined this from the perspective of elite-level female footballers, who had all made the decision to balance their careers with education to ensure they had something to fall back on. Their findings concluded that the right support systems, for example, the family, were integral in the athlete’s ability to manage the demands of a dual career. This study also raised the point that support from the sporting organisation can vary, thus emphasising the importance of developing and maintaining networks outside of sport.

The value of support during key transitions has been touched on earlier in this chapter, for example, the importance of support during the transition to motherhood was significant. This was the focus of the research of Darroch and Hillsburg (2014) which looked at the way elite distance runners combined their athlete and mother identity as they balanced an athletic career and motherhood. They identified that the support network around athletic mothers was
typically made up of their spouses and other family members but also their sponsors. They reported that having support from sponsors allowed the athletes to feel they had ‘breathing space’ to make the right decisions about the timing of their return to sport. This also related to how the athletes recognised just having support around them gave them a choice when it came to both deciding to have a baby but also when it came to deciding to continue with a career in elite sport.

While social support will often be fundamental at a youth level, both in terms of emotional and also tangible financial and logistical support, as athletes progress in their elite careers their support network within sport will naturally develop. In the context of the HAC model (Wylleman 2019), as athletes enter the mastery stage support begins to move from just family, friends and coaches to the broader support team, something touched on by Darroch and Hillsburg (2017) who recognised the importance of sponsors.

2.7.2 Planning

Where the development of a strong support network around an athlete tends to be grounded in family and friends, more formalised support systems become apparent during the transition to elite level. The importance of planning and management of transitions has been discussed with research by Martin et al. (2014) concluding that both athlete career education and career planning were essential to smooth transitions especially during retirement when this could support a more gradual decrease in athletic identity. Devaney et al. (2017) examined the impact of lifestyle support on elite cricketers, with their findings concluding that players valued lifestyle support and reflected on how it helped not only their adapting to new environments but also in managing competitive stress, other life choices and to negotiate identity. By adopting a counselling approach to work with athletes, lifestyle practitioners can facilitate smoother and less problematic transitions for athletes. While important during the athlete’s career, lifestyle support is often most vital during retirement.
Martin et al. (2014) discussed how advisors can work with athletes to identify potential roles outside of sport by looking at their strengths and interests. Retirement planning such as this results in a much more positive retirement experience and allows the athletes to see that there are positives to this process such as a potential increase in free time, decreased injury risk and removal of competitive stress (Martin et al., 2014). While structured retirement planning is key, it appears that for many athletes this is still a negative experience. Dos Santos et al. (2016) focused on Brazilian Olympic athletes with 74.7% reporting that there was a lack of information available about retirement and a further 59% having concerns about what might happen after retirement, emphasising how this is a concern for athletes. More recently Ekengren et al. (2021) conducted an intervention study focused on the impact of a career assistance programme delivered to a team in a ‘crisis transition’ when their coach’s contract was unexpectedly terminated. The implementation of a series of workshops focusing on both sport and nonsporting aspects resulted in a decrease in the stress experienced and more awareness of their own personal resources. These findings emphasise how a counselling style approach that adopts a holistic approach to athlete support appears to be most effective.

2.7.3 Resilience

A final coping mechanism that is frequently cited in the literature relates to the development of resilience (Fletcher, 2019) Athletes’ ability to perform under pressure is fundamental to their success in sport, as the high-performance sports environment requires athletes to adapt to and manage different demands on a daily basis (Fletcher, 2019). This high-pressure environment often sees athletes overcoming adversity, in turn facilitating the development of resilience which is a quality underpinning sustained success in sport (Fletcher, 2019) and which allows athletes to cope better with transitional events.
Sarkar et al. (2015) explored the experiences and impact of adversity of 10 Olympic male and female gold medallists. Through inductive thematic analysis they identified several adverse situations including non-selection, sporting failures and injury that ultimately supported both psychological and performance development. In all cases where initial points of adversity elicited feelings of trauma, frustration and, in some cases, anger, these responses were not prolonged but rather replaced with an enhanced motivation to push themselves to put more effort in. A key point of debate is that all athletes reflected that they could not be sure that they would have achieved their level of Olympic success had they not endured the setbacks they had faced, which suggests that when athletes successfully engage with challenging situations, using these to support growth and development, it can potentially dictate later success.

Coping with adverse situations may see athletes develop resilience, a tool which can support them throughout their sporting careers (Seery, 2011). Resilience in the sporting arena may be defined as an athlete’s coping ability, however, Fletcher and Sarker (2012) offer a more comprehensive definition concluding that ‘it is the role of mental processes and behaviours in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors’ (p. 675). This definition suggests that resilience is likely to facilitate a more successful career path if negative stressors can be managed.

McManama O’Brien et al. (2021) looked specifically at the importance of the development of resilience for young women in sport as they represent a group who often face distinct challenges. This relates to the findings of Tekavc (2020) who found female athletes also had more transitional events in sport. Young women in sport often must face challenges connected to sport inequality, body image and increased mental distress. Their findings suggest that the development of resilience through sport not only benefited them in sport but also in terms of personal growth and carried over into their life beyond and after sport.
2.8 Chapter Conclusion and Research Questions

This chapter has examined the broad range of literature pertaining to career transitions in sport from entry to sport, through a range of within-career transitions, to the point when an athlete faces retirement. The range of challenges that transitions can present has been examined with a particular focus on the impact of athletic identity, which underpins several of the emotional and psychological reactions athletes may experience. Furthermore, the ways that athletes manage these transitions have been explored, presenting a range of different coping strategies that facilitate positive transitions, for example, social support, career planning and the development of resilience. While research is extensive within the career transition literature there remains a limited focus on the experiences of elite female athletes, their experiences of transitions and their negotiation of identity. Furthermore, there is no research related to elite female athlete transitions within the winter sports domain. Through adopting a lifespan narrative approach, the current study will explore the lived experiences of five elite athletic mothers throughout their athletic journey. As well as the story they tell, the way this is told and the sense they make of their career will be examined. In line with this the study has one overarching aim to examine how elite female athletes from different sports negotiate identity during their career both pre- and post-motherhood. This also generated four sub-questions:

5) How is athletic identity developed during the early stages of the elite female athlete’s career?

6) How do elite female athletes negotiate career transitions and challenges to athletic identity?

7) What is the impact of motherhood on identity and how is this managed?

8) How do female athletes negotiate retirement from sport?
To address these questions, the next chapter presents both the methodological philosophy that has underpinned the study as well as detailing the methodological approach adopted to examine the lived experiences of five elite female athletes.
Chapter 3 – Methodology and Research Methods

3.1 Introduction

The early chapters within this thesis have sought to illustrate both the importance of further research into career transitions in sport as well as highlight the gaps within the current body of literature pertaining to the experience of elite female athletes. The importance of this is evident when we acknowledge that female athletes tend to have more challenging career paths and experience more transitions than men (Tekav, 2017). Specifically, there is a limited focus on elite female athletes who combine motherhood with an elite career within a winter sports domain and negotiate the changes and challenges to their identity as athletes. The limitations of the current body of research led to the development of one overarching research question:

How do elite female athletes from different sports negotiate identity during their career both pre- and post-motherhood?

While specific research focusing on the target population is lacking, there is a plethora of research looking at career transitions in sport. Research in this field often seeks to understand and examine the lived experiences of individuals and as such requires a methodological approach that can elicit rich data as well as allow each athlete to tell ‘their’ story in their own words. This can then allow the researcher to gain holistic understanding of both the psychological and emotional reactions experienced by athletes (Barker et al., 2014; Lally, 2007; McArdle et al., 2014). Throughout this chapter the methodological approach adopted and the relevant paradigm that has been chosen to support the research will be examined.

Guba (1990) defines a research paradigm as something characterised by its ontology, epistemology and methodological disposition which allows the development of a common set of beliefs and some agreement to be reached in terms of how the problem is understood (Kuhn, 1962). The focus on the lived experiences of athletes and the value of gathering rich data sees
the current study lean towards a qualitative research paradigm. However, one complexity of qualitative research is that, by its very nature, it has no one clear definition as it encompasses a range of different styles and approaches (Sparkes and Smith, 2013). The qualitative approach is one that sees the process of inquiry as a matter of interpreting the interpretations of others (Sparkes and Smith, 2013). As a form of social inquiry, it is focused on not just interpretations of experience but also the way in which the individual makes sense of that experience and, in turn, sees the researcher interpreting the interpretations of others. As Sparkes et al. (2014, p. 14) note, at its heart is the desire to understand more about the ‘social reality of individuals, groups, and cultures, and explore the behaviours, perspectives and experiences of people in their daily lives’. Furthermore, through this understanding researchers can focus on the way in which people construct their meaning of a given phenomenon, allowing further exploration of a phenomenon through each individual’s experience. As Creswell (2007) notes, the fundamental role of the qualitative researcher is to both acknowledge and report on the different realities through examining the words of the participants. This suggests that qualitative research can also tell us something about culture and how social process can influence patterns of behaviour.

3.2 Research paradigm and method: a rationale

To establish a methodological position, it was first necessary to provide clarity in terms of the research paradigm being adopted and both the epistemological and ontological stance. Philosophical assumptions inform all research as these are governed by the belief system of the researcher, a belief system which informs their understanding of the nature of reality (ontology), likewise, the epistemological views that guide how we go about uncovering and arriving at our knowledge about learning and reality (Willig, 2013). Furthermore, both researcher and participant enter the research field with their own reality which can be influenced by experiences, beliefs and the interactions between each other. These interactions
become particularly relevant in the context of epistemology as the interaction between researcher and participants can influence how participants think both about issues and the knowledge they share. The potential significance of these interactions means that researchers need to have an awareness that they are an instrument within the study and will influence the information that is shared (Creswell, 2013).

While there are a range of different research paradigms, sport science researchers have tended to draw on more established classifications. Petrovic et al. (2017) sought to explore in more depth research approaches within sport science and in particular the methodological traditions in sport science. Their findings suggest that three research paradigms most closely align to this discipline, which were proposed by Sparkes (1992): positivist, critical, and interpretative. Positivist research tends to adopt an ontological view that there is only one reality when viewing the world, furthermore, from an epistemological perspective, positivists ascertain that reality is comprised of a knowledge base which can be uncovered through adoption of the right methods (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). A positivist approach is claimed to be a value free and highly objective paradigm using reliable and valid tools to obtain data (Kuhn, 1962). However, while it allows objectivity, it tends to be rigid in nature only seeing a single perspective of reality, which fails to allow for any subjective stance and, as such, is not appropriate when conducting research seeking to learn about the lived experiences of athletes (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). In contrast, the birth of interpretation reflected an awareness that social reality can be understood in many ways and accepts that there is no single reality or truth, but in fact individuals or groups create their own reality (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Through understanding the way individuals construct their own world though their own personal interactions, this approach also acknowledges the interaction that may take place between researcher and participants. Researchers enter the research arena with some prior insight into the research
context and their own assumptions and biases and must be open to these being challenged. Through adoption of an interpretive paradigm there is an openness within the research that allows realities to be shifted and the participant to interpret their own experiences in an honest way. Research within the qualitative tradition has tended towards exploration to understand the realities of others; subsequently there is an argument that as all research seeks to interpret, that research is interpretative in nature, guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and social contexts. These beliefs can inform how these contexts are understood and, in the case of research, studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The deeply personal and individual nature of each athlete’s story places my methodological position within an interpretive paradigm due to its flexible and personal research structure (Carson et al., 2001). Furthermore, research within this paradigm accepts that the researcher enters the field with some insight into the research context but appreciates this is limited due to the complex, and unpredictable nature of everyone’s perception of reality (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). As discussed in Chapter 1, I entered this research with my own perspectives, developed through my own lived experiences and interactions. Fundamental to the research paradigm is an understanding of the epistemological stance of the researcher and what is understood by the stance towards the nature of knowledge which informs how we go about uncovering knowledge about learning and reality. This study sought to explore how each athlete’s transitions experience was shaped and interpreted. Furthermore, through exploring the epistemological stance, the importance of acknowledging elements of feminist epistemology, which gives thought to how gender can influence our concepts of knowledge and practice of inquiry was realised (Longino, 2017). As a female researcher conducting research with women, it is important to recognise the gendered nature of this study, and how being a woman will influence both participant and researchers views of the stories being studied, thus supporting Stanley and Wise (1993) who suggest that research that comes from a
feminist epistemological standpoint should be ‘by women, for women and where possible with
women’. Research that sits within the feminist epistemology closely aligns to the interpretative
paradigm, allowing the exploration of the personally created reality but acknowledges the
salience of gender.

3.2.1 Feminism and Poststructuralist feminism

The evolution of this study saw a growing awareness from the researcher of the importance
of placing the research within the context of feminist theory, providing solid underpinning to
allow for the exploration of the intricacies within gender studies (Mansfield et al, 2018).

Feminist research within sport contexts have frequently found that female athletes have more
challenging career paths with extra demands placed on them which can be related to both
gender hierarchy and a difference in societal and cultural norms and expectations (Kavoura et
al, 2018).

Scraton and Flintoff (2013) discuss three key theoretical explanations towards feminism in
sport. Liberal sports feminism presents the assumption that sports environments are positive
spaces for women and girls to be within and that any oppression cannot be attributed or
explained by class, sexism, or patriarchy. While socialist feminism seeks to consider those
factors that do impact upon women’s oppression, poststructuralist feminism is a theory that
focuses on how issues such as power and discourse resonate in the lives of women, with an
emphasis on the social construction of gendered subjectivities which allows and encourages
researchers to explore the world in a way that challenges what is accepted. In the context of
this research, this became pertinent when the gendered culture around sport was considered.
The desire to appreciate the lived experience of the athletes and understand both the impact
and perception of key life events closely aligned this research within the poststructuralist
perspective. Furthermore, identity is an underpinning aspect of this study and, as something
that is largely socially constructed while also changeable, an interpretivist paradigm that draws on a poststructuralist feminist perspective is a legitimate theoretical approach.

3.3 Methodological Approach

Through the exploration of a range of qualitative research designs it was concluded that a phenomenological approach that relied on in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of the athletes would be best. One strength of this approach is that phenomenology can be useful when studying an area or topic where there is limited knowledge (Donalek, 2004).

3.3.1 Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach is a complex research tradition that places emphasis on understanding a phenomenon or experience (Morse & Richards, 2002). It is a philosophical tradition that has been applied to many different settings and, of relevance to this study, can allow investigation of both individual experiences but also the culture that those experiences take place (Allen-Collinson, 2009). As a methodology it is concerned with the understanding of the lived experience of the individual, allowing a deeper appreciation of the meaning and structure of the phenomena being studied (Van Manen, 1990). Research aligned to this tradition can adopt either descriptive or interpretive phenomenological approaches which support going beyond the recounting of subjective experiences and allows questioning and interpretation of the experiences of others (Norlyk and Harder, 2010). By design, elements of both interpretive and descriptive phenomenology underpin this study as the personal nature of the topic (i.e. motherhood and sport) align to interpretive phenomenology whereas the specific nature of the experience of pregnancy and motherhood within the elite community remains an area with limited knowledge lending itself to more of a descriptive approach. It is also key to recognise how, in an effort to understand lived experiences, it is important to consider how meaning is experienced, and in turn how every experience that is recounted is likely to have a meaning (Sundler et al, 2019). Specifically, the principle of a phenomenological analysis
supports an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences of individuals and focuses on how people draw meaning and make sense of their experiences (Smith, 1996). However, interpreting experiences involves something Smith et al (2009) term a ‘double hermeneutic’ process which sees the researcher attempting to understand the way the individual attempts to make sense of their own world. This approach has been utilised by researchers seeking to explore and understand participants’ views of the world related to key phenomena, for example, Brown et al.’s. (2018) examination of social support during retirement. Like Brown et al. (2018), the current study aims to examine a range of transitions and accepts that there will be variation between participants’ experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. This approach allows exploration of the development of meaning of experience and whether perception can in some way shape this (Lakey & Drew, 1997). Furthermore, within a sports environment, Brady and Shambrook (2003) suggest that this tradition is helpful when exploring the quality of life for the athlete, making it pertinent to this study. Like Brown et al. (2018), Bruner et al. (2008) also adopted a phenomenological approach to transitions. Their study focused on the early transitions into sport of youth athletes, moving away from a superficial overview of the athlete’s experience and instead focusing on an in-depth understanding of the early athlete journey into elite level sport. This approach saw the young athletes positioned as the expert and created an environment that allowed them to be open about their experience and their interpretation of that experience.

This study adopted a phenomenological approach in contrast to other traditions such as narrative enquiry for a number of reasons. In a similar way to phenomenology, narrative research focuses on the lived experiences of participants proposing that lives are storied and that a sense of self is constructed by the narrative told (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). While narrative research still allows for the interpretation of stories it doesn’t consider the investigation of a phenomena more broadly which is this case was elite athletes who were also
mothers. In contrast phenomenological research sees participants asked to describe their experiences, make sense of those experience through interpretation and in turn drawing meaning from those experiences to allow the deeper understanding of the phenomena. The need for a rich and detailed account of each athlete, their experiences and their interpretation, have meant that research of this type has typically adopted in-depth interviews.

3.3.2 In-depth Interviews

One commonly utilised data collection technique within qualitative methods are in-depth interviews, which are often deemed most appropriate when researchers are seeking to gain detailed information about a person’s thoughts, behaviours or new issues in depth (Legard et al., 2003). This style of interview was used in contrast to structured interviews, which have been criticised for their rigidity and failure to accurately capture participants’ experiences and would not allow the athlete’s story to be told in their own way (Dale, 1996). Interviews of this style support the traditions of phenomenology as they allow the researcher to gain an understanding of not just the participants’ experiences but also meaningful perceptions of these experiences (Patton, 2002). Mears (2012) describes these as purposeful interactions in which the researcher seeks to learn what another person knows about a topic, as well as to discover what they have experienced, their thoughts about it and the significance of this within their lives. These purposeful conversations have clear objectives and see an interaction between researcher and participant. Moreover, these interactions are also largely naturalistic due to their conversational style (Legard et al., 2003). A further benefit of in-depth interviews is they not only allow the focus to be on more than the story that is told, but also on the linguistic practices of the narrator, for example, word choice, laughter, or other emotions that are displayed during the story process (Chase, 2011.) Underpinning all epistemology is the acceptance that both researcher and participants enter the research with their own version of reality, which will have been influenced by their own experiences and the interactions that take place during the
interview process. This interaction raises the question about how active or passive the researcher is or indeed should be when conducting in-depth interviews. The nature of research sees the researcher exploring the experiences of those being interviewed, with the questions asked guiding the story and determining the quality of the information being gleaned. These interactions illustrate the importance of the researcher being aware of their role within the research (Creswell, 2013). Closely related to this and drawing on the work of Kvale (1996) is the positioning of researcher within the interview process. Kvale’s ‘traveller metaphor’ positions the researcher as traveller journeying with the interviewee, with meaning uncovered as the researcher interprets the stories told. This positioning as researcher supported the phenomenological design of the study as it facilitated the understanding of the lived experiences of each athlete. The current study also called for a balance of structure (to ensure all key points in the athlete’s lives were covered) as well as flexibility (allowing the athlete to talk about key events they perceived as relevant and in as much depth as they felt necessary). The interviews were approached with a clear outline of themes in the form of a broad topic guide ensuring that key areas were covered, the structure of this was flexible enough to not force participants to talk in set order or at set length about events. (Legard et al., 2003).

This chapter will now turn to the dynamics of interviewing women. Olesen (2000) recognised how interviewing females tends to be more reflexive and interactive, with a less stark distinction between the roles of researcher and participant. This further supports the collaborative notion that sees researcher and participants as co-creators negotiating understanding together. The active researcher is no longer a neutral asker of questions but may express their own perspective or give information about themselves, which Oakley (1981) recognised to be of value to women interviewing women.
3.3.3.2 Interviewing women

Feminist researchers generally acknowledge how gender can influence a person’s concept of knowledge and seeks to ensure that there is a balance between research and subject by women interviewing women. Research of this type aims to instigate change through understanding the experiences of women. Traditionally, cultural norms within social science have rendered women invisible, and, as such, early research with women required careful consideration of the potential impact that the interview could have (Reinharz & Chase, 2002), with the development of feminist approaches to research wholly challenging women’s subordination (Steiner, 2009).

In stark contrast to traditional cultural norms the women interviewed (elite level female athletes) provide a clear example of high achieving women in a traditionally white and male dominated environment. Powerful women will tend to be more accustomed to speaking and being heard and this was reflected in how all those interviewed were open and comfortable with telling their story. In line with feminist literature, it is also important to acknowledge the intersectionality of gender and class presented by the sample chosen. While gender is more frequently categorised as a marginalising vector (Nash, 2008), the privileged position and higher socio-economic group of the participants may further suggest their comfort at being interviewed and confidence in telling their story.

Furthermore, Reinbarz and Chase (2002) recognise how they often feel that participating in research is part of their responsibility to women who aspire to follow in their footsteps. Ostrander (1984) used this to gain access to her participants by appealing to them as women. These considerations were evident during the recruitment process as elite athletes are role models for the next generation of athletes and also to women who seek to juggle career and motherhood. This linked to the research of Darroch and Hillsbury (2017) who recognised how women take responsibility for role modelling active and sporting behaviours. Like Ostrander (1984) appealing to the unique nature of the experiences these women had been through was a
pivotal part of the dialogue surrounding recruitment. This was also strengthened through the self-disclosure and subsequent connections that were made with each participant by sharing the experiences of the researcher in sport as well as those as a mother. The interactions between the researcher and the study are key here and as discussed by Stanley and Wise (1993), women conducting research on women is important in the context of female epistemology.

3.3.3.1 ‘Insider/outsider’ status and self-disclosure

The ‘insider/outsider’ debate was explained by Merton (1972) and suggests that certain groups only have access to particular knowledge, ‘monopolistic access’, in contrast to some groups having ‘privileged access’ to certain types of knowledge. This was discussed by Lewin (1998), who recognised how mothers talking to mothers can shape the narrative. The significance of the interaction between researcher and participant illustrates the importance of building a rapport early in the research process. One such mechanism was discussed by Knox et al. (2011), who saw that self-disclosure can facilitate this process. Reinharz and Chase (2003) explained this process of self-disclosure describing how it takes place when the researcher shares ideas, attitudes or experiences that have relevance to the interview topics, which in turn can encourage respondents to share in a more forthcoming manner. The use of this approach has been examined in a more investigative context with research by Dianiska et al. (2021) finding that self-disclosure could overcome barriers in terms of cooperation when interviewing individuals in a criminal setting and was used as a rapport-building tactic. While traditionally researchers have been advised to keep themselves out of the research process (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), those who advocate more flexible in-depth interview approaches have suggested that self-disclosure can be a useful research strategy, especially when the researcher is seeking to elicit more personal or sensitive information, a factor found within the current study. Furthermore, female researchers tend to be drawn to topics that are deeply personal and, as such, the sharing of ideas, attitudes or experiences that are relevant can encourage
participants to be more at ease and in turn forthcoming (Oakley, 1981). Oakley (1981) also recognised the humanising and equalizing impact self-disclosure can have which can result in a more comfortable telling of a story. Disclosure was considered carefully prior to each interview and, in keeping with Reinharz and Chase (2002), the extent of disclosure was balanced, based on both the individual and the context. As discussed, self-disclosure was a natural stage within the first interview with participants when the research was explained to them in more detail, as the researcher shared that the initial interest in the area was sparked from their own experiences of balancing engagement in sport with motherhood and a career. The sharing of motherhood was a form of solidarity between both parties. It is important to place this in the wider context of the social characteristics of the interviewer and the relationship of the interviewer to the participant as well as the topic.

The sharing of experience and being seen as an insider was deemed a strength of this type of research as this shared experience allowed empathy to be shown and helped to reinforce how valued their stories as woman, mother, and athlete were. This led to a more conversational dialogue within the interviews with participants often asking the interviewer if they knew what they meant or had experienced something similar. A final consideration was the positioning of self-disclosure within feminist research as it can serve to balance power relationships, something women interviewing women often strive to do (Levy & Hollan, 1998). The creation of this more equal relationship further supported the development of a more naturalistic and relaxed atmosphere, which is important when trying to explore highly personal experiences.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted on 10th March 2017 by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref - HREC/2016/2433/Lingam-Willgoss/2). There were no changes requested. Contact with participants and data collection including the pilot study did not take place until after this approval.
Participants were all contacted via email in the first instance and once they had confirmed interest in involvement in the study were sent both a participant information sheet (Appendix D) and consent form (Appendix E). Participants were all advised regarding the purpose of the study and given a brief guide in terms of the topic areas that would be covered, which included: early experiences in sport; key transitions; pre-motherhood; pregnancy and motherhood; and retirement from elite level competition. Furthermore, they were all made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage of the project. At this stage it was also confirmed that pseudonyms would be allocated to themselves and anyone else they referred to by name within the interviews. Pseudonyms were also given to areas where they lived as well as training locations; the years of events such as Olympic Games, have not been mentioned. This is in keeping with methods used by Debois et al. (2012). Finally, the type of sport competed in is referred to in its most generalised term to help ensure anonymity while athletes were either categorised as runners or winter sports athletes. Participants were also afforded the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure that no events or comments could identify them.

To confirm their inclusion in the study all participants signed a written consent form.

During the research process the ethical strictures were adhered to at all times. One challenge within this research was that participants were elite level athletes with several having a strong media presence or a highly recognisable story – this was a key reason for asking all participants to carefully check over all transcripts to ensure they were happy with the level of anonymity that had been used. To further guard against revealing the identity of participants, some detail has been removed from the results sections in this thesis, for example, detail in terms of actual career success has not been included.

3.5 The pilot study

A pilot study was undertaken 12 months prior to the main study. There were three main reasons why the pilot interview was carried out: 1) to assess the effectiveness of the interview
questions; did they generate the expected response and encourage the participant to talk about the main themes?; 2) to allow the researcher to practise interviewing skills of this style; and 3) to allow the researcher to build familiarity with the research process (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). One participant, a female swimmer was assigned the pseudonym of Jane. A mother of two teenage children Jane had previously been a competitive swimmer at national level. Jane was married to Peter who had also been a national level swimmer. At the time of the interview Jane worked 30 hours a week and still swam on average four times per week. She was known to the researcher as they used to swim together.

While interviewing someone one knows might raise concerns in terms of rigour, it was felt in this instance to be helpful as the researcher already had some knowledge about Jane’s life and career, so was aware when things were potentially missed out and could ask why.

Three separate interviews were conducted which adopted the same schedule as that planned for the main study. As the pilot interviews progressed it was evident that some refinement was needed to the questions. For example, an early question was designed to encourage the participants to talk about their early experiences in sport, but this resulted in Jane immediately discussing how she first got involved in swimming rather than sport more broadly. This led to a clearer explanation of the purpose and nature of the interviews being given at the start and more clarity given to the questions asked as, at points, the interviewee asked for clarification or for an indication of how much depth was required within her answers. A final general point that was illustrated throughout the pilot was how events unrelated to her main sporting career or events outside of sport were not deemed relevant by Jane when she was recounting her story as she felt they were unrelated to the context of the study. Again, this led to a change in explanation being used for those participants within the main study to emphasise the importance of the events both within and outside their athletic world.
Following the series of interviews, Jane was asked how she found the process of being interviewed about her career in sport and life. She openly said at the outset that she felt a bit self-indulgent as she did not really think she had much to tell and saw herself as a regular person. This perception lends support to Reinharz and Chase’s (2002) suggestion that women may not feel they have a place to talk. However, Jane reflected that as the process went on and she got more relaxed she found it almost therapeutic and a positive experience as she said she never really had the chance to talk or even think about her previous success. The therapeutic nature of interviews was something explored by Heppner et al. (1999) who discussed that there is much crossover between a phenomenological interview and a therapeutic one (typical of those in a family therapy session). This process has been found to be as beneficial for the researcher (in terms of understanding) as it is curative for the participant (Nelson et al., 2013) as well as raising how important the relationship was between researcher and participant, this highlighted that the way that the participants interacted with the researcher and how they felt during the interview process was likely to shift and develop.

3.6 The main study

3.6.1 Aims and Research objectives

The main aims of the study were to address the prominent gap in current transition literature pertaining to elite female athletes, with the broad aim being to:

Explore the transitional experiences of elite female athletes who had children during their career and returned to compete at elite level. This broad question had several related areas that were of interest including how the athletes navigated the transitions they experienced, the impact on athletic identity and the formation of new identities, and management of a career and motherhood.
3.6.2 Time frame

The data collection took place over an 18-month period. The original aim to conduct all interviews within a 12-month period was overly optimistic due in part to the competitive demands on those athletes who were still active in their sport. For example, during the period of data collection one athlete was preparing for and competing in the Olympic Games.

3.6.3 Participants

A key aim of this study was to examine the differences in experiences of women from different types of sport, with a key focus on those from winter sports where limited research exists. Of the research that does exist looking at elite athletes who combine motherhood with their career, a significant proportion is centred on the running community, with it appearing more accepted that athletes are combining these two roles.

Following approval of the study by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, five elite female athletes were purposefully sampled and contacted (Patton, 2002) who fitted the following criteria: (a) had gone through pregnancy, were mothers and had returned to competition; (b) had competed at elite level both pre- and post-childbirth; (c) were British athletes; and (d) either competed in a winter sport or were a distance runner. Of the five athletes three were retired and two were still competing, three were runners and two were winter sports athletes. One of the criteria presented something of a challenge in terms of defining the term ‘elite’ athlete (Polman, 2012). A systematic review carried out by Swann et al. (2015) found much inconsistency and a wide range of definitions for the term elite, from Olympic gold medallist to regional level athletes. For the purposes of this research an elite athlete is defined as someone who has competed at international level as a senior athlete (Swann et al., 2015). Recruiting five athletes of this level was not a straightforward process as gaining access to elite level athletes, whether active or retired, relied heavily on use of gatekeepers to facilitate access to appropriate individuals. The researcher also attempted to contact athletes via their own
professional websites or through social media. This secondary method initially resulted in two active elite athletes confirming their involvement with the study, however, both failed to then participate. Of those who participated in the study two were recruited through a gatekeeper who was a professional in that field. The remaining three athletes were recruited via snowball sampling. The relatively rigid selection criteria and range of sports has resulted in a sample with limited diversity. All of the athletes are white, heterosexual and, while not explicitly stated, could be classed as in a privileged position in a relatively high socio-economic group.

Initial introduction to all athletes took place via email, which was followed up with each participant being emailed the participant information sheet and consent form (see Appendices A and B). All participants were given the opportunity to contact the researcher if they had any queries prior to agreeing to participate. While detailed in the consent form this information was further iterated to participants within the initial email contact. Participants were also reassured that they would have the opportunity to check all transcripts to ensure they were happy with the level of anonymity, as well as to confirm that there was nothing else recorded that would make them recognisable.

3.6.4 Sport classification

One comparison that this thesis aimed to explore was whether there were differences in experiences of athletes based on type of sport, as discussed in Chapter 2. This remains an area where there is a significant gap within the transition literature specifically in relation to winter sport athletes. One means of categorisation relevant to the current study was to consider how each type of sport was categorised in terms of level of risk and demands. This categorisation was based on Zuckerman’s (1983) sport risk continuum which saw high risk sports as those that were characterized by acute danger, associated with accidents and in particular risk of fatal injury. These included sports such as motor racing, skiing, and skydiving. At the other end of the continuum were sports such as swimming and marathon running that could result in injury
but have a very remote chance of fatality. Finally, medium risk sports were those such as contact sport, for example rugby, that carry a risk of serious injury, but the chance of death is remote. Noteworthy is how the context of a sport could also change its categorization, for example, Thomson et al. (2015) classify cycling as a low-risk sport but mountain biking as high-risk. The desire to explore the differences in experience of winter sports athletes (higher risk) and low-risk sports athletes, saw the recruitment of participants from typically moderate/high-risk and low-risk sport. Subsequently this study has focused on both winter sports athletes and runners, the selection of runners being in part based on the amount of research that has been conducted looking at elite athletic mothers who run (e.g., Bean & Wimbs, 2021; Darroch & Hillsbury, 2017; McGannon et al., 2015 and Romaine et al., 2016). Furthermore, they provided a contrast to winter sports athletes, for example, running is easily accessible, low risk, introduced at school and has a strong tradition in the UK. Given that, to aid anonymity this study has removed any mention of either event, for example 5000m or marathon running (in the case of the runners) or disciplines such as downhill skiing or luge (in the case of the winter sports athletes), a risk classification is helpful for the reader. A summary of each athlete’s participant information as well as other basic biographical information is provided in Table 3.1.
Table 3.1

A table to show pseudonyms assigned and participant information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Risk level</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Years competing</th>
<th>Years since retirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Ice based winter sport</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>Snow based winter sport</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>N/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>Long distance running</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Long distance running</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>N/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>Long distance running</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.6.5 Data Collection

Data collection took place between June 2017 and February 2019 and took the form of a series of open interviews with each participant. Interviews took place in a range of locations all chosen by the participants and ranged from participants’ homes to places of work or via Skype (online communication software application). In recent times the use of online communication software for interview has become increasingly prevalent and it has been found to have several benefits including cost-effectiveness, and the ability to talk to a wider range of people due to lack of location-related barriers (Boland et al., 2021). However, use of tools such as Skype
must be managed carefully due to concerns related to the barriers they might present in terms of developing rapport, privacy, equity as well as potential technical problems (Boland et al., 2021). In the context of the current research the benefits of this method outweighed any concerns, and as Oliffe et al. (2021) concluded a key benefit was the way this allowed an extension of recruitment a vital consideration when working with athletes who are likely to be at various locations due to competition. Where possible face-to-face interviews were conducted but for two of the athletes this wasn’t possible due to location and travel commitments. Finally, three of the participants were interviewed three times and the remaining two had four interviews. This was based on time constraints and level of detail provided at interview three and where appropriate a fourth interview was deemed necessary. A summary of the interview locations is presented in table 3.2.
Table 3.2

A table to show the locations of interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Interview 3</th>
<th>Interview 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Private room at a pub</td>
<td>At her workplace</td>
<td>At her workplace</td>
<td>At her workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>At her home</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>At her home</td>
<td>At her home</td>
<td>At her home</td>
<td>N/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
<td>N/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
<td>Via Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This approach has meant that parity between interviews was hard to achieve due to different interview techniques, however, each of the interviews was conducted in a private location where participants felt comfortable. A naturalistic conversational style was adopted – this developed as the interviews progressed and rapport was developed between researcher and participant. It is also worth noting that all participants were comfortable using online communication and had all conducted media interviews in this way.

The location of these interviews was also considered in terms of researcher safety; both Gemma and Yvonne were introduced to the researcher via a gatekeeper who they were well known to, and therefore a visit to their homes wasn’t deemed a risk to the researcher. However, at both first visits a friend came and sat in the car while the researcher conducted the interviews. At no point was the interviewee’s name disclosed or any information discussed in relation to the interview with the friend. The interview with Rebecca was conducted at locations where other people were working in nearby rooms so no risk was identified. For all face-to-face interviews
safety was ensured by calling a friend to confirm arriving and leaving the location and arriving home.

3.6.6 Interviews

At the start of the first interview participants were asked a selection of structured questions to obtain basic biographical information including: age; number of children; marital status; years competing at elite level; years since retirement (if retired); they were also asked to confirm what level of risk they perceived their sport to have. The rest of the interview followed an in-depth approach; all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the main researcher and lasted between 50 and 120 minutes.

3.6.6.1 Interview 1

The focus of the first interview was to learn about the athletes’ early life experiences. It was also important in terms of developing rapport to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing highly personal stories. To facilitate the development of rapport the first interview started with some basic conversation in which the researcher introduced themselves and the research and explained more about why they were interested in exploring this topic area. This required a level of self-disclosure which served to both establish a commonality between researcher and participant but also encouraged the development of rapport. In this first interview it was also reiterated that all information would be treated confidentially and that they would remain anonymous; confirmation was also given that they would have the opportunity to read all transcripts to ensure they were comfortable with the level of anonymity provided. Finally, all participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the study, with it being confirmed that their data would be destroyed if they chose to do so. Within this first session participants were asked about their early sport involvement. The purpose of this interview was to learn more about each athlete’s early life and their early sporting involvement, from school sport and beyond. They were also encouraged to talk about any other significant
early life experiences up until the point they made the transition to either senior or elite level sport (see Appendix A). Furthermore, as well as their involvement, they were encouraged to talk about how and who got them involved in sport. The first interview tended to tell the story up until the elite level was reached as this was considered to be a fundamental transition in the career of each athlete. The transition marked the point that they became an athlete, which meant that this also marked the point when the athletes started to talk about the development of an athletic identity. This point in their story also provided a natural break in the conversation. Due to the conversational nature of the interviews this natural break point was different for each participant. Following the first interview with each participant the recording was immediately transcribed and any points to follow up in the second interview were noted. The transcript was also sent to the participant to check the level of anonymity.

3.6.6.2 Interview 2

In most instances the second interview focused solely on the athletic career of each athlete up until their retirement, however, in one case where the athlete had already retired, the subject of retirement did come up. For all participants this was the longest interview and contained some of the richest data. Key areas of focus within this interview were: (a) within-career transitions, in particular motherhood; (b) psychological and emotional factors (motivations for participation, perceptions of transition and impact); and (c) psychosocial factors (perceptions of social support) (see Appendix B). In the cases of three of the athletes this second stage ran into two interviews due to the extensive experiences that some of the athletes recounted and the time constraints of each interview. It is worth noting that for all athletes much of the second interview focused on their experience of motherhood and how they negotiated pregnancy and their return to sport. For all the athletes the discussion around pregnancy and motherhood formed the longest parts of the interviews. As for interview one, the second and third interviews were transcribed and checked prior to the final interview.
3.6.6.3 The final interview

The final interview solely focused on the latter stages of the athlete’s career including their retirement from sport, their life in the years after retirement up until present day. (See Appendix C). At the time of interview two of the athletes were still competing, and while they did touch on their retirement plans, their focus was more on their career moving forward. This final interview also sought to explore how each athlete had viewed the interviewing process and what the experience had been like for them.

3.7 Data Analysis

Sundler et al, (2019) discussed the value of adopting qualitative thematic analysis on descriptive phenomenology. This approach allows the thematizing of meaning (in line with other qualitative approaches) but allows for meaning to be understood as related to the interpretation of the data presenting and, in turn, spotlights the underlying or more subtle meaning within the lived experiences that can give clarity a phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016).

Through adopting thematic analysis, the themes derived from the analyses are data driven and deductive, allowing the researcher to search for meaning and organise these into themes. One of the most commonly used approaches to thematic analysis is that detailed within psychological literature by Braun and Clarke (2006). However, before any detailed analysis can take place data needed to be organised.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read and listened to throughout repeatedly (4-5 times) to gain a holistic and familiar sense of the data. This was carried out directly after each interview to check on the quality of the recording, to allow the researcher to reflect between interviews and, subsequently, to allow any follow-up points to be noted and then raised at the start of the following interview. After transcription and ensuring anonymity, a copy of each participant’s transcript was sent to them to ensure that they were happy with the level to which they and those they talk about had been given anonymity. Once the scripts were returned and
any changes made, interviews were ready to analyse. The only changes made were to the transcripts of Rebecca who asked that a section was removed, which she felt would make her recognizable due to the event she described.

3.7.1 Thematic analysis
Defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a recursive form of analysis, thematic analysis adopts a staged but also cyclical approach to analysis. More recently they described this analysis as both telling a story and making an argument, whereby the process of analysis allows you to decide which story you want to relate about the experiences of your participants (Braun et al., 2022). Essentially, it relies on identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data. This type of analysis was chosen for this study as it is a highly flexible method that aligns to any paradigm adopted. Fundamental to this study it allows social as well as psychological interpretations. This study adopted Braun and Clarke’s (2006) staged approach to thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; and defining and naming themes.

The analysis of data followed this staged process although there was some flexibility in approach, with the data being revisited several times during the process to ensure that codes were within the correct themes. Furthermore, original audio recordings have been listened to several times to ensure that the full meaning and emotion relating to key events were not lost. These were noted on transcripts to allow for them to be easily revisited when undertaking the analysis.

3.7.2. Using software in qualitative research
Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was used to code the interview transcripts. CAQDAS packages do more than just support the early coding stages of
the data analysis process as they can allow for better overall management of data. A range of tasks are made somewhat more manageable via CAQDAS such as: planning and managing a project; writing analytic memos; reading, marking, and commenting on data. These are on top of those linked to coding, such as developing a coding scheme and organising data and mapping (Silver & Lewins, 2014). With a range of different packages available, NVivo was chosen as the most suitable for this research. NVivo is a code-based system with a range of flexible tools which are relatively intuitive to use. One of the appealing qualities was its use with structured data (interviews) that allows for incorporation of material from other applications (Silver & Lewins, 2014). NVivo was used to help organise the data and select the initial key codes within each transcript. No analysis of those codes was conducted in the software package. Later the package was used to support the selection of key quotes to represent themes and to keep data organised.

3.7.2.1 Familiarisation of data

In many ways this stage began during the data collection stage, through the stories that were told to the researcher. This is somewhat typical of naturalistic inquiry, and it meant that the end of data collection and the start of analysis was somewhat hazy (Patton, 2002). More formally this stage began at the transcription stage, as the researcher took care to ensure that all information was retained, such as punctuation and pauses to preserve context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was taken to analysis which involved the discovery of patterns and themes in the data (Patton, 2002). Following transcription each interview transcript was read several times. Care was taken not to start coding at this stage but to just make a note of emerging patterns. A final part of this stage was that each athlete’s story was summarised to form a vignette of their life and career in sport to form Chapter Four of this thesis. Importantly, this facilitated a full understanding of their story and allowed the researcher
to preserve who they were as people. Furthermore, their narratives, when broken into themes, might potentially become disjointed if an overview wasn’t presented first.

3.7.2.2 Generating initial codes

The process of missing generating initial codes has been termed open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This terminology emphasises the way the analysis is open to the data provided and that the researcher aims to remain unprejudiced by their own beliefs directly in alignment with the interpretative paradigm. As an ‘insider’ the personal experiences of the researcher as a mother and athlete informed the initial coding as certain codes were expected and therefore easier to identify, for example, the researcher expected the athletes to talk about feeling the absence of competition during their pregnancy. All the initial codes were discussed and agreed with the lead supervisor. A fundamental part of this stage was to ensure that codes were inclusive so that the essence of meaning and the context were not lost (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This has resulted in several very long sections that represent codes which, if cut down, would lead to a loss of meaning. One example of this was when Rebecca discussed the logistics of planning for her first event after having a baby: there was a lot of detail about how meticulously this was organised and, without the full section, the impact would be lost. There were also several instances within all transcripts where extracts fitted within more than one code, such as discussion around training during pregnancy, where the point could relate to either training or pregnancy. Each transcript was read and coded – initial codes were quite descriptive in nature as certain points that were discussed were quite specific – whereas others were quite broad and prominent through all the athlete’s stories. Initially identified were 165 ‘nodes’ using NVivo (see Appendix F), however, these were later reduced as several nodes were deemed to fit the same broader codes, for example entry into sport’ and ‘early sporting experiences’ were ultimately grouped together as they were reasoned to be one code, whereas others such as athletic identity remained codes in isolation.
3.7.2.3 Searching for themes

Stage Three was concerned with sorting codes into themes and looking for patterns and relationships across and between all interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Valuably it allowed for the significance of each individual theme to be explored fully by emphasising how much a theme was mentioned by each participant. A theme is identified as that which captures something important about the data in relation to the questions that are being asked (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2014), furthermore, it is important to recognise that, while themes were predominantly seen across all data sets, their prevalence varied and in some cases there were themes that were unique to just one athlete’s narrative, for example, the impact of overtraining. To aid the sorting of codes into themes, these were presented visually using tables that allowed for the relationships between codes and themes to be explored, also identifying the need to have an additional level within the data that had overarching themes with sub-themes. The 165 nodes were initially broken down into 33 different themes which appeared across the narratives of all athletes (see Appendix G). This process took place manually not within NVivo; nodes were grouped together and, in some places, nodes had been labelled twice. It is worth noting that these initial stages highlighted that some themes had greater significance for some of the athletes and dominated much of their narrative.

3.7.2.4 Review of initial themes

The initial themes that were identified were then further grouped into eight higher level themes that fitted into much broader categories, for example, motherhood and retirement. However, at this stage it was recognised how the shift in identity that the athletes experienced during each key transition underpinned their experience. This review process allowed for themes to be defined and named specifically. This process identified how there were higher level themes that related to identity. All themes were viewed as valid to the data set and captured the true
meaning within each athlete’s story. A final stage was added here as there was a gap of several months between the start of the interview coding and the completion, meaning that some codes had got lost or overlooked. All interviews were then re-read to check that no key nodes were missed when coding through NVivo and to ensure no key themes were missed.

3.7.2.5 Defining and naming themes

The eight higher order themes were all linked to the athlete’s career in sport, with no clear themes emerging that related to life outside of sport, other than the discussion connected to motherhood. Six of the themes were all underpinned by links to shifts in the athlete’s identity either connected to their athletic identity, their mother identity or challenges and losing their identity as an athlete. These six key themes are illustrated in figure 3.1 below. The final two themes focused more on influencing factors that had a bearing on how each transitional episode was navigated, as illustrated in figure 3.2.
Figure 3.1

Thematic map showing six main themes related to identity.
Figure 3.2

Thematic map showing two main themes which influenced the quality of transition
3.8 Emotional Reflexivity

Traditionally research has suggested that a separation between participant and researcher is essential to avoid bias or any influence on the natural setting (Douglas & Carless, 2012). While the development of relationships between participants and researcher are less obvious within phenomenology or narrative inquiry than, for example ethnography, it is important to recognise the growing relationships that develop during the research process as well as the relationship the researcher has with their research. Owton and Allen-Collinson (2013) explored this within their study that focused on friendship as a form of methodology. They contend that the development of rapport and friendship during research can in fact provide another layer of richness to the data collected through both emotional involvement and emotional reflexivity.

Reflexivity is a fundamental component of qualitative research which encourages researchers to consider their role within their research and the research process as well as the social context of the research (Linabary et al., 2020). Within the context of feminist research reflexivity has been highlighted as important in terms of accountability and acknowledgement of the researcher’s role within the co-construction of knowledge (Dowling, 2012). A specific function of reflexivity with the feminist research body relates to the shifting of power dynamics, for example, creating a shift in the traditional relationship between researcher and participant, which Collins (2002) suggests can foster more caring and reciprocal relationships. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2012) have also recognised how reflexivity can support a more holistic process in terms of research approach, in part through the way it can allow for a change in dynamic between participants. This is of relevance to the current study which sought to gain a holistic appreciation of the athlete’s life. More specifically, emotional reflexivity relates to how we interpret both our own emotions, those of others and how these play out, something Womersley et al. (2011) recognise as important within feminist research.
The commonalities between the experiences of the participants and researcher and the sharing of their relationship with sport as mothers allowed for both trust and rapport to be developed at the start of the interview process. As an insider it is arguable that the athletes would not have been so open with the researcher about their highly personal experiences without this common ground. The researcher was open about their decision to study in this area being driven by personal interest and experience and, as such, it is to be expected that they entered the research journey with their own views and position on this topic. Like the athletes, they had experienced the tensions of juggling motherhood with a career albeit at a lesser competitive level. However, this has been viewed as a strength of the research rather than a limitation. For example, their career as an elite winter sport athlete allowed them to show empathy for the winter sports athletes when they described key events or experiences. As Ezzy (2010) discussed, it is unlikely that many of the more intense and emotional reflections would have been covered or would have been treated in a superficial way had this relationship not been developed. For example, Wendy was comfortable enough to talk in detail about her experiences of labour and post-natal depression. The level of emotion connected to events such as Wendy’s is one example of how recalling the event carried with it heightened emotion. The researcher felt that same emotion and cared about each participant experience, being able to empathise with what they described at an emotional level. In the context of this research emotional reflexivity allowed the researcher to understand both the athlete story and their emotional connections.

3.9 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide a clear overview of the research paradigm that this study is positioned within as well as the methodological approaches taken. Through exploration of the interpretive paradigm the epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches have been given clarity. Research that seeks to explore the lived experiences of participants and
examine how they view and interpret the world saw this study draw on the traditions of phenomenology and, through in-depth interviews, a detailed account of each athlete’s story was garnered. Each athlete’s own interpretation of their world and their experience was maintained as well as the associated emotions. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of analysis saw eight key themes emerge that related to either shifts in each athlete’s identity or factors that influenced the quality of their transitions. Before these themes are discussed in detail within Chapters Five to Eight, Chapter Four presents the athlete stories that were created during the early stages of data analysis. These provide a rich and detailed account of each athlete’s life with a primary focus on the period prior to them becoming mothers subsequently allowing later discussion to be placed in context.
Chapter 4 – Athlete stories

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed and descriptive overview of each of the five athletes who are the focus of this thesis, facilitating a better understanding of the context of their experiences. Furthermore, this greater understanding will serve to contextualise the analysis of the athletes which will take place in the chapters that follow. There is a history within qualitative research of this type to draw on the use of vignettes to present data, as these allow a holistic appreciation of the athlete’s life (e.g., Nesti et al., 2020; Champ et al., 2020). These descriptive vignettes will facilitate viewing the specific transitions and shifts in identity focused on in the later chapters in the context of the wider athlete journey. As discussed in the previous chapter, to preserve the anonymity of each athlete specific detail has been removed. All athletes competed at elite level, representing their country at either World, Commonwealth or Olympic events.

4.2 Penny

Penny is a 45-year-old distance runner. She is married with two children. Penny has competed in five Olympic Games and has been an elite athlete for over 20 years. She has had considerable career success gaining medals at several international-level competitions (e.g., World Championships). Penny was one of the two athletes still competing at the time of the interviews who had no intention to retire.

Spending much of her childhood participating in a range of different sports, Penny was one of three children and, having two very active brothers, spent a lot of time playing football with them. She talked several times about how she had wanted to be a footballer when she was young but how it wasn’t considered something ‘girls’ could pursue. Her first experiences of running occurred at school when she was 13 years old when her PE teacher suggested she join an athletics club. She initially tried numerous track and field events before slowly showing a
natural aptitude and love of distance running. Penny made rapid initial progress but as she entered puberty she plateaued and remembers this as being a frustrating time. Her reflections on this period of her life dealt with how young female athletes did not have much information or support relative to puberty and, in her case, it led to her losing focus, stepping away from competition for a while.

The next key period within Penny’s life was when she went to university. During this period, she ran recreationally but was also plagued by several injuries meaning any hope of resuming serious training was impossible. She enjoyed university where she studied physiotherapy. Following graduation, she married her husband whom she had met through athletics seven years before and then went straight to work as a physiotherapist. Throughout this time, she talked about not knowing if a career as an athlete was viable, something based on her lack of confidence in her ability as a runner. This lack of confidence made her fearful of other people’s opinions of her should she fail in her pursuit of running as a career. This meant that when she made the decision to try and succeed as a runner she did not make any formal announcement. Instead, Penny told those around her she was going travelling with her husband, which allowed her to combine her desire to travel with an increase in training. Penny remembers how she was very ‘rusty’ when she returned to training in the UK because, while abroad, she had done no work on the track but it had been a significant moment in her life as it catalysed her career in elite sport. On her return Penny joined an athletics club and began training on the track. Gradually she brought her times back down, resulting in her qualifying for the World Championships and marking the start of her international career. This represented a key point in Penny’s life with a shift from running and training as carefree and flexible to becoming something highly focused and with clear goals.

Unfortunately, this success was short-lived with Penny plagued by an injury for two and half years. She had an unsuccessful operation on her knee, which left her with permanent damage.
Penny made a very slow return to competition, but this coincided with her getting a new coach and saw her qualify for the Olympic Games. Indeed, significant periods of her career were marked by injury. During these periods she always worked hard to maintain fitness and did a lot of aqua jogging and running on grass to avoid too much impact during her return to training. Penny changed coaches within her career, ultimately ending up with her husband as her coach.

A prominent part of her story was related to cheating, specifically doping and drugs in sport. She has been awarded medals retrospectively when those she raced against have later been found to be drugs cheats, although in some cases this has been many years after the event. She mentions several times how she probably deserved a few extra medals as she is sure not all of those who raced have been found guilty even when it was known they were cheating. While she noted it was nice to have been given the medals eventually, this has had some impact on her career as missing out on medals when she was younger saw her miss out on some lucrative sponsorship deals. She discussed how even though she didn’t compete for money, the additional income could have made some things a bit easier and given her more security. This linked to her having quite limited financial support from within the sport and having to rely on sponsorship as her main revenue source.

Penny talked quite a lot about funding and sponsorship within her story and described points when she had lost her sponsorship, which occurred when she got older, regardless of her continuing success. This loss of sponsorship made Penny consider whether she was too old to compete and the viability of continuing to compete with reduced funding. There were several periods in her career when she lost funding unrelated to her age, largely linked to periods of injury when she had a prolonged period away from competition.

The most significant transition Penny discussed was becoming a mother. Penny was desperate to become a mother and having her first child was a real turning point for her. She had her first
child quite late in her career but at a time when she was still successful. She attributes much of her later success to feeling so much happier in her life and having a secure family unit. She worked hard to ensure that she was able to balance her career and be a very present mother and the mother she wanted to be. Throughout the discussion related to children and family she talks a lot about the role her husband played in her career and in terms of her continuing in sport after having her children. In addition, having him as her coach meant he planned her training to fit around her son and she said it was much easier for her than if she had had a coach who did not know her situation or the logistics of managing a child.

Penny made some adaptations to her training when she returned after becoming a mother. Notably, she got a treadmill so that she could train at any time. Following the birth of her son Penny made a very successful return to competition, under her husband’s coaching, including medal success at several major championships. She worked hard to combine training with her son and fit it around his needs. She also included her son in her training when he was at an age when he could join in. When her son was almost four Penny opted to try for a second baby. Following the birth of her daughter, Penny made a successful return to sport again including medal success at major events.

Penny enjoyed the longest career of all those in the study, with considerable career success, much of it coming after having children. At various points, Penny mentioned how running as a sport was far easier to combine a family with and noted that if she had been involved in a team sport it could have been much harder to continue once she had her children. She felt that the need to train at set times as dictated by a team would have taken away all the flexibility that allowed her to juggle motherhood with training.
Penny regards her success after having her daughter as her career high point. Penny expressed gratitude to her sport and the life and experience it had given her and continues to train and compete at elite level as well as being an ambassador for her sport.

4.3 Wendy

Wendy is a 44-year-old retired distance runner, married with two children. She competed at elite level for eight years, although this was split into two blocks as she had a significant gap in her running career. Wendy was the only athlete in the study who had a job alongside her running, working in the caring industry. Wendy retired 10 years ago.

Describing herself as being from an active but not sporty family Wendy remembers taking part in many activities but not in a competitive way. She discovered athletics at primary school when a teacher introduced her to the sport and she showed an early talent for the 800m. Continuing to run at secondary school she won an event at the school sports day. Seen by a local athletics coach, she was invited to join a club. At first her parents only let her train three days a week but after a year she gradually dropped her other commitments to focus more on running. She had quite a lot of success at junior level including a bronze at the UK championships. She represented English Schools a year later but then gave up competitive running.

This period away from competitive running coincided with Wendy going to university where she fully immersed herself in university life, enjoying the social side. She occasionally went for a run. It was when she met her husband who was in the military that she started to run a little more seriously. They married when she was 24, the same year she went back to university to do her Masters. She attended a university with a strong sports tradition and started to take running more seriously again. Following university Wendy and her husband moved to a new
location due to his job in the military. They moved 13 times which impacted on her ability to stay with the same training group.

Following one move, Wendy joined a new running club and got a new coach. This coach was perhaps the most significant person in her life and career bar her husband. The running group she joined had several high-profile athletes and Wendy entered a well-structured, focused training environment. This period saw her love of running resurface and she represented her country several times. However, after a short time her husband was re-located again and for two years Wendy continued to commute twice a week to join her training group and work with her coach. After subsequent moves she decided to work closer to the training venue which resulted in very long drives several days a week to work and then to training and then home. It was fortunate that her job meant she could work anywhere as there was a shortage of people working in that industry.

Her big breakthrough was qualifying for a major championship. She performed well at the event, running a personal best but not gaining a medal, although the next day she ruptured her plantar facia on her recovery run. This injury took nearly 18 months to recover from. Her recovery saw her do a lot of aqua jogging and she maintained her fitness, she kept motivated by focusing on Olympic qualification which was the following year. Her injury prevented her qualifying and so instead she focused on having a baby. There wasn’t any detailed planning involved in this, as Wendy, while healthy had quite low body weight and irregular periods. Wendy continued to train during her pregnancy as she wanted to return to running as quickly as possible. She ran on heart rate to ensure she wasn’t doing too much, although admits there wasn’t a lot of guidance available to elite athletes when it came to training in pregnancy.

Wendy talked in depth about the whole experience of her very traumatic labour. She ended up having an emergency caesarean, the experience from which it took her a long time to recover;
Wendy was both physically and mentally scarred. She recognised that she suffered post-natal depression and how being unable to run for such a long time had a serious impact on her mental health. It was only after a new health visitor suggested that she needed to get back to running that her mental state improved.

After Wendy became a mother her coach played a significant role in her return to training. He would come to where she lived twice a week and, while she trained, he would push her son around in the pram. Due to her husband’s job, he couldn’t look after their son much but he did when he could. This routine continued for about a year and 18 months after having her son she represented her country again. This was the beginning of a three-year block of training and competing at elite level.

During this period Wendy also got a new part-time job working within sport in a management position. The company accommodated her need to train but she recalls this period as one where she had to juggle the demands of a young child, work and training. One way she managed this was acquiring a cross-trainer, which facilitated her training at home. This strategy also protected her against injury to some degree as she ran fewer miles but maintained training volume. At this time Wendy competed at both cross country and road running.

During this period her husband went to Iraq for 6 months which was challenging for her in terms of childcare and general support. Also, during this time, she suffered another injury, rupturing her plantar fasciitis again halfway through an international race. She finished the race but she had damaged her leg badly. However, this coincided with she and her husband deciding to try for a second baby, her husband returning from Iraq and moving to Belgium for work. The family’s move to Belgium was negotiated carefully to ensure her son did not miss too much school and to allow her to recover from injury. Wendy fell pregnant with her daughter but the move to Belgium was a much shorter move than anticipated and rather than
two years was only six months; they returned to the UK where she had her daughter. She had a much more positive experience of labour the second time. This also marked Wendy’s retirement from elite sport.

Having retired 10 years ago Wendy has transitioned out of elite sport into her life after sport, where she works as a coach. However, she said she will always identify herself as a runner and athlete but commented that perhaps this is due to the nature of the sport. Even though she has retired from elite competition she was still able to run and compete just at a different level and often runs for fun with no pressure attached. She has managed to transition within her sport and is still drawing on her experiences as an elite athlete, while her role as a coach still allows her to identify as a runner. Towards the end of the series of interviews, Wendy said that talking about her sport had given her time to reflect more closely on her career and conclude that at the time she did not give herself enough credit for how much she had achieved during her career.

4.4 Yvonne

Yvonne is a 42-year-old retired distance runner. Married, with three children, Yvonne competed at elite level for 24 years and retired 10 years ago. During her career she competed at Olympic level, an experience she notes as a career high point. She has also achieved medal success at other international competitions.

Yvonne was a very active and energetic child and sampled a range of different sports and activities including gymnastics, ballet and karate. She was introduced to running by her mother who ran to keep fit. She joined a running club, but when she was 11 her parents split up and she moved house with her mother which meant she had to leave her running club. Yvonne found it hard to train at her new club so, on turning 12, she went to live with her father and returned to train at her old club. This club had several elite and high-profile athletes. There
was a gradual increase in training load, running four times a week, which increased over time to twice a day by the time she was 18. Yvonne had some success at junior level and competed in minor internationals. She made the move to senior level at 19 and quickly qualified for her first World Championships. This was a period with limited pressure on Yvonne: she was ‘just running’ and even though she was successful it was more a hobby. It was only when she was 20 and she was contacted by a sponsor that she realised that a career was viable. During this time, Yvonne also went to university and completed her teacher training. She worked part time as a teacher after graduating alongside her running. She also met her husband and got married.

At 26 years of age, she secured Lottery funding after some strong performances at world-class level and gave up her part-time teaching job, focusing on pursuing a full-time running career. She suffered a serious Achilles injury the next year which resulted in her not having a track season but allowing her to focus on the Olympic Games the following year. Yvonne easily qualified for her first Olympics which brought the belief that she could compete on the world stage. This period of success coincided with her working hard to raise her profile. Supported by her husband, she wrote for magazines and gained additional sponsorship and developed her work as a coach. This allowed her to make a career from running.

She discussed her first Olympic experience very fondly but went on to say that she was also over-motivated and trained too hard. This led to her first serious career setback. Her over-motivation and subsequent over-training led to her suffering from chronic fatigue and saw her having to take three full months off from any form of exercise, a period she remembers as the lowest point in her life. This was a turning point for her within her career as it changed her approach to training and, for the first time, she had a dedicated coach. When she returned to sport after her illness she said the joy was incredible even though she only started with a 10-minute jog!
Yvonne had several injuries during her career with many occurring during key events including the Olympic Games, although she still notes this as a high point of her career. However, her second more significant injury was less of a blow as she had already decided to have a baby after the event and recognises that this softened the experience as she already had a clear goal ahead so was able to refocus as soon as the injury occurred. Her decision to have a baby was planned; her husband, also a competitive athlete, had retired the year before so the timing was right for them. She always planned to return to sport, but equally she was happy with the career she had and were a return was not possible then she was comfortable with that. She trained during her pregnancy to keep a return viable but also because running was part of her life and what she wanted to do. Becoming a mother was the most significant event in her life, her priorities had changed with her daughter becoming the most important thing in her life rather than running. Yvonne managed to combine parenting with running and had a running buggy that she used quite a lot. Her return to running was slow as she had seen the issues that other athletes experienced when they had returned to sport too quickly, especially longer-term health issues. Her husband was very supportive during her return to sport and Yvonne recognises this meant she was able to balance motherhood with her elite career.

Her return to running was relatively successful but she suffered from persistent back problems which ultimately led to her retirement. Yvonne had a very positive transition into retirement. She felt ready to retire and reflects how it was a relief to not have to train for another competition with all its accompanying pressures. Her decision was also driven by injury and by her body, in her words, ‘starting to fall apart’ and just not being able to sustain the level of training of which she had once been able; she did not know for how much longer her body might keep going. This decision also coincided with her desire to have another baby. Yvonne had a carefully planned retirement and, while she had a very strong athletic identity for many years, she felt comfortable with no longer having that identity and just being known as a mum.
and a coach. Her relationship with running is positive. She still likes to run but isn't dictated by the need to. Yvonne went on to have twins, having made the decision to have more children, and continues to be involved in sport as a coach but she now has a new passion for interior design in which she is studying, an avenue she always wanted to go down but which her career in elite sport did not allow.

4.5 Rebecca

Rebecca is a 36-year-old retired winter sports athlete. She is engaged with two children. Rebecca competed at elite level for 13 years and retired in 2015. During her career she competed in two Olympics and has won medals at all major championships.

Rebecca had been involved in sport from a young age and sampled a range of different activities until adolescence. She was good at all sport but excelled at judo and long-distance running. Her father was the main instigator of her interest in and involvement with sport. From a military background, he encouraged her to try all different sports but was never pushy. She started at an athletics club as soon as permissible, aged 9. At 13 she started to take her running a bit more seriously. She was spotted by a talent scout at training at the age of 15 and started to specialise in hurdles. She became a very competitive track athlete and went to university on a high-performance pathway, although she fell out of love with her sport at university as to raise her level she would have to double the intensity of her training and she was constantly tired. She got a back injury in training which started to impact on her ability to run so she made the decision to leave the pathway and transferred to a different university for her final year to focus on a career in teaching. She did start to run again for fun. On an unplanned trip to her old university to see friends she was introduced to the sport at which she would ultimately be world class. When she took up the sport it was in its relative infancy, resulting in her sporting career being more challenging. Rebecca’s talent was natural and her progress and improvement were
rapid, seeing her soon qualify for the British team. She deferred her final degree submission to focus on sport and moved back to her parents’ home, allowing her to train and get a job to support her training.

She openly discussed how she had a somewhat unconventional pathway to elite level and paid to train with the military rather than through the official performance pathway. She had some challenges during her career including a difficult relationship with the performance director of the sport and she recounts several examples of bullying, sexism and other discrimination against her and her partner.

She had considerable success, at both world cup and Olympic level and has some fond memories of these events, but the difficult relationships she endured with performance staff impacted on her enjoyment. While she loved her sport, she felt highly controlled by it; there was a lack of freedom in terms of training and competitive demands. Even when she had a long-term injury, she was denied time off and she recounts the environment as being tough. Her first big success carried with it significant media interest and she was thrust into the spotlight. This was an intense time for her and coincided with her wanting to take a break from competition having trained very hard for several years. This was not something she was ‘allowed’ to do but an on-going knee problem and her desire to start a family saw her getting the time out of sport that she needed. Subsequently she had a meticulously planned pregnancy, then knee surgery two weeks after her daughter was born.

She trained throughout her pregnancy and was adamant to her coaching team that she was going to return to sport after having the baby. However, there was distrust, and they did not think she would return, as it wasn’t something an athlete from a winter sports background had done before and they did not think it feasible. This led to her funding being cut. Rebecca loved being a mother, but she felt unsupported by the organisation around her.
Perhaps most significant in her story was her account of her return to sport. She wanted to return but felt an incredible pressure to get back on the competitive circuit, largely due to her needing to get her funding back. Immediately she showed she was considering returning to sport she was given targets to attain and she was not afforded the time to build back up gradually, which was hard in terms of both being a new mother and the knee surgery. She had a lot of support from her family and her partner’s family when she returned to sport and they would often come and help them out at events when they were both competing.

Rebecca had more success after having her baby than before and she notes that this was without any support from the governing body. There were several rule changes during this time and there were restrictions placed on what she could include her daughter in. For example, family members were not allowed to travel together and, were they to do so, they had to book their own travel and were unable to stay in the team hotel. This created additional logistical problems at events as there was additional travel to join the team each day and she describes the experience as being treated like an outsider and reflects how the environment as she perceived it had a significant impact on her, it being a setting with a much professional jealousy.

Her decision to have a second baby was bound up with her considering retirement, due to the challenges a second baby could present but, as with many things in her career, she ended up feeling forced to make the decision to retire, or at least retire from the elite programme as her funding was reduced again. The support during her retirement from sport was very poor. She was allowed to keep her funding for just three months and that included all the support that came with it, for example access to physiotherapy, and then she was on her own. This was particularly stressful a time at the end of her career as she had suffered a very bad neck injury and, when she left the programme, she was conscious of only having three months of private healthcare left. She had gained qualifications at university alongside sport so decided to set up
a business of her own and, if that were successful, she would not return to sport. Rebecca also went on to have a second baby. She talked about missing many aspects of her sport but is also glad to be out of the toxic environment she felt she was in.

4.6 Gemma

Gemma is a 32-year-old winter sports athlete, married with one daughter. She has competed at elite level for 15 years and is still competing. Gemma has competed in four Olympic games and a career high point was gaining a World Cup win.

Gemma, the youngest of three children with two older brothers, was involved in a range of sports from a young age. She had an unconventional upbringing and was home educated which was one of the reasons they were all encouraged to be involved in sport as it provided them with the social interaction they would have typically gained at school. Being from a very successful sporting community she naturally gravitated towards sports that required more physical strength and less tactical awareness. She also tended to choose more extreme sports such as mountain biking, roller hockey, and kitesurfing. Gemma tried several winter sports at a young age as her parents spent half of the year living in the French Alps, but she did not take any of these sports seriously till she was 10 years old. She was naturally talented at snow sports, but these were not very competitive at the time and she often won events with little effort. Regardless she became British Champion at 11, which opened several avenues to her. She continued to compete at junior international level being very successful and qualifying for the Youth Olympics.

Her early success dictated her educational path. She did not sit any formal exams, as she decided to pursue her athletic career. She made the decision at 17 to go to Canada to be coached, something she hadn’t experienced, as she had only been informally coached by her brother. Gemma was at the point where she envisioned herself as athlete. She loved the elite
environment and remembered how key the increase in training load which left her body hurting all the time.

Her early career was largely funded by her parents and various holiday jobs. Not until she was 19 did she begin to get some sponsorship support. She received governing-body funding for some of her career, but this was inconsistent, and she faced several funding cuts during her career which were a challenge.

During her career Gemma also tried to have a more stable revenue stream and embarked on several different business enterprises, with varying success, which allowed some extra income during times when funding was not so good. They have also allowed her to have some options to pursue when she retires from sport. At the start of the interviews Gemma hadn’t really considered her retirement but said that talking about her next event being her last had made her realise she needed to start considering what she might do.

Gemma had several coaches throughout her career but at times was left without a coach or specialist coaching. Her sport also had a change in governing body during her career which was a difficult time for all UK athletes within the sport. Gemma lacked a solid base during her early career and moved house a lot, staying with different people. It was only once married that she felt she had her own home and firm base.

During her career she has suffered two quite serious injuries both of which could have ended her career. The first occurred away from competition at a sponsor event; she recalls being told she would be lucky to walk again.

Her decision to have a baby was an entirely conscious one. Planned in detail, Gemma had to ensure she would be back for Olympic qualification meaning she had a slim window within which to fall pregnant. She conceived within the window and had a straightforward pregnancy.
but stopped sport-specific training and competing very early in her pregnancy. There was a lack of knowledge within the coaching team about how to support an athlete who was pregnant, but she felt lucky that even though her team did not know exactly how to approach it they wanted to support her and sought information enabling this. Her strength-and-conditioning coach researched the area and supported and guided her through her training in pregnancy. She also sought advice from other athletes who had fallen pregnant within their careers and who similarly had a very clear plan to return to sport. Gemma had no doubts that she would return if she had no complications so her focus was on maintaining her fitness as much as she could during her pregnancy.

Gemma has an incredibly strong athletic identity, and she loves everything about being an athlete. However, her mother identity is equally solid and she developed the ability to switch between these identities so she could focus on being an athlete when she needed to. She recognises that having her daughter was one of the most significant transitions for her and, while she always knew she would come back, she accepted that motherhood may not have been the best move for her career. However, she notes how becoming a mother made her a much better person which in turn has made her a better athlete. She has a flexible approach to her training and works hard to fit training around her daughter so that she can enjoy as much time as possible with her: for example, rather than go to a training camp for the whole week she went home for the odd day to see her daughter. She became more confident and motivated to achieve, believing that the harder she worked the better future she could give her daughter.

She has a highly supportive partner also involved in sport and cognisant of the demands placed on her. As part of her support team he could travel with her which meant her daughter could also travel with her. While her partner was her key support both their parents also played a significant role travelling with them to provide extra support. It is clear at several points that she could not have continued without the support of their family; Gemma recognised that as an
athlete while there were logistical challenges to overcome, she had better quality of family life than if she and her husband had been a couple with regular jobs. They got to spend more time together and experience much more as a family. During her career Gemma had set herself the goal to compete in one final Olympic Games and then retire as she wanted to have a second baby. This goal she achieved.

4.7 Conclusions

This chapter has given a detailed overview of each of the five athletes within this study, giving context to their athletic journey and their lives. Three of the athletes were retired when the interviews took place, one retired during the interview process, and one was still competing. The three runners had similarities in their pathway into their sport and had gradual transitions to elite level competition. Both Rebecca and Gemma had relatively rapid transitions to elite level. These two athletes also engaged in higher risk sports. The next four chapters explore elements of the athletes’ stories in more depth, focusing on key transitions and the impact on their identity. Their stories will be analysed in the context of the themes and models identified in the literature and by these means the similarities and differences between their experiences and previous research findings will be examined.
Chapter 5 - Life before motherhood: being an athlete

5.1 Introduction

Life, and life in sport, are marked by a series of transitional events that serve to both develop and shape an individual’s identity. The significance and importance of some of these transitional events within sport are in part due to them being experienced at a relatively young age (Stambulova, 2010), with most children gaining their first experiences of sport and physical education in the playground through unstructured forms of play. At this point key motives relate to having fun, playing with friends as well as wanting to engage and be successful in a socially desirable area (Gould & Horn, 1984). It is only as children start to develop that what begins as play becomes more meaningful and they start to engage in more structured sports and activities within the school environment, although the key motive remains to have fun (Côté et al., 2009). At a young age many of the transitions experienced tend towards normative or planned transitions, being developmental, predictable, and anticipated in many cases, for example, the transition from junior to senior level sport (Schlossberg, 1984). A further consideration at this early stage of the athlete’s career links closely to the development of athletic identity which, for those who view sport as socially desirable, can form as soon as athletic involvement in sport begins (Ballie & Danish, 1992).

The early transitions within an athlete’s career tend to be seen in the initiation and developmental stage (Wylleman et al., 2013), with key normative transitions such as the move to senior sport. These early stages also see the development and strengthening of athletic identity as sport begins to take a bigger role within the athlete’s life. However, as the athlete’s career progresses towards mastery and beyond, the unpredictable nature of sport and the challenges it may present see transitions becoming less planned and potentially more
problematic. Furthermore, research suggests that, typically, female athletes can have more challenging career paths within sport, reporting more challenging events (Tekavc, 2017). Throughout this chapter the transitional events of the five athletes will be explored, from their first experiences of sport until the point when they decided to become mothers. The data is divided in this way as throughout the athletes’ narratives there is a clear line between the period before they became mothers and their career afterwards. The transitions discussed represent the key themes evident within the athletes’ stories, although some themes were not within every athlete’s narrative.

5.2 Early sporting involvement

The point at which children first embark on sport marks the start of their athletic journey and, as discussed by Côté et al. (2009), typically involves a sampling approach whereby children participate in a range of different activities. The young age that children first engage in sport also means that the family can play a highly influential role in early transitions. This level of involvement is illustrated in the HAC model, which identifies the strongest psychosocial support coming from parents, siblings, and peers in the initiation phase (Wylleman, 2019). All the athletes within this study sampled a range of different sports at a young age and speak of coming from ‘sporty’ or ‘active’ families which echoes the concept of family habitus being key to early socialisation into sport (Coakley, 2006). For example, Rebecca talks about both the range of activities she was involved in and the significance of family,

‘I was really sporty from a very young age: my parents put me into lots and lots of different sports clubs at my local sports centre, from judo, karate, gymnastics, trampolining, running club, kung fu and I was a pretty good all-rounder and excelled at judo, long distance running and movement sports’

*Rebecca, Interview 16th June 2017*
whereas in Gemma’s narrative the influence was largely from her siblings:

‘I did a lot of sport when I was younger, so when I was a kid, I did tons of sport. I have two elder brothers and they did loads of sport as well, that is how I started in the sport, it was a lot because of my brother’

Gemma, Interview 1 - 22nd June 2017

Gemma discussed how she wanted to do what her brothers did and later in her story it is evident that they influenced her career direction. These examples are representative of the childhood stories of all the athletes: sport and physical activity formed much of their childhood, both inside and outside of school. Furthermore, they all acknowledged the role of their families in accordance with the HAC model (Wylleman, 2019).

5.2.1 Family influence and support

Family influence and support represents a key theme with all the athletes coming from a strong family sports culture (Strandbu et al., 2020). The importance of family was seen at two key points within their careers: at the start of the athlete’s career and again when they became parents. The significance of family and most notably parental support at the early stages of an athlete’s career is illustrated within the HAC, which identifies the important role parents play in terms of providing both psychosocial and financial support (Wylleman, 2019). Wendy’s experience is reflective of the significance of a family habitus as discussed by Coakley (2006) as even though organised sport wasn’t regular, she came from an active family. Wendy talks about her whole family being active rather than a focus on any particular parent, suggesting that it was normalised to be active regardless of gender.

‘We have always been quite an active family; when I say play tennis in the back garden, I mean have a knock around with a tennis ball we did not have tennis courts or anything like that but go on holiday, go cycling so we were active’

Furthermore, at these early stages the influence of parents was seen not just through the tangible and emotional support provided but also through the modelling that active parents provide, something Laird et al. (2018) noted as a key influence on physical activity of adolescent girls. This is illustrated by Yvonne’s early interest in running, which was directly influenced by her mother, and it was a chance decision to join her mother one day on a run that introduced her to the sport in which she would one day represent her country. This finding bolsters Ronkainen et al. (2019) who suggest that young girls seek out role models with whom they feel similar.

‘My mum used to run . . . so one day I asked her if I could go for a run with her and she took me out and I think it was for about a four-mile run, so when you are 9 it was quite a long way, and it was a really hot day. I think she thought that would be it, she won’t ask me again; and then I would ask her again if I could go for a run. There was just something about running that I connected with, I can’t really explain it.’

Yvonne, Interview 1 - 26th September 2017

As Yvonne’s love of running developed, it gradually took a more structured format when a teacher at school started a running group. Yvonne moved house a significant distance from her old club when she was 11 and after a while she made the decision to go and live with her father to allow her to re-join her old running club. The impact that running had on her decision to move illustrates how even at a very young age sport was incredibly important to Yvonne.

The commitment to training seen by Yvonne facilitated a strengthening of her identity as an athlete as it represented an investment in sport. This type of investment at a young age (in her case 12 years-old) has been found to be a key predictor of later success at elite level (Stambulova et al., 2012) when managed appropriately, which Yvonne was able to do. Penny was also motivated to participate in sport through family, but in her case, like Gemma, by her siblings and she recounts playing lots of football with her brothers. While the influence of
siblings is touched on in research (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2019) they are less commonly cited as an influence than parents. The significance of siblings in both Penny’s and Gemma’s narratives suggest this is an area worthy of further study. Penny’s interest in running developed when she started secondary school, which saw her progress rapidly, although she still sampled a range of different track and field events.

‘It wasn’t until I was at secondary school my PE teacher asked me to run two laps of the grass track and she was pleased with how I did and recommended that I went to an athletics club and this was when I was 13, 12-13 when I joined the club and a neighbour who took her boys to the club kindly offered to take me and I went there and when I first joined the athletics club I did lots of different sports I tried long jump and all sorts at the athletics club and I seemed to specialise by joining a group that did long distance running.’

Penny, Interview 1 – 20th March 2018

These experiences are similar to Wendy’s, who was introduced to athletics in her final year at primary school. Furthermore, Wendy was also supported by a teacher at school who encouraged her. The experiences of both Penny and Wendy perhaps suggest that the HAC (Wylleman, 2019) should reflect the importance of teachers on the psychosocial development of athletes as, while coaches are recognised at the development stage, it is apparent that teachers should be credited within the initiation stage. As Cheung (2019) found, the impact of teachers can be most important at this age as it can promote early socialisation into sport. However, it is worth noting that there is somewhat limited research looking in detail at the influence that teachers can have on longer-term participation, although the findings of this study suggest that the influence is significant, as both Penny and Wendy, even 25 years later, recognise the importance of their teachers.
As mentioned, the influence of family on all the athletes links closely to Wylleman’s (2019) HAC, specifically, when the experiences of the runners are placed in the context of this model it can be seen how they all transition from initiation to development at a consistent rate in line with their broader development points, for example, their psychological development. In contrast the winter sports athletes had different journeys through their athletic career which can in part be attributed to them participating in sports that are not traditionally experienced at school, although Gemma’s less conventional schooling and lifestyle meant her athletic progression did align more closely to the HAC in comparison to Rebecca.

Gemma had a unique situation when growing up, with her parents living abroad and she being home educated. Any void left by not having a school-based peer group was filled through her involvement in sport and provided her with the social interaction she might have got at school. Gemma acknowledges that she felt one of the reasons her parents encouraged her activity was to allow her to experience this level of social interaction.

‘I think part of the reason why my parents, at least at the start, were quite keen to encourage me and my brothers to get into sport was because there’s lots of odd things about me; one of the odd things is that I was home educated, both my brothers and I were home educated. I am the youngest of the three children. Home education is great, I think it was absolutely brilliant and I am really happy my parents did it for me, but one of the dangers is that you don’t have as much social interaction with others’

_Gemma, Interview 1 - 22nd June 2017_

The impact of family, not only on an athlete’s experience, but also on their opportunities has been examined by DeLuca (2014) whose concept of the family habitus is perhaps best illustrated by Gemma’s experience, as her family’s home and winter sports tradition meant this formed part of her lifestyle. However, she also acknowledges that as well as providing
opportunity once she made a commitment to competitive sport, the role of her family shifted to one of providing direct support. For example, Gemma’s mother travelled with her to her first training camp in Canada to ensure she ‘was ok’. This event marked a transition to senior level sport for Gemma, a transition that has been recognised as one of the most significant predictable transitions an athlete can experience, in part due to it occurring at a relatively young age but also due to the change of focus and environment (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011).

Furthermore, Frank et al. (2016) recognised how the impact of social support was important at this stage but only when the athlete had the right internal resources, for example, a strong athletic identity and high motivation. This perhaps explains why Gemma was able to manage this transition, as both her internal resources (high motivation) and support were in place.

While Rebecca had an active childhood her relationship with her chosen sport was developed relatively late and via friends rather than family. Rebecca was originally focused on a career in athletics rather than judo, in which she also excelled. She discussed how one of the motives for choosing athletics was that she was improving rapidly and getting personal bests, perhaps illustrating how early success is a factor in determining whether participation will continue (Hayman et al., 2014). By the age of 15 Rebecca qualified for English schools in hurdles and went on to university on a performance pathway to study and train as an athlete. However, unlike the other athletes, Rebecca’s journey as a hurdler stopped at this point as she found the performance set-up at university overwhelming and she describes how she just ‘crashed out of it all’. Her experience here is a clear example of how the pressures of a high-level training environment can be too much for an athlete. For example, Røynesdal et al. (2018) identified how fitting into a first team environment can put too much pressure on an athlete. Rebecca’s experiences provide an interesting case study as these findings perhaps suggest that even when an athlete is good at a sport and has potential, if it isn’t the right sport for them these challenges
Rebecca’s experience contrasts with Gemma’s who thrived in the high-performance environment: ‘I thought this is a brilliant environment.’

Rebecca was later introduced to her sport by friends and the transfer of skills from her athletics career and her natural ability meant she was quickly noticed and saw her return to a high-performance environment. However, while she was excited and determined to be successful, her experiences in the elite environment on a personal and emotional level were challenging.

‘It was hard; the equipment, we weren’t given that much advice with equipment and it did not fit, I broke my nose loads of time on the track where the equipment was slipping and um, having to go to hospital. The coaching at that point was really good technically but outside of that it was quite a bullying nature so you had to be a fairly robust character to deal with that. Some people did not get on with that so they left the programme because they just couldn’t cope with that. Some could probably have been really amazing athletes but just couldn’t deal with that environment so you had to be really quite a hard cookie I think and for some people that is really difficult.’

Rebecca, Interview 1- 6th June 2017

Rebecca’s early experiences illustrated the toxic culture that she perceived within her sport, where she felt bullied and reflects how other squad members couldn’t cope and left. Research has suggested that the development of these cultures largely stems from the gendered nature of sport where men hold the positions of power (Breger et al., 2019). As Fink (2008) discusses sports with structures and organisation that reproduces hegemonic masculinity can lead to the subordination of women positioning them as outsiders (as was experienced by Rebecca). These unequal power relations reinforce the patriarchal nature of some sporting cultures and in the case of Rebecca saw the control, exclusion and bullying (a form of abuse) of women, illustrating the toxic nature of the culture of her sport (Breger et al, 2019). The challenges that
these experiences presented meant that Rebecca had to be very tough to cope. She reflected later in her narrative that she became highly resilient, something that is often recognised as a quality developed by elite athletes (Fletcher, 2019). This experience also highlights how there are differences in the cultures within different sports and even between two winter sports, as no other athlete talked about gender-related challenges or toxic cultures.

Wendy was the only athlete to have a significant break in her career at an early stage when she went to university. She reflected how she needed the break as she was a ‘serious child’ and took everything in life seriously and when she went to university, she took a break and in ‘made up for lost time’. She still ran during this time, but intermittently, and it wasn’t until she met her husband at age 23 that running became serious again. However, it was a life transition that ultimately triggered her move back to elite performance when she moved to a new house and joined a new club, an event that marked her transition back to a high-performance environment.

No research was evident that looked at the impact of these early career breaks on an athlete’s career, however, research by Everard et al. (2019) discussed points related to sport injury related growth and how periods out of sport due to injury can be viewed in a positive way when the athlete sees this as a point to take a break and return stronger and more motivated. These findings seem to relate to Wendy’s experience as she viewed her time out of sport in a positive way, it provided the break she needed both mentally and physically.

5.3 Developing athletic identity

The significance of athletic identity as a concept in the context of the athlete journey is illustrated through its exploration within most of the transition literature. While research suggests that athletic identity can begin to develop even during the first stages of athletic involvement at school (Ballie & Danish, 1992), the strengthening and renegotiation of this identity from just being ‘athletic’ to being an elite athlete is more complex. Brewer et al. (1993)
provide a helpful lens through which to view the development of athletic identity, which recognizes the impact of social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity on the strength of identity. These factors perhaps explain why there was a clear point for the athletes when they perceived themselves to be elite, in terms of how they were viewed by others, the level at which they competed and the strength of their identity.

This transition to elite-level sport was a marked event for all the athletes in the study; it was a period when pressure increased in terms of training demands, but also where their athletic identity was developed and strengthened. Through the narratives of all five athletes the strength and importance of their athletic identity became evident and they all identified the point at which they felt they were actually an athlete. A fundamental factor that contributed to ‘feeling like an athlete’ was closely linked to the high-performance environment that the athletes transitioned into, which had a bearing on their social identity, with Gemma recounting, ‘I thought this is a brilliant environment, I love this environment’. The elite environment magnified feelings of being an athlete and further strengthened their athletic identity. This love of being an athlete was reflected in the narrative of all athletes, but perhaps most clearly in the story of Gemma, who frequently would comment, ‘I like being an athlete’ with the sense of joy in this identity coming through every time she gave consideration to this part of her identity. Gemma talked fondly of the transition to an elite environment, and throughout her narrative, it is clear that when she first received funding and began more sports-specific fitness training with other athletes, she realised that she was an athlete. Although while her athletic identity had strengthened during this period, she did not see herself as elite.

It is likely that the strengthening of athletic identity is in some ways connected to the increase in training demands, whereby that became the primary task each day. Furthermore, in line with Brewer et al. (1993) this also allowed exclusivity with sport being the only social role that the athlete was engaged with. Yvonne remembers a notable difference being when she was no
longer juggling her part-time teaching job with training as this suddenly afforded her more time to dedicate to her sport:

‘I had more time to recover, fuel myself properly and do all the added extras like stretch, do some weight training, core training, so it gave me more time to be more diligent with my training rather than just getting by. It gave me the opportunity to experiment with my training more, try out different things um and obviously load my body and run more miles so I think when I was teaching I was averaging about 80 miles per week and then when I moved up to marathon I was able to run 100 miles per week. It definitely allowed me to train harder and more get the recovery I guess, and also going to see people like physiologists, nutritionists and strength and conditioning coaches and tried to tick as many boxes as I could at that point in order to try and be better.’

Yvonne, Interview 1 - 26th September 2017

This period represents a time when Yvonne’s identification with the athlete role strengthened, impacting her social identity and in turn strengthening her athletic identity. The exclusive role sport played provided a constant reinforcement of her athletic identity, however, this intense engagement in sport has been recognised as a factor that can result in athletes developing an exclusive athletic identity, making athletes more vulnerable to adjustment difficulties (Martin et al., 2014). This was illustrated very clearly in Yvonne’s story where she suffers chronic fatigue early in her career and remembers not being able to consider not running or competing: ‘I just couldn’t even contemplate life without it at that point’. This emotional response to a perceived failure in the athlete role reflects one of Brewer et al.’s. (1993) influencing factors, negative affectivity, which suggests that when an athlete is presented with a challenge to their athletic self it can serve to strengthen the importance of their identity as the significance of being an athlete is highlighted.
5.4 Transitions and Challenges to Identity

The early transition into sport is recognised as a significant marker within the career of an athlete, however, this is only one of many change events an athlete will experience. The predictable transition from junior to senior level, while forming an integral part of the athlete journey, tends in the case of the successful athlete to be smooth and without challenge (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). Successful transition to senior level has been noted as a measure of later athletic success. For example, Hollings et al. (2014) explored the experiences of junior male and female track and field athletes and found that early success at senior level and strong athletic identity were markers of success within elite level sport. In support of this, none of the athletes in the current study described the transition from junior to senior level as problematic. The findings of Hollings et al. (2014), like those of Franck et al. (2016), further emphasise how the development of a strong athletic identity at an early age does correlate positively with success. For example, Yvonne’s relocation to train with her old club served to strengthen her athletic identity at a young age.

The lack of research specifically focusing on the experiences of elite females is somewhat surprising when placed in the context of Tekavc’s (2017) findings which conclude that typically females have more challenging career paths and report more change events. Furthermore, he recognised how high training demands, pressure from coaches and combining multiple roles, like athlete and student, contribute to these. Furthermore, their research suggests that this can be exacerbated by female athletes tending to have lower levels of confidence. This was evident in the narratives of both Penny and Yvonne when they talked about the decision to transition from a competitive runner to committing to a career as an elite athlete. Penny talked about her decision to try and become an elite athlete, saying, ‘I had this burning desire that perhaps I could be an athlete, but I wasn’t very confident about that like I did not tell anyone’. Likewise, this uncertainty was echoed by Yvonne who recounted that, even after
quite significant success, she wasn’t sure she could make a career out of running, ‘even then I
did not think making a career of it was viable’. These comments are not dissimilar to those
made by the female handball players in Ekengren et al.’s. (2019) study who didn’t think they
could have a career in sport. Both these athletes openly talked about not feeling confident that
being an athlete was an option, highlighting how even the most successful female athletes tend
to have lower levels of confidence in their abilities.

5.4.1 Becoming elite

Evident through the stories of all five athletes is that transition to becoming an elite athlete
happened at different points in their career. As outlined in the introduction, within this study
‘elite’ was defined as those who had competed at international level (Swann et al., 2015),
however, the athletes all perceived themselves to be elite at much later stages of their career
beyond just competing internationally. For example, for Yvonne it was when she went to her
first Olympics. Stambulova et al. (2012) discussed how, when athletes invest significantly in
their career, they are in effect signalling an intention to pursue a career in elite sport. However,
Rebecca was the only athlete who openly said she had her focus on an elite career. She was
motivated to represent her country and go to the Olympic Games while, for the others the steps
were more organic, with the possibility of the level they might reach only being acknowledged
once it had been achieved.

All the athletes within the study participated in individual sports, although the different
environments of runners and winter sports athletes resulted in very different transitions to the
elite environment. For both Rebecca and Gemma, the decision to commit to sport and a career
as an elite athlete was in some ways more ‘official’, with them committing to extensive
oversees travel and all training tending to take place at set training camps, which resulted in
them spending lengthy periods away from home. While the runners had to travel and train as
well, they had a choice in the camps they attended and could do all their training from home if needed. The experiences of Rebecca and Gemma have some similarities to those of the U18 handballers in Samuel et al.’s. (2019) study which concluded that when training and competition are abroad there are a plethora of other non-sport related factors that need to be considered. One key factor was the lack of support around the athletes when they left their family and friends, the constants in their lives being no longer present and some of the stability of a known environment lost. This was clearly expressed by Rebecca when she discussed the point at which she had moved to an elite level: ‘I was having to just go on a team bus all across Europe all the time and staying overnight in a bus with the guy athletes, it was really hard’. Both athletes had to form new relationships both on a professional and social level. The all-encompassing commitment to sport that this period required saw a very rapid strengthening of athletic identity as their whole world became immersed in their sport and their whole environment was underpinned by it. While there were challenges connected to this, ultimately the transition into this environment as athletes was managed successfully by both. This relates to the findings of Poucher and Tamminen (2017) who concluded that athletes took responsibility for the management of their identity through key actions or strategies which allowed them to manage the transitions to elite sport, for example, increases in training load or raised profile from success.

Rebecca’s and Gemma’s transitions into elite sport was characterised by a complete immersion into new environments which contrasts with the experiences of the three runners who had a more gradual transitions to elite competition, with more measured increases in volume and intensity. These differences were related to both the structure of elite running but also the more flexible transition each was able to make; one competition success led to another step up and shift in training, in contrast to Rebecca and Gemma who had to make a clear decision to race at a set level. Furthermore, Penny, Yvonne and Wendy were all able to maintain a relatively
stable environment around themselves when they made the transition to senior or elite level. They still lived in the same location and trained with the same group of people and their personal support networks remained unchanged and proximate. This marked difference in the pathways of the different athletes was in part dictated by the types of sports in which they were involved. Athletics and specifically distance running has a strong tradition within the UK and it is a sport that has a clear infrastructure in place, with competition happening at recreational, regional, national, and international level for all ages of competitor (England Athletics, 2022). For example, Yvonne gives a very clear description of her pathway to becoming an elite athlete, noting some of the key points in her early career before she recognised herself as an elite. Like Swann et al.’s (2015) definition, Yvonne perceived herself as elite after competing at international level. These are illustrated in Figure 5.1 which show there are small progression points within running allowing athletes to start to experience high performance sport and slowly adapt to different training demands.

**Figure 5.1**

![Diagram](image_url)

*Yvonne’s pathway to elite level*

This more gradual transition potentially mitigates the pressure that is associated with the move to elite level sport. Røynesdal et al. (2018) recognised that this pressure could place considerable stress on an athlete as they try and adapt to the elite environment. None of the three runners made a clear decision to pursue a career as an elite athlete; they gradually started to have more success, which led them to be selected for their country. Furthermore, they did
not discuss having the same kind of organisational demands at an early stage in comparison to Rebecca. They were all able to transition more gradually while maintaining other aspects of their life, for example, Yvonne worked part-time as a teacher, Penny had trained as a physiotherapist and Wendy was a social worker. This multi-dimensional aspects to all their identities may also have facilitated a less pressured approach resulting in a smoother transition to elite competition (Kuettel et al., 2017). Where Rebecca and Gemma both had clear aspirations and a focus on becoming elite athletes, the narrative surrounding the runners was more about whether they could make running a career rather than a focus on being an elite athlete. With a huge depth of talent within running in the UK at the time, the potential to make a career out of running was more difficult. In contrast there was a relatively limited number of athletes competing in winter sports, so success was perhaps more achievable. This was discussed several times by Gemma when she talked about her early career success and the level she was competing at.

‘British Champs in this sport isn’t really that high level of competition to be fair. I know in swimming or something it would be like a really big comp but for Britain it is not, so the world champs or something yes massive yes of course, but because Britain is not really a winter sports nation say the Swiss national championships would be a lot bigger of a competition than the British national championships……I won the Brits for the next 6 years’

Gemma, Interview 1 - 22nd June 2017

This early success in many ways dictated Gemma’s career paths as, although she was realistic when talking about the level of competition, becoming a British Champion served to motivate and build confidence. The desire to be an elite athlete resonated throughout Rebecca’s story and perhaps explains why she so successfully transitioned into the elite environment even with the barriers placed in her way. She was highly focused and motivated and sought to achieve
an elite athlete identity, factors which are frequently cited as facilitating a positive transition to elite sport (Franck et al., 2016). Furthermore, as discussed, she was the athlete with the most evident self-belief, recognising that she had talent but had just not found the right sport: ‘I just wanted to um represent GB. I just wanted to um be able to say I represented GB officially in anything’. This self-belief underpinned her whole career; she recounts when she made the very clear decision to aim for Olympic selection:

‘We were sat in a room and our performance director at the time said hands up who wants to win the British Championships and none of us put our hands up and he said hands up who wants to go to the Olympics and we all put our hands up and he basically bollocked us and said you should all be aiming for the British Championships not the Olympics because there is no chance any of you will go to the Olympics in four years’ time, and I can remember just sitting there and thinking I am gonna try, I’m actually gonna try and this was just intrinsically I was thinking, I will I am gonna see if I can do this because that’s a really good challenge.’

Rebecca, Interview 2 -12th October 2017

This mindset is characteristic of Rebecca throughout her career; she was often driven by a desire to prove others wrong and show what she was capable of. Such strong motivation to move to the next level was a factor also identified by Franck et al. (2016) as key in supporting athletes as they progress in sport, allowing them to manage the challenges and stresses that an elite environment presents. This highly focused drive and motivation combined with her resilience perhaps explains how Rebecca was able to cope with the many challenging situations and relationships she was confronted with during her career.

As Franck et al. (2016) discussed, the move into an elite environment has been reported to carry several potential emotional and psychological challenges for the athlete as they adapt to
new demands. Gemma illustrates how for some the environment is one they thrived within and she embraced the more structured and focused training environment. While the nature of the environment did not present a challenge to Gemma, the physical shift in terms of training load as discussed by Røynesdal et al. (2018) was a key marker for her being an elite athlete.

‘My main memory was when I went out for a five-week block and then it was the start of the season so it was just those five weeks and then yeah I remember thinking, I had done like exercise and stuff and my legs had hurt for a day or a couple of days and then they got better, but the sort of exercise I was doing there before my legs recovered I was already doing something else so they just kind of stayed sore for like five weeks in a row, and I thought I did not think this was even possible’

Gemma, Interview 1- 22nd June 2017

Only Rebecca and Gemma talked about the significant increase in training and the physical impact of this. As discussed, the nature of winter sports required complete commitment with no gradual increase in training. Indeed, both describe the camps they went on as full-time training, in comparison to the more part-time approach taken previously without clear structure. Furthermore, due to training locations both Rebecca and Gemma had limited support networks around them while away, although both athletes recount their mothers coming out to one of their early camps to check they were ‘ok’. In contrast, Wendy talked about the role her parents played in managing the increase in her training early in her career which further illustrates the significance of parental support early in the athlete’s career (Wylleman, 2019). Wendy talked about her parents gradually letting her do more evenings of training over several years. For both Rebecca and Gemma, the tangible, physical impact of the increase in training demands signified that they had made the transition to an elite sport, however, as Røynesdal et al. (2018) discussed, there were also more subtle psychological and organisational changes. For example, Gemma reflected that as she moved to a more structured and elite set up there was a difference
in the focus and motivation of those she trained with: ‘they cared about the competition, they were preparing as much as they could do and that kind of stuff and I thought that was really refreshing and I thought this is a brilliant environment, I love this environment.’. This presented Gemma with an environment she thrived in and saw her start to develop a much stronger athletic identity as she ‘felt’ like an athlete. While the transition was significant for Gemma it was largely positive, in part due to her love of training and competition but also because she had experienced several years on the youth circuit and had built up a network within the sport, giving her an element of stability within this newer environment.

5.4.2 Major events

The transition to elite and the acceptance that they were elite athletes largely coincided with the period following their international selection, although this point came at different ages for each athlete. In line with Brewer et al. (1993) this period was marked by a stronger commitment to sport and development of their athletic identity as their identification with the athlete role strengthened. The period of transition to feeling and being recognised as an elite performer was marked by a key event and, for most, this was qualification for their first major championship. They all looked back on this event as a significant point in their careers and noted it as a career high-point even if they did not have success at the event. This suggests that a recognition of their talent, for example, being selected or going to a major event can see athletes achieve a very clear goal and feel huge amounts of personal success and pride. Penny talked about this in connection to her first Olympic Games.

‘I was just thrilled to make my first Olympics and thought if nothing else happens my dreams have come true and I have become an Olympian and I kind of thought if nothing else happens I have been to an Olympic Games and it felt amazing really’

*Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018*
Like Penny, Yvonne also talked about the significance of qualifying for an Olympic Games as well as the actual experience of competing at the event itself.

‘Qualifying for the Olympics gives you such a massive boost and motivation for training and it really boosts your enjoyment for the sport especially if you are not injured and able to do the training which I was; and then going and being part of the Olympics team, getting all the kit, it is just so exciting, travelling, going to the holding camp and now you are looked after by the governing body with kid gloves, they are like there for you, it was a real new experience for me and all we had to do was training and sleep and they took care of the rest’

Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017

Throughout Yvonne’s narrative, it was clear that the Olympic Games represented the culmination of a lot of hard work. She says that it boosted enjoyment, which suggests that success and enjoyment are closely related. Yvonne and Penny both felt hugely successful, accomplished and proud in going to an Olympic Games even though they did not achieve the outcome or performance goals set. These events served to strengthen the athletic identity of the athletes, linking to the findings of Rasquinha and Cardinal (2017) who concluded that the higher recognition received served to reinforce athletic identity. Rebecca also competed at Olympic level but it was her entry onto the world cup stage that was more significant within her career, as the prestige attached within the sport was notable and, again, this gave her great recognition on the world stage as these events had a media presence and were televised.

‘I just want to get on the World Cup because to me that was the pinnacle of my sport at that point, so um probably one of the biggest achievements to that date was getting onto that squad. It was a completely different level; you have film crews there, it is all
televised, that was really new. The athletes were the people that you saw on TV when you were watching all the World Cup races so it was a little bit, like, wow!’

Rebecca, Interview 2 - 12th October 2017

This did mark a key shift in Rebecca’s perception of herself as a legitimate elite athlete as well as serving to further strengthen her identity.

5.4.3 Funding and organisation pressures

The nature of competitive sport sees athletes place themselves in high-pressure situations on a regular basis and the ability to cope with pressure is frequently cited as a key attribute of successful athletes (Vitali & De Brant, 2019). However, there are still examples in sport where both the governing bodies and the culture around sport place undue pressures on athletes, producing reticence about support or failing to acknowledge key organisational demands or changes. For example, recent research by Darroch et al. (2019) looked at the support given to elite distance runners during pregnancy and found athletes reporting a lack of support from both sponsors and governing bodies. Transitional events related to organisational pressures and funding implications were more significant to both Rebecca and Gemma largely due to the nature of their (winter) sports that had excessive expenditure due to equipment, training locations and travel. Rebecca entered the elite environment having to self-fund, with minimal support, and poor equipment. She described sitting in a meeting and the reality of the situation hitting her that the lack of funding was impacting on her performance.

‘I thought I have had all of these knocks, chipped my teeth, broken my nose I have really not performed very well I have been disqualified from a couple of races for being overweight because my equipment was so heavy because we have like um thresholds of equipment and I was on borrowed equipment from the federation’.

Rebecca, Interview 2 - 12th October 2017
These funding-related issues remained a challenge to both athletes throughout their career, with them describing how funding was highly fluid and, due to limited money within winter sports, could be taken away or dropped after one poor result or not hitting a target. As mentioned, the difference in the experiences of Rebecca and Gemma is largely related to the cost of the sport both in terms of equipment but also travel and the limited funding that was available to them. For example, Gemma was the only athlete competing at elite level in her sport, which meant she was not eligible for funding, which perhaps highlights a unique challenge to sports that are not mainstream or popular with UK athletes. Gemma went through many changes in her funding with constant pressure to try and achieve results to re-secure funding. To negate the possible impact of this on her career she decided to set up a business to run alongside her career in sport to provide a more consistent income stream. This additional ‘job’ could be seen to have given her a more multifaceted identity rather than just that of an athlete and, while it may have been only a small part of who she was, allowed the development of a multidimensional identity, facilitating her coping with other transitions (Kuettel et al., 2016).

The expense related to their sports meant that for Rebecca and Gemma loss of funding had significant impact, although this was also discussed by the other athletes. Penny describes how funding concerns were always a pressure and part of being an elite athlete.

‘I did not start out my career thinking funding existed because there wasn’t the national lottery for funding when I first started to compete as a senior so that wasn’t an issue but of course some years I have got funding and then you get injured for a year and then next year you are taken off. That happened to me so you get worries about I suppose the fact that you want to continue in the sport and when you get injured athletes under those sort of pressures they can still sustain themselves because they have got to be able to sustain themselves to therefore continue once the injury has gone if you know what I mean and that can be quite a lot of pressure for people.’
The implication and worry connected to a loss of income was perhaps most significant when the athletes had prolonged periods out of sport, for example, during periods of injury, as exemplified by Penny or due to pregnancy, a key transition which is the focus of Chapter Six.

A further challenge faced by elite athletes are the changes within their coaching set up or direct sporting network. All athletes touched on changes to their support network during their career, but this was most significant within the narratives of Gemma and Wendy. Changes to the network around any athlete are commonplace within elite sport, however, the importance of the coach-athlete relationship can mean that these changes create considerable disruption (Kuhlin et al., 2020). Gemma had several changes to her coaching team during her career and through all of those changes she talks about having to change expectations and about how each coach treated her. These changes meant it took time for her to develop a relationship with a new coach and to develop the trust required for a positive coach/athlete relationship (Jowett, 2007). Transitions such as this require effort on the part of the athlete to cope and manage these changes (de Subijana et al., 2020). In her early 20s, Gemma had a highly involved and supportive coach who managed not just her training but was more instrumental in taking responsibility for much of the logistical planning in relation to travel and competition. Her first change of coach showed a stark contrast to her previous coach because her new coach only coached her rather than taking responsibility for planning for example. She reflected, ‘I felt scared I think really, but I muddled through’. Later a more authoritarian coach took over and she recounts how she often felt belittled as she was suddenly being told what to do. Having just found her own way as an athlete she found this difficult, and she did not develop a positive relationship due to his failure to consider her opinions. These experiences are much like the athletes in de Subijana et al.’s (2020) study who had to manage many changes during their careers. Gemma had to constantly negotiate the fluctuations in her coaching strategies, which
at a young age was difficult. She realised that it can take time to develop a positive relationship with a new coach, however, towards the latter half of her career Gemma talked very positively about her coaching set-up. She had a far more reciprocal relationship which figured as a team approach. This successful relationship was a clear example of an effective coach/athlete relationship, something that has been recognised as particularly important to individual sports athletes (Gullu et al., 2020). Gemma’s experience also highlights how feeling unsettled within your coaching network has the potential to disrupt identity and she discussed having to ‘muddle through’ and how she felt ‘unsure’ about everything.

Wendy’s experience was different to Gemma’s, her desire to ensure her coaching network remained consistent meaning that she adapted her life and working pattern to facilitate her staying with the same coach. It was that positive relationship with her coach that she credits for much of her sporting success and for her ability to manage the transitions she experienced. This lends further support to the work of Brown et al. (2019) who noted the importance of receiving the right support from the right people as being vital to successfully navigating transitions.

The positive coaching environment and support that Gemma discussed was polarized by Rebecca’s experience, who spoke of the ‘shocking’ coaching practices and culture in which she was immersed. She recounts a negative coaching environment with a misogynistic culture that nobody challenged: ‘he had a bullying nature so you had to be quite robust’. However, as mentioned, the challenge this period presented did advance the development of her resilience, saying that ‘those who kind of got through that kept on in the sport longer’. This supports the work of Sarkar et al. (2015) who recognised how the high-performance sports environment required athletes to stand up to challenges and how adversity-related experiences can potentially facilitate the development of resilience. Furthermore, her experience has parallels
with the findings of McManama O’Brian et al. (2021) who found resilience was often more important for young women in sport as they often faced unequal treatment, something Rebecca frequently discussed. This kind of toxic culture was fuelled by a set of gendered power relations which saw men in all key positions of power (Breger et al., 2019). These cultures can be seen to encourage the dominance of men and exclusion and abuse of women, something Rebecca acknowledged, however, while she found the culture heavily gendered and faced a lot of inequality she discussed how this fuelled her resilience and she felt able to stand up to the men in charge: ‘I wasn’t the type of athlete who would just sit back and accept a lot of banter against me so you know I put up with it for a bit but then I would become quite challenging back’. Despite the significant challenges Rebecca faced, her growing resilience and determination resulted in a strengthening of her identity as an athlete, in part, as Samuel et al. (2019) discusses, because she had to sacrifice all other identities to embrace her athletic life. Rebecca’s story echoes that of a participant in Stambulova et al.’s. (2020) study who had a very negative transition when she moved to a new environment: only her resilient nature saw her succeed. The difference in the experiences of Rebecca and Gemma, while both winter sports athletes, is important to highlight as this suggests that even within one sub-set of sport the culture can differ, an area worthy of future study.

5.4.4 Cheating in sport: the impact on clean athletes

The cultural norms that develop around sport can be seen to have underpinned some of the challenges that the athletes have experienced within their career, for example, a toxic culture (Kerr & Kerr, 2020). Furthermore, these norms can be seen to dictate behaviours (Breger et al., 2019). As an example, one such negative behaviour relates to the use of performance-enhancing drugs by athletes. Smith et al. (2010) examined this issue, noting that athlete attitude is dictated by the culture of sport. The challenges within athletics have been well documented in mainstream media (Roan, 2015) a theme identified in the narrative of one of the athletes.
Penny was the only athlete to talk about drugs in her sport and through her reflections the significance of this period of her career is evident.

‘Probably the biggest frustration is that I’d have had to compete with a lot of drugs cheats in my event over the years. It felt much more significant when I was in my prime because you know it was like at the European Championships when there are like three Russians that are there that are like, for example in one European Championships I was fourth and all three of them ahead of me have been banned but not until after that race, so they are saying they can’t prove that they took drugs in that race or whatever …..so I might have got a silver in that …. so that was probably more frustrating than injuries because when you are injured you can look at yourself and think how am I going to overcome it how am I going to change the training or maybe I should have done less track work or maybe I should have worn my spikes less but when there are people cheating

Penny, Interview 2 -16th October 2018

Penny’s account of this period resonates with the work of Erickson et al. (2016) whose findings suggested that the impact reached beyond merely the sanctioned athlete and often with far greater effect. As Penny looked back at her career, she reflected that the impact of drugs cheats was potentially more significant on her than she realised at the time, for example, these events were all when she was at the peak of her career when medals would have more likely translated to better sponsorship deals.

‘I would have won it that year and again being in more of my prime then I think even the winners at Europeans got a really nice car as they had a really nice car sponsor, and that again affects that I did not get the sponsorship deal because I came fourth, and I did not get the medal as they were caught after the race and you can’t prove that
they cheated before but obviously they did. They are all complete cheats. I have had a bronze medal retrospectively...what I am saying is if I had got the Gold it would have given me more security for the future.’

_Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018_

This point about the longer-term financial impact reflects comments from one of the athletes within Erickson et al.’s (2016) study who also discussed how not making a final had significant funding implications and ultimately changed the course of her career. Penny went on to talk about her success later in life, which saw her win gold medals but her age meant she wasn’t viewed sponsorable and lost her main sponsor. Ultimately Penny was able to maintain a career although without the financial security that more success in her younger days would have brought. She discussed how there was always an added pressure on her to ensure she could earn money as she had a family to maintain. While this period of Penny’s career did not represent a transition, it did challenge her identity as an athlete, as she felt she was failing in the athlete role, which as Brewer et al. (1993) discuss can have a bearing on athletic identity due to impact on negative affectivity.

‘I always had that feeling of failure a lot of the time because you put everything into it and in the best shape of your life and you should have got gold’.

_Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018_

The significance of these perceived failures in Penny’s life could have seen her take a step back from elite competition, but she chose to rationalise this and focus more on what she could control within her career. The importance of taking control relates to the findings of Poucher and Tamminen (2017) and perhaps explains why she was able to manage the challenge to her identity as an athlete, which could have been damaging.
5.4.5 Illness and injury

Injury is frequently cited as one of the most common transitions and challenges to identity that an athlete might experience during their career (Richardson et al., 2017). Both injury and illness can result in a substantial period out of sport which can have differing impacts, from a drop in performance level, de-selection and in some cases career termination (Park et al., 2013). Research within this area remains of significant importance, due to the potentially negative psychological implications of injury, such as depression, fear, boredom, and sadness (Russell et al., 2018). Injury and illness can prevent an athlete from competing, which can serve to threaten their athletic identity at an already psychologically vulnerable time. In the case of female athletes this has been found to impact on their self-perceptions outside of sport. For example, Scolnik et al. (2018) concluded that being injured also challenged the athlete’s identity as a woman, with injury possibly being seen as an unfeminine characteristic, which in turn could have an impact on body image with athletes feeling less attractive when injured, although this was not seen in the narratives of any of the athletes within the current study. We see, then, that their management of injury/illness is complex for female athletes, further emphasising the import of examining the differing experiences between female athletes and not solely comparing them to their male counterparts. The athletes all experienced injury at more than one point in their career, and while this was challenging, in contrast to most research in this area (e.g., Invarsson et al., 2017), four of the athletes managed to negotiate this period in a predominantly positive way, although they all acknowledged they had low points. This suggests that their support networks and coping strategies facilitated a positive outlook and their recovery.

Yvonne is the only athlete who had a significant illness occurring early in her career. Following her first Olympic Games she experienced chronic fatigue which had a significant impact on her. Even recounting the experience some 15 years later elicited emotion. Yvonne’s
chronic fatigue was sparked by overtraining, leaving her unable to train at all for three months. In many ways she felt that this was worse than an injury as she was physically exhausted just walking, which led to her questioning if she would ever run again:

‘If I wasn’t able to run again, I did not know what direction to go in. I did not want to go back to teaching and so I almost was afraid of what was next but if I had to think what life would have been like without running I almost couldn’t bear to think about what it would look like, because I think I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to the running, I just couldn’t even contemplate life without it at that point. It takes you to some quite dark places. I was kind of on a cliff edge and I did not want to go over the cliff I wanted to hang on but I wasn’t able to even hang on, I just had to stand on that edge for a while and I remember feeling really quite down and just did not know where I was in life so I probably cried quite a lot I probably was quite depressed just because I couldn’t run which seems really sad but at the time it was very real because that’s all I had in my life and that’s what motivated me every day to get up and you know I still had Joe he was amazing but I still felt really awful and quite lost’

Yvonne, Interview 1 - 26th September 2017

Yvonne’s description of this experience characterises the threat her illness presented to her athletic identity, as it occurred at a point in her career where she couldn’t envisage anything other than being a runner, with her perception being that it was all she had in her life. This case outlines the range of emotions that an athlete can experience during a period of illness or injury, with Yvonne articulating feelings of helplessness, lack of control and uncertainty, all of which had a profound impact on her emotional and psychological wellbeing. Yvonne’s experience echoes Von Rosen et al. (2018) who found that injuries experienced early in the athlete’s career could cause an identity crisis and lead to athletes doubting any value in continuing at their sport. The critical nature of such an event is exemplified in Yvonne’s
cognitive appraisal which saw her desperate, as she could not contemplate what she might do if she was to not run again (Brewer, 1994). Yvonne’s experience at this point in her career also coincided with her having what might be described as a one-dimensional identity, almost exclusively identifying as an athlete, her sole focus in life. Her illness consequently had a significant psychological impact. The role of her husband was fundamental in terms of the support offered and we can surmise that without that level of support she may have lacked the mental capacity to get back to a point where she ran once more.

Yvonne’s later experiences of injury sit in stark contrast to this very dark period early in her career and provide extensive support for the opinion that having a more rounded identity can facilitate effective approaches to challenging events (e.g., Warriner & Lavallee, 2008; and Wojciechowski, 2018) but also provides a clear example of how Yvonne’s former illness experience impacted cognitive appraisal (Brewer, 1994). These later injury setbacks within her career were interpreted very differently as they occurred when she had become a mother and was working as a coach, with these other roles giving her a healthier perspective on her sport.

*If it did not go right it was annoying and frustrating cause you put all that effort into it, all the training but it wasn’t the end of the world whereas previously it was sometimes quite devastating and frustrating so I definitely feel like I had a different mind-set*.  

*Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017*

This is an example of how importantly athletes develop rounded identities during their athletic life because multi-dimensional identity inadvertently acts as a coping strategy (Kuettel et al., 2016). When looking more deeply at the later experiences of injury Yvonne, although experiencing negative emotions such as those discussed by Petitpas and Danish (1995) including frustration and sadness, was able to process the experience and rationalise her injury.
‘Not having fulfilled my potential in the race felt really frustrating so I remember being absolutely gutted, .... something I had to process and get over and I think I might have said the way I got over it was I just put it in world perspective so erm it’s just running at the end of the day although running is a huge part or was a huge part of my life at that time, you have to kind of contextualise these things and I just opened my mind to a broader perspective and that enabled me to process it and move forward but also Joe and myself had always said, when I have finished racing we would try for our first child’

Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017

This shift in perspective later in her career to a more philosophical view is not dissimilar to Penny, who had a very optimistic outlook on injuries even at a young age. Penny suffered a range of injury setbacks during her career, with her most significant injury resulting in almost two and a half years away from running when an operation on her knee went wrong leaving her with a huge amount of scar tissue and unable to fully straighten her leg without pain. While Penny expressed a sense of frustration when discussing these injury experiences, she did not demonstrate any anger or depression, emotions typically cited by injured athletes (Russell et al., 2018). While this could be attributed to the time that had passed since her injury, as Penny was still competing and other events did elicit a strong reaction it seems possible that she didn’t experience particularly negative emotions at times of injury. This finding contrasts with previous research that suggests injured athletes typically express a range of negative emotions including depression and fear (Russell et al., 2018). Penny’s reflections on her injuries or setbacks during her running career were to view these as a learning process. This supports the ‘sport injury related growth’ literature such as Wadey et al. (2013) who suggest that injury leads to a period of growth for athletes. Unlike research that suggests there are largely negative responses (Invarsson et al., 2017), her response is quite different. Although she did
acknowledge some frustration was felt at the time, she always tried to frame her emotions in a positive way, avoiding negative terminology.

‘I have never cried about being injured because at the end of the day I have had friends who have died of cancer, and I know it is cheesy but I believe I have been so fortunate in life. I have seen so many athletes crying because they are out of a championship and it’s not that I am not emotional or I don’t cry about things, it is just that I don’t see that as something to get emotional about because you are fortunate in life; yes it is frustrating but when I talk to people about my injuries I always try and not use the word depressed. I tend to say it is very frustrating as I have worked hard to get to this point.’

Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018

Penny attributed her approach and coping strategies to her personality, and how she approached life in a generally positive way. Furthermore, Brown et al. (2019) acknowledged how receiving the right type of social support when faced with more challenging transitions from someone the athlete perceives as genuinely caring is key, potentially mitigating against negative emotions. This links closely to Penny’s injury experience as the inference within her narrative is that having her husband as her coach meant she had perfect professional and personal support around her, something that also relates to the findings of Scolnik et al. (2018) who recognised the value of the right care.

Penny’s narrative suggests her determination during periods of injury and her ability to place this in a broader world perspective allowed her to handle adversity largely optimistically. She also arrives at a point of acceptance which links to the final stage of Kubler-Ross’s (1969) grief response model. While this model has received criticism due to its rigidity, it illustrates the final stages of Penny’s injury journey. Similarly, with Everard et al. (2021), Penny’s experience links to two of their injury narratives, resilience and ‘MoreToMe’ (the value of
having multiple identities). Her acknowledging that injury is part of sport witnessed her positive response to adverse situations such as the serious long-term injury early in her career: they are growth opportunities and in all likelihood these early events developed her resilience, facilitating her handling of later career challenges positively (Wadey et al., 2013). Furthermore, she had always been flexible in her approach to training, an approach she was able to utilise during periods of injury by adapting sessions so she still felt she was ‘training’ and was an ‘athlete’. She often talked about finding alternatives, even if they were not running. Through maintaining involvement in training Penny was still able to feel like an athlete, subconsciously protecting her athletic identity as she remained committed to her athletic goals and continued to fulfil the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1996).

‘Just doing anything you can always find something you can do even if it is arm cycling doing some strength and conditioning and just thinking that you are keeping the training going’.

Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018

The ability to be flexible when injured was also evident in Wendy’s story. She suffered several quite serious injuries during her career but like Penny sought out alternatives that allowed her to train. She talks about doing hours of aqua jogging in a bid to get back to running. Furthermore, also like Penny, elements of Wendy’s rehabilitation carried with it a layer of frustration and she acknowledged that she struggled to remain motivated, in contrast to the other athletes in this study. Her experience is more comparable to those of athletes in previous research (e.g., Pettipas & Danish, 1995) who have tended to acknowledge periods of injury carrying several negative emotions.

‘I think for about nine months I was really motivated and after that I did lose motivation’.

Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017
A main source of frustration for Wendy was the timing of her injuries, all occurring when she felt she was in peak condition and all taking six to 12 months’ recovery. This relates to previous research that suggests the longer an athlete is away from training and competition the more significant the impact of their injury (e.g., Scolnik et al., 2018)

All the athletes discussed the importance of the support networks around them during their early career, however, this was not restricted to this time-period. The importance of social support was a theme through each athlete’s entire career but particularly important during challenging periods such as injury. Moreover, as Rees and Hardy (2000) discussed, the support provided tended to fit under four broad categories: emotional, esteem, informational and tangible. Penny talked about the value of support networks during periods of injury and specifically the emotional support she received through maintaining the same support network around her and offers this as advice to others, for example:

‘Still maybe going up to the running club with people if they want to give themselves a boost psychologically still meeting up with your running mates, things like that just finding a new routine’  

_Penny, Interview 2 - 16th October 2018_

Importance of social support and staying connected to sport during periods of injury features extensively in the injury literature. Mitchell et al. (2014) identified how social support during injury is highly predictive of a successful return post-injury. When placed in the context of Penny’s experience, this could be based on the psychological benefits that maintaining these relationships presents. Keeping connected with their sporting world also ensured that their athletic identity was preserved, as this is as much connected to the networks within the sport as the actual engagement with the sport. This concept links closely to Fink et al.’s (2009) social identity theory, which suggests that forms of identity can be developed through the way an
individual identifies with a particular social group. A further perspective on support was discussed by Penny, who talked about how the experience of injury can present a learning experience for the athlete.

‘You can learn about maybe what went wrong in training or how much more you need to listen to your body or change your approach to training, there is so much you can learn about it and I think you know that can help you later in your career.’

*Penny, Interview 2 - 16th October 2018*

It is likely that this learning also lent support to Penny’s psychological growth and resilience by making her stronger as an athlete (Everard et al. 2021). The learning that athletes can potentially gain through injury also resonated within Yvonne’s account of her illness. She discussed how it was only after this period that she sought out support to manage her training in a better way and, like Penny, felt this experience to be edifying.

‘I think yeah learning from your mistakes can be very empowering sometimes I think you have to go to those low points to really appreciate the simple things of just being able to run again’

*Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017*

Prior to her illness while Yvonne had seen herself as an elite athlete she discussed how she had not always treated herself as one, explaining how, ironically, the negative experience of chronic fatigue marked a change to her starting to live more like an elite athlete. Again, this provides a clear example of how dealing with a challenging event empowers and supports the development of the athlete and leads to a shift in how life and sport are viewed. This shift relates to the findings of Wadey et al. (2013) who discussed how injury could lead to this type of personal growth. Yvonne’s experience triggered a more mature approach to her career and, in transitioning back into training, she had a novelty of strength and focus. This example
illustrates how, while a transition can present a challenge resulting in an athlete feeling isolated and depressed, if managed it can also trigger a new appraisal to their sport and also future setbacks. Even at this early career point Yvonne’s experiences illustrate the multitude of competencies and skills athletes can develop through their sporting involvement (Vitali & De Brant, 2019). Yvonne’s newly acquired strength and focus demonstrate how her response to a challenging event developed her resilience to cope with future setbacks more positively (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

‘I had more control I was more careful with my nutrition and surrounding heavy workouts with carbohydrates and thinking more about when I ate um and also obviously having the easier days and focusing more on recovery so that was um yeah it was just motivating to know that I had control over that’

*Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017*

All the runners in the study expressed different emotions at different points when injured, but all managed to successfully navigate their way back to sport and these experiences largely saw them develop an enhanced resilience both within their sport and beyond. These findings lend support to those of McManama & O’Brian et al. (2021) whose recent research focusing on the development of women in sport found several benefits related to the response to challenge in sport.

Gemma had the most serious injury of all the athletes within the study and was the only athlete who was told that hers was likely to be a career-ending injury, a diagnosis that has typically caused significant psychological trauma, as in Gemma’s case, it would also signal an end to her athletic self (Chen & Bansal, 2021). As Gemma recounted this experience she did so with an element of humour, reflected on the level of positivity she felt and recalled no negative emotions connected at the time. However, it is important to recognise that she was recounting
an experience several years ago and some recall bias may have influenced her memories. Somewhat ironically Gemma suffered this injury during a photo-shoot for her sponsor. She was jumping over several cars and did not land correctly, shattering all of the bones in her foot. Gemma never mentioned feeling frustrated or upset by injuries. The strongest emotion she discussed was that it ‘bothered her’ but that she was certainly led by how she felt about it rather than by what the surgeon had said: ‘He did not think I would be able to compete again and he thought I would be lucky to be able to walk normally again.’. However, it seems possible that the impact of the event may have been softened over time and her phrasing suggests she was in fact manifesting one of the stages of grief as described by Kubler-Ross (1969) and was in denial.

‘I did not believe him basically, I did not think at any point that was gonna happen, I thought well it’s a broken bone I have had broken bones before I have had lots of injuries before my body heals itself it is pretty good at healing itself, I will be fine basically’

_Gemma, Interview 2 - 21st August 2017_

This approach of denying the severity of her injury may have enabled her to cope with it at the time and allow her to protect her identity, although her later experience fails to support this. She moved non sequentially through each of the stages of grief, highlighting why the rigidity of the model negates its relevance. Furthermore, Gemma was generally very positive in her outlook and her love of the sport often allowed her to approach challenge-events in an optimistic manner. It also seems likely that previous injury experiences had allowed her to develop a resilience which, as McManama O’Brien et al. (2021) recognised, can be a key coping strategy for athletes. When the strength of Gemma’s athletic identity is viewed in the context of research by Samuel et al. (2019), it could explain how she was able to perceive transitions so positively, as they found that the development and maintenance of a high athletic
identity could in fact facilitate the way athletes adapt to within-career transitions. This finding and Gemma’s experience are somewhat in contrast to other research that has found high athletic identity can mean athletes have more trouble dealing with crisis transitions such as injury (Martin et al., 2014). The importance of ‘being an athlete’ to Gemma meant she was only able to view a positive outcome from potentially negative situations such as her injury or funding cuts.

Like the other athletes, Rebecca had a range of different injury experiences during her career, although hers were mostly chronic in nature, for example, a persistent knee problem. She only had one notable injury which was extensive whiplash, which left her with long-term damage to her neck. Her emotional response at this time was, like many of her experiences before, connected to the lack of support she felt within her sporting environment. The inadequate support she received at the time of injury saw her try and continue to compete which led to further injury. This injury sequence got to such a point where she was barely able to lift her head and she sought out a specialist mid-season. She recounts his reaction to her neck after examining her.

‘he tested all the Gs that my head could take and he was like ‘Oh my god I can’t believe you even competed because you can hardly take the weight, you can’t take the weight of your head you should have had this sorted ages ago, like I don’t know how you competed through that Olympic season with the fact that you neck is so injured’ so he was just like ‘I can’t believe that’, so it was pretty injured and I just kind of coped with it during the season’

Rebecca, Interview 3 – 18th July 2018

Interestingly, Rebecca did not mention any emotion connected to her injury, just a memory of the pain she was in at the time and, while she did mention feeling frustration, this was related
to her being unable to get the correct medical treatment rather than with the injury directly. Again, this example might be said to show how, like all the athletes, her career in sport had seen her develop a level of resilience to deal with both pain and emotional setbacks. As Fletcher and Sarker (2012) discuss, resilience can protect an individual from the negative effect of stressors.

5.5 Life transitions

Although throughout the interviews all athletes tended to focus primarily on their sporting life, they were encouraged to talk about their lives more broadly. Wylleman’s (2019) HAC model illustrates how alongside the athletic career there are several other life transitions that may occur. These other transitions tended to be touched on at the start of the athlete’s career when they talked about school, education and shifts of support networks. Later they all mentioned meeting their partners, getting married and having children but only Wendy’s narrative focused on other aspects of her life, more in parallel with her athletic career than to give context or as a key transition such as motherhood. It is likely that the emphasis she placed on other parts of her life link to the significance and impact these factors had on her sporting career. She was the only athlete who continued to work during her whole elite career with the least spousal support due to her husband’s job. Wendy spoke about how her husband’s career often dictated hers, notably moving more than 13 times during her career. This frequent shift in location had a bearing on her training network and presented other logistical challenges.

‘We moved, I started training at the club in July and moved back to North London erm with John’s job obviously in November but I actually carried on for the next two years commuting to training on a Tuesday and Thursday evening, I arranged it so I could leave work early in order to drive to training with the group and then we moved again with John’s job which is near but I arranged it so I was working where I used to train
so although I had to commute about 45 miles it meant I was then in situ for training after work and again rearranged my hours so that I could.’

Wendy, Interview 1 - 11th September 2017

This constant juggling that Wendy had to manage was a trend seen during Wendy’s career until she decided to retire. The impact of constantly moving was illustrated most clearly when she talked about the most significant move they made as a family to a different country after she had her first child.

‘I did not want to move before the European Championships as I said to you moving, and in particular an international move, and we had not done that before is just quite tiring the whole physical and mental thing of it and I always find I am knackered and wiped out for a few weeks, so I said to him I don’t want to move to before the European Championships’

Wendy, Interview 3 - 13th November 2017

This example emphatically contrasts with the other athletes in the study, showing the impact of having a partner whose career does not complement the athlete’s. Wendy was the only athlete whose life was dictated in many ways by her husband’s career, as the other athletes had partners whose work allowed them either directly to support their partner, or they were part of the athlete’s direct coaching team, such as Penny’s.

5.6 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the early experiences of each of the athletes as well as the range of within-career transitions experienced during their careers, both normative and non-normative. The first transition into sport marked the start of each athlete's career in sport, they all navigated it in a positive way with findings suggesting that positive early childhood experiences and family support are key factors in ensuring a positive transition (e.g., Coakley, 2006; Laird et
Furthermore, the experiences of Rebecca also illustrate how when that early transition into a performance environment is managed poorly it can cause athletes to drop out, as she did from her athletics career (Røynesdal et al., 2018). Of the five athletes, it was only Rebecca who had her sights set on an elite career as she explicitly aspired to represent her country. As discussed, the other athletes all had a gradual transition to the elite environment and cautiously considered pursuing an elite career. For all athletes a key transition was the point that they recognised themselves as elite athletes, which also saw a strengthening of their athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). This stronger athletic identity was further reinforced by significant achievements such as qualifying for the Olympic Games or competing on the World Cup circuit. An interesting reflection on all the athletes’ stories is how even when faced with challenging events they were able to negotiate these successfully and view them as learning experiences, for example illness or injury (Everard et al., 2021). Both Rebecca and Gemma faced several issues at organisational level connected to funding and changes to their coaching set up and, while not directly organisational, Penny’s reflections on the issues with drug cheats highlighted a problem within her sport at the time she was competing and linked to the findings of Erickson et al. (2016). Wendy’s narrative was the only one to place her career in the broader context of her life through much of the dialogue, and she was the only athlete whose career was not the main focus of the family due to her husband’s job. This example highlighted how, for at least three of the athletes, their partners were completely focused on supporting them, for example, Penny’s husband was her coach and Gemma’s worked for the team in an official support role. Clearly, each athlete negotiated their career in a positive way regardless of the challenges presented. However, none of these transitions held as much significance to them as motherhood which is the focus of chapter Six.
Chapter 6 – From athlete to mother athlete

‘I wasn’t just Yvonne the runner anymore, I was Yvonne the mum’

Yvonne, Interview 3 - 9th January 2018

6.1 Introduction

One of the most significant life and career transitions that female athletes may face is that of pregnancy and motherhood as this transition can present unique challenges (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). These challenges relate in part to the physical nature of sport but are also due to cultural norms and gender ideology that have traditionally suggested that women should have clear and defined roles and promote how women’s ‘true role’ is to bear and care for children (Weedon, 1997). These values have been reinforced within sport, demonstrated by a lack of women combining a career and motherhood and the gendered environment that has seen women poorly supported and subsequently feel that the two roles are incompatible. As a result traditionally female athletes have waited until the end of their careers to have children (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Yet, with optimal fertility often falling at the same time as peak performance there is a growing trend that sees elite athletes deciding to combine these potentially incompatible roles that will undoubtedly lead to a period out of their sport (Jette, 2011). This trend has seen a shift in the narrative where it is becoming more accepted to return after having a baby and slowly more celebrated rather than challenged. All the athletes in the current study recognised that while they had experienced a wide range of transitions in their career, becoming a mother was their most significant and life-changing transition. The importance of this life event meant that, through the stories told, this one transition overshadowed nearly all other notable points in the athletes’ lives, even their career successes, for example, an Olympic medal. This is illustrated by Yvonne when she describes how motherhood resulted in a shift in priorities, ‘She kind of knocked running off my top priority so
instead of running being up there, and my husband and life, Lola came along and took top position on that priority list’. The shift in priorities that motherhood can trigger may explain why more athletes tend to wait until the end of their career to start a family, in contrast to male athletes who more typically combine parenthood with their sporting career (Tekavc et al., 2015). Unlike the athletes in Tekavc et al.’s study (2015) each of the athletes in the current study made a conscious decision to combine motherhood with their career and all planned, and ultimately made, a successful return to elite sport. The experience of pregnancy and motherhood will be unique to every individual and, while each of the athletes experienced pregnancy and motherhood in a different way, there were several recurrent themes throughout all the athletes’ narratives related to; (1) Planning and wanting to be a mother, (2) Challenges of pregnancy and the post-partum period, (3) Impact of motherhood on the athlete, and (4) Managing motherhood and sport.

6.2 Planning and wanting to be a mother

While more women are combining elite sport with motherhood, cultural norms still dictate that elite females see it as expected that they will retire when they have a baby (Ronkainen et al., 2016). The decision to retire links to the findings of Palmer and Leberman (2009) who discuss how pregnancy and motherhood can create disruption within the athlete’s life, making it hard to maintain training and competitive demands. These potential disruptions mean those who make the decision to combine their career with motherhood must employ careful planning if they are to return post-partum. Darroch et al. (2019) identified the significance of planning within their research, looking at the experiences of elite distance runners from five countries. Their findings illustrated how financial pressures resulted in the athletes trying to manage and plan their pregnancies around competitions to reduce the financial impact and ensure they had adequate spousal support. This planning was also seen in Tekavc et al.’s (2020) study although, in this instance, the planning was related to timing their pregnancies to minimise the impact of
their time out of sport and the number of major competitions they missed. All the athletes in
the current study planned to combine their career with motherhood and subsequently made a
conscious decision to time their pregnancies to least impact their careers. For example, Gemma
discussed how her planning had to coincide with the Olympic cycle. This type of planning
around the competitive calendar was seen in Tekavc et al.’s (2020) research, whose participants
planned their pregnancy around the four-year Olympic cycle.

‘Yes, basically we had a two-month window, we had two chances, (laughter) Rob felt a
lot of pressure. Our families thought we were completely nuts; they were like there is
no way you can do this in a two-month window! So, we had two chances, any earlier
and I would have lost too much of the season and any later I would have lost too much
of the Olympic season’

Gemma, Interview 2 - 21st August 2017

Gemma discussed how careful planning was essential if she was to be back on snow and able
to qualify for the next Olympics. The need for this type of planning and the potential pressure
perhaps suggest why there is a perceived incompatibility between an athletic career and
motherhood and explains why in more instances women make the decision to retire before
starting a family (Bø & Backe-Hansen, 2007). This was illustrated through Rebecca’s narrative
when discussing how her plan to return to competition was received by the performance
director: ‘He just did not believe I was going to come back’. Like Gemma, Rebecca had a
clear plan and a desire to return, saying, ‘I still wanted to compete. I wasn’t ready to quit. I did
not want to quit on an Olympic medal’, but like the other athletes in this study she had reached
a point where she felt she wouldn’t feel fulfilled if she did not have a baby. When asked whether
she considered waiting until she retired to have a baby, Rebecca talked about not wanting to
leave it too late, expressing her concerns around leaving sport with nothing else in her life.
‘No, no because I always wanted to have children, like mid late 20s, just in case anything happened where I had to then go IVF I just wanted some contingency of things to do, and I also thought, you know, I don’t want to go through sport, pop out in my mid-thirties, and go ‘I haven’t got a degree I haven’t got any qualifications and I haven’t got a family’, because that is what a lot of people do in sport. They kind of go through it, they have started as a junior they haven’t got any qualifications because they have just done sport, sport, sport and they pop out the other end and all they have got is to work in that sport and it might not be what they want to do. They haven’t got a relationship, they haven’t got any qualifications, it’s like crikey!’

Rebecca, Interview 3 – 18th July 2018

This clearly reflects Rebecca’s desire to have a family for many reasons, but also implies she recognised the need for balance in her life during her career.

Both Gemma and Rebecca knew the nature of their sport would affect their ability to maintain any sports-specific training during their pregnancy, due to both the associated risk and type of activity. This highlights a challenge for athletes in certain higher risk and core dominant sports who are unable to maintain sport-specific training volume. Research has conclusively found that maintaining a relatively high training volume in pregnancy facilitates a smoother return to high intensity training postpartum, resulting in a more rapid return to competition (Erdener & Budgett, 2016). However, even when some training is maintained it is important to acknowledge that there will be a significant decline in fitness and physical capabilities during pregnancy, which can influence the speed of a return to sport. Both Gemma and Rebecca discussed this and accepted that they did not know how rapidly they would be able to return as they were unsure how their bodies would recover and adapt post-partum. It is important to recognise how some of this uncertainty was associated with the lack of knowledge around how
to support winter sports athletes through pregnancy. Research suggests that this lack of guidance on supporting pregnant athletes is a more far-reaching issue than just one confined to winter sports athletes but a factor that more closely relates to the sometimes-unforeseen physical implications related to childbirth. (Atkinson et al., 2022; Deering et al., 2020; Pullen et al, 2022). The inability to maintain specific training during their pregnancy was clearly factored into both Rebecca and Gemma’s plan to return. However, this inability to train was in stark contrast to the runners within the study who were able to maintain a lower volume running schedule during their pregnancy. As Wendy mentioned, ‘I ran four miles six days before I gave birth’. This difference illustrates how type of sport has a bearing on the way training is managed during pregnancy. Neither Gemma nor Rebecca could take part in any version of their sport, which could potentially have an impact on both the speed of their return as well as their athletic identity. This is something that Gemma touched on when describing what she missed about sport during her pregnancy.

‘So I really missed doing that, I missed a bit of adrenaline and excitement, I missed being able to just completely shatter myself doing a session and get really tired by the end of it because I had to be just a bit careful, and I could exercise but I wasn’t really meant to get out of breath too much, and I just had to be gentle and I wanted to just completely go for it and kill myself in the session’

Gemma, Interview 2 - 21st August 2017

Like Gemma, Yvonne also timed her pregnancy around the Olympic cycle, making the decision to try for a baby after competing in the Olympic Games. Yvonne recalls that her Olympic final was filled with mixed emotions as she picked up an injury during the race resulting in a poor performance. She remembers this experience with upset and frustration. However, her later reflections lend support to research findings that suggest transitions are best managed when the athlete has a new focus (Lally, 2007). In Yvonne’s case the prospect of trying for a baby
mitigated the feelings of upset and frustration related to her injury by giving her a new goal and focus. The way that the prospect of motherhood allowed Yvonne to cope with her injury suggests that this prospect of the mother identity may become more important than athletic identity prior to it becoming a reality. Furthermore, this period away from training and competition facilitated the rest and recovery she needed. All the athletes fell pregnant within a few months of making the decision to try for a baby, therefore quickly redefining themselves, embracing their new identity, potentially mediating an identity crisis.

The experiences of the athletes within this study also suggest that a shift in culture is evident that normalises women maintaining their athletic career while starting a family, in contrast to traditional narratives (e.g., McGannon et al., 2012) that suggest motherhood and a career are incompatible. The desire to become a mother but also retain their identity as an athlete echoes the findings of Beans and Wimbs (2021), with the athletes in their study striving to retain their runner identity as well as embrace that of a mother.

6.3 Challenges and changes during pregnancy and the post-partum period

Potentially the most significant challenges faced by the athletes were related to the physical implications of both pregnancy and motherhood on their bodies and their concerns about the impact that this could have on their return to sport. Tekavc et al. (2020) reported that all participants in their study noted a significant decline in physical capabilities, related to endurance, strength and balance. They all entered pregnancy knowing they wanted to return to sport, and all maintained a relatively structured training regime until their final trimester. As mentioned, these concerns were of particular significance for Rebecca and Gemma who had limited knowledge of how their bodies would respond due to being the first within their type of sport to have a baby and return.
‘My body was my job, I had to physically work you know, and do a physical job and I did not have any idea how I was going to come back and they (coaches) did not either so it was really, really tricky so I was up against it and I was the only athlete (on the squad) who had ever had a baby’

Rebecca, Interview 3 – 18th July 2018

The true impact of pregnancy and childbirth on the female athlete’s body is still largely under-researched, as Deering et al. (2020) reported in their paper looking at the support provided to elite athletes, concluding that guidance on returning to training and competition is lacking. The athletes in the current study all recognised a decline in their physical ability following childbirth, something that resonates with the athletes in Tekavc et al.’s (2020) study, who talked about a loss of physical ability, with one athlete comparing it to a return from injury which required a lot of mental strength. Furthermore, each of the athletes in the study had been used to living the life of an elite performer, where they could be selfish with training, rest and recovery. As previous research suggests, they could no longer be selfish and they had less time to themselves due to the obligations that looking after a baby carried (Tekavc et al., 2020). This was something discussed by Gemma who talked about both a change in her focus from solely herself as an athlete to the needs of her daughter, as well as the lack of recovery time she had. She noted that this had an impact on her ability to work on her physical shape as she was exhausted much of the time. These factors again support why women have more traditionally waited to combine motherhood with retirement.

Research suggests that while some female athletes are prepared for the physical impact of pregnancy and labour on their body and return to sport (e.g., McGannon et al., 2012; Tekavc et al., 2020), others have to reassess their planned return and physical readiness (Tekavc et al., 2020). The far more extreme physical impact of having a baby was something at the heart of
Wendy’s story, she had a ‘traumatic’ first labour and the experience left her psychologically fragile. Her description of the impact on her body still carried palpable emotion.

‘I honestly felt that I had been in a car crash. I went from heavily pregnant but physically able - I ran 4 miles 6 days before I gave birth - to a person who couldn’t even lie down or sit up in bed, honestly it was absolutely dreadful’.

Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017

Wendy’s description of the post-partum period illustrates how as athletes these women felt in control of their bodies and understood how they would cope with the different physical demands placed upon them but suddenly they faced a time of physical uncertainty when basic tasks were a challenge.

‘You know your body really well when you are an athlete and it does what you want it to and sometimes it doesn’t but you can normally fix it and just the experience of having that C section and I think on top of the exhaustion, just, you know, I couldn’t even stand up the next day’

‘My self-perception, not being physically able to be an athlete and be a runner in any sense really had a big impact on me’

Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017

This shift in her physical self-perception resonates with the retirement literature and the work of Stephan et al. (2003) who discussed how the shift in an athlete’s perception of their body and athletic competence can impact on identity. While the athletes were all planning to return it is likely that their self-perception altered and in Wendy’s case this had a significant impact during the early post-partum period. Subsequently this physical impact of pregnancy and childbirth influenced the psychological wellbeing of the athletes, for example Wendy’s
inability to run had a notable effect on her mental health. Running for her wasn’t just about chasing times and competing, it was who she was, and she perhaps held her athletic identity higher than any of the other athletes in the study. She talked about how important it was for her to get back to running rather than back to competing, indicating it was initially her identity as a runner she needed back rather than that of an elite athlete, similar to the runners within Bean and Wimbs (2021) study who needed to maintain their runner identity and balance it with that of a mother.

‘I wasn’t in any way back to being an athlete I was just trying to run, I suppose to find myself a little bit again and get me back together, it was my identity I just wanted to be able to run, being an elite athlete was so far away from where I was at that time’.

Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017

Wendy was the only athlete who really talked about the impact on her identity in the post-partum period. Not being able to run challenged Wendy’s identity and in her own words she needed to run to find herself again as without this she felt lost. Wendy was the only athlete to recount this period as psychologically challenging, but she had the most difficult labour and was also the athlete with the least support around her. Social support has conclusively been found to underpin positive transitions through sport (e.g., Adams et al., 2015; DeFreeze & Smith, 2014) and Wendy’s lack of support is perhaps indicative of her struggles post-partum. Wendy’s experience was similar in many ways to that of an injured athlete as she was physically unable to walk for several weeks, echoing the reflections of one of the participants in Tekavc et al.’s. (2020) study who compared this time to the return from a sports injury. Furthermore, like the return from injury it is important to acknowledge that a returning mother will also have a range of emotional and psychological factors at play. Wendy’s experience exemplifies the need for athletes to have support both in the early post-partum period and when
they make a return to sport. Moreover, as Brown et al.’s (2018) study concluded, having the right support from the right people was also illustrated in Wendy’s experience. It was only when she got the right support from a professional who normalised her desire to run again that her narrative changed and her perception of motherhood become more positive.

As highlighted, Wendy had a particularly challenging return to sport in the post-partum period. The only other athlete who recounts this period as challenging was Rebecca who faced considerable organisational pressures, which meant she felt rushed in her return to training and competition. The lack of understanding around athletes having children and returning to competition meant Rebecca’s return to sport was something she felt was forced on her and rushed. There is a risk of putting Rebecca’s experience down to the fact that it took place over a decade ago, however, more recent research has concluded that this poor or inadequate organisational support is still evident in some settings (Pullen et al. 2022). Darroch et al. (2019) examined the experiences of elite distance runners, concluding that a lack of both sponsor and governing body support made them feel it was expected they would retire after having their children and as such did not warrant support and like Rebecca faced cuts to funding. This comparison from Rebecca’s experience to that of elite runners from different countries illustrates how there is still considerable work to be done to support athletes who strive to combine their career with motherhood, both in terms of organisations developing a better understanding and more appropriate support systems.

The lack of guidance on returning to competition post-partum remains a significantly under researched area, largely down to the gendered nature of sport and the subsequent lack of research seeking to understand female experiences surrounding pregnancy and the post-partum period. This lack of knowledge about the performing female body is discussed by Mujika and Taipale (2022), who concluded that research with women, especially around their physiology, hormonal changes and reproductive health has been avoided as it has been deemed complicated
and time consuming. Subsequently, this lack of understanding can lead this period being poorly handled and in turn may have longer term physical implications for athletes. For example, Sundgot-Borgen et al. (2019) examined the experiences of elite Norwegian athletes during their return to sport. Somewhat concernedly they reported that several of the athletes suffered stress fractures and felt dissatisfied with the advice they were given. These findings further illustrate how even three years ago there was still a lack of knowledge surrounding the returning mother. The physical impact of a rapid return was something discussed by Rebecca who made her return to competition when her daughter was only nine weeks old. She spoke of on-going problems she had with her body, which she attributes to returning too quickly to training. In addition, like the athletes in Sundgot-Borgen et al.’s study (2019) Penny also experienced stress fractures even though she made a relatively gradual return to running. She recognised how her ligaments had not returned to normal and that the impact of pregnancy and breast-feeding on her bone density meant she needed an even longer time to recover. This example further illustrates how the demands of different sports can dictate not just the way training is approached during pregnancy but how it can also influence how quickly an athlete can return, for example in a sport such as running. The risk associated with a return to sport was something of which Yvonne showed an awareness, mentioning how much of her approach was based on seeing what other runners had experienced rather than clear medical guidance.

‘I did not want to rush getting back into my running cause I had witnessed other runners rushing it and getting very injured, so I decided to take six months to ease myself back into full-time training again and that was not really based on anything, just seeing other runners try and make it too quick and I think it gave me more time to enjoy Lola’

Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017

These findings further support those of Deering et al. (2020) as well as the recent BASES Expert Statement (Atkinson et al., 2022) which concluded that there is both a lack of
understanding of how to manage a return to sport for elite athletes as well as a lack of guidance. While Yvonne was very aware of the potential implications of returning to sport too early and took control of this, in contrast Rebecca felt forced to make a rapid return due to both financial pressure and worry about losing her position on the team. She was the only athlete who faced a drop in funding during her pregnancy, something that was done to force her to make a rapid return and she was the only athlete who had funding-related targets attached to her performance on her first event back. Like the runners in Darroch et al.’s (2019) study who all managed and planned their pregnancy to minimise the financial impact, Rebecca had to consider this when deciding to return, with this additional pressure placing her under undue physical and psychological stress.

‘(They were like) I don’t believe you will come back so I need to give you an incentive to come back so we are going to drop your APA (Athlete Performance Award) down to the bare minimum . . . when you start training we will ramp it back up again’

Rebecca, Interview 3 – 18th July 2018

Throughout her narrative she often reflects on this period as being ‘a horrible time’ where she felt angry and isolated. Rebecca felt this lack of organisational support was evident as soon as she announced her pregnancy. This period of her career led to her feeling disillusioned and following the birth of her daughter she felt she was constantly fighting for what she deserved. Even when ten weeks after having her daughter she hit all the targets assigned, including a top three finish, she still felt isolated and ‘an outsider’. A fundamental purpose of this research was to consider the experiences of winter sports athletes both in isolation but also in comparison to runners. Rebecca’s experience seems to suggest that Winter sports athletes have less support in terms of expertise, knowledge and finance. While Gemma had a very different experience within winter sport she still talked about a significant lack of knowledge and
understanding of the pregnant athlete, a finding that echoes some of the findings of Pullen et al. (2022). When Gemma announced her pregnancy her coach researched how best to support her even though he did not originally have the knowledge, and during her return she discussed the support she had, with no pressure to compete. She was given the flexibility to gauge how she felt at the time and base her return on small progressive steps.

‘Yeah, so there was a competition end of November, a smaller competition, Europa Cup and there was a World Cup about a week into December – ten days into December and I wanted to do the World Cup in December and ideally I would do the Europa cup end of November as well because that would be a good sort of warm up competition so that the World cup wasn’t my first competition back. I did not know whether I would be ready for it or not so I was talking to my coach about it and this is what I am thinking, and he said ok that seems fair, let’s try and go for the Europa and you can always pull out at any point because we were training there anyway so there was no extra travel involved so it was at our training location so he’s said let’s try that, you can even do the official training and not do the comp, just do whatever you feel.’

Gemma, Interview 2 - 21st August 2017

The experiences of Rebecca and Gemma while both from a winter sports background were at extremes of a continuum and illustrate how support from both the coaching and support team as well as the governing body are essential if women are to successfully navigate their return to sport. Research by Darroch and Hillsbury (2014) looked at the support around athletic mothers and concluded that while tangible support from family allowed mothers to return to sport it also allowed athletes to have ‘breathing space’ to make the right decisions about their return. Support offers athletes choice, and they need no longer view their decision to start a family as the end of their career. However, within some environments there remains an assumption, as in the case of Rebecca, that pregnancy will mark the end of the athlete’s career.
This assumption underpinned the findings of Tekavc et al. (2015) who focused on the experiences of elite Slovene athletes, highlighting how most female athletes still decided to start a family after they retired. Furthermore, Romaine et al. (2016) recognised how this assumption is still fostered by cultural norms that dictate that pregnancy carries with it an expectation that they would retire. The lack of understanding on the part of the organisation about how to work with a pregnant athlete both physically and emotionally led to Rebecca feeling unsupported and under significant pressure. When recounting one experience it was obvious to see the psychological impact the event had as it still elicited a visibly emotional reaction some 10 years later:

‘(They said) we want Rebecca to do fitness testing to see if she is fit to return to performing and my team were like, ‘why is she doing that, there is no rush for her to get back, we are just doing it in our own time, she has just had a baby so it is really dangerous for her to do the return from injury protocol which is on a normal athlete with a little injury we are talking she is coming back from a baby’. But one of the returns to fitness protocols is three single leg hops for distance and my team were going ‘no that’s really stupid that’s too high risk’ and they (the organization) were going ‘no that’s the return to injury protocol, that is the policy.’’

Rebecca, Interview 3 – 18th July 2018

This is just one example of the constant challenges on Rebecca as she started her return to training and competition, with no reasonable adjustments being made to allow a smooth transition back, and she recalls it as ‘a really shitty time, they put a lot of pressure on me’. As her return progressed, her narrative was one of loneliness as she felt ostracised by her sport. These challenges are not unusual. Darroch et al. (2019) found that all athletes in their study
from five countries experienced a lack of support and lack of clear policy and Deering et al. (2020) concluded that there remains limited guidance on how to manage this return to sport.

It is important to place Rebecca’s poor support from her organisation in the wider context of her support network where she had extensive support from family and her direct coaching team, although her negative experience overshadowed this somewhat. This additional support gives some insight into how Rebecca ultimately managed a successful return with further career success.

The issues associated with poor support were just some of the tangible challenges faced by the athletes in this study. More subtle were the implications in the post-partum and return-to-sport phase for all athletes. For example, some of the athletes alluded to missing their sport while they were unable to train or compete; Gemma missed the adrenaline and excitement. Conversely, Yvonne enjoyed this period out of the competitive environment, echoing the comments of some of the athletes in Tekavc et al.’s (2020) study who viewed their pregnancy as a time to rest and heal naturally. Yvonne had reached a point when she felt she needed to give her mind and body a break seeing pregnancy as the chance to do that.

‘Um, it did but it kind of felt nice not to have that pressure for a while, erm and because prior to that I’d had that really clear focus since I was nine years old, really it was always about the next race so never in my life had I, since I was nine, not really had that erm other than, even when you have an injury you always have your sights set on something beyond that, whereas for me, you know, I knew it was going to take nine months. I did not know how the pregnancy was going to be, I did not know how I was going to be once I had had the child, my plan was always to return to competing, after I had Lola as well so I knew I needed to maintain a level of fitness but I wasn’t in training I was just on maintenance mode.’
Yvonne went into her pregnancy with no expectations or clear timeline set for her return to sport. Lack of pressure and enjoyment of this stage of her life shone through her narrative as she discussed the period straight after having her daughter, focusing on how much she enjoyed her daughter and spending time with her, and her only mention of running was how she slowly returned, but for exercise and a mental break rather than training. Yvonne’s realistic and relaxed return to competitive sport was largely possible due to the structure both she and her husband had in place. They had other sources of income and a flexible home life in terms of their other work. This allowed Yvonne to remain in control of her return to sport and navigate the post-partum period at her own rate. This controlled and flexible return made for a positive time for Yvonne with no accompanying pressure.

Throughout the narratives of all athletes, it was evident that the post-partum period was particularly significant, with several physical and psychological challenges to overcome. All the athletes had a range of challenges to manage during this period, largely connected to the demands of a new baby as well as the changes to their physical body and the psychological impact of motherhood yet all the athletes made a successful return to sport and, as their narratives progressed, talked about the positive impact that becoming a mother had on several aspects of their lives.

6.4 The impact of motherhood

The decision to have a baby and the early challenges in the post-partum period is largely related to implications on training and the return to sport. However, the longer-term impact of motherhood on the athlete is more far-reaching (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). Palmer and Leberman (2009) discussed how the on-going negotiation of the two identities of athlete and mother saw something they termed ‘identity management’ being essential to the successful
combination of an athletic career and motherhood. While this balancing act can carry with it some tensions (Bean & Wimbs, 2021), research has more commonly found that motherhood can enhance many aspects of the athlete’s life, for example, as McGannon et al. (2012) discuss within their study which focused on Paula Radcliffe’s return to sport, having a baby can give an athlete a sense of success in two domains and give them a better perspective on sport. Feeling complete in all aspects of their life can in turn allow them to be a better athlete. This shift in perception was discussed by Darroch and Hillsbury (2017) who found that the runners in their study all noted that this change in perception led to a shift in priorities, for example, it can lead to a reduction in pressure on the athlete within the competitive domain as the role of mother was more important. This shift in perspective that comes with motherhood was evident in the narratives of all athletes within this study, illustrating how the significance of motherhood regardless of type of sport or experiences post-partum creates in many ways a more rounded perspective of sport. Gemma went into her pregnancy accepting that it may not have been beneficial to her career but, as her story progressed, she reflected that becoming a mother had a positive impact on her, perhaps not in terms of performance but on the type of athlete she was and how she experienced sport.

‘I think she has made me a better person; she has probably made me a more confident athlete; I think she has made me a more confident person and I think that has transferred into the athlete that I am’

Gemma, Interview 2 - 21st August 2017

As well as this increase in her confidence as both a person and an athlete, Gemma also discussed how her level of organization has improved as a by-product of managing things with a child.
‘One thing I noticed when I was there (away training) is that I am way more organised than I used to be, like the night before I was getting everything ready for the morning, anything I could do at night so I did not have to do it in the morning I was doing that. I used to be fairly organised but I am pretty sure I wasn’t this organised, so being a mum has apparently made me more organised’

_Gemma, Interview 2 - 21st August 2017_

This enhanced level of organisation was echoed by Penny, who recognised how, once she had a baby, she had to organise both her life and time much better and work out how to prioritise training. Her children’s importance in her life meant they allowed her to cope with days when things perhaps did not go to plan.

‘It makes you have to organise your life and time better and think about things and priorities and as you get older you can use that age to add to the experience and you kind of work out what training is important and prioritise, that so that is definitely good and mentally I think it makes you stronger and it helps you put things in perspective because your kids are so much more important that running so you aren’t going to dwell on ‘I hope I hit those times on the track’, or if you don’t hit the times on the track you don’t have time to feel frustrated or worry about that because you have so many more important things to think about, it definitely has that effect’

_Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018_

While previous research has discussed how motherhood can have a positive impact on the athlete’s career, no current research has identified the impact it can have on organisation skills with the focus more on how it can shift perspective. The notion that motherhood leads to a potentially healthier perspective as discussed by McGannon et al. (2012) is clearly reflected in Gemma’s narrative as she felt that there was more balance and that she was able to fulfil her
needs as an athlete alongside those of being a mother. This feeling of completeness resulted in her being a better athlete. Penny also talked about the happiness she gained from motherhood and how this in turn had a psychological impact on her as an athlete.

‘It was just a massive mental boost I think, feeling happy gave me a psychological boost, I no longer stressed about training, I trained as hard as I could as much as I could but I did not stress about training before or after’ I did not worry about it…. you always have that as an extra boost but just the happiness it gave me, I have got two kids now. I am really lucky to be a mum, that gave me a massive mental boost’

_Penny, Interview 2 - 16th October 2018_

A further benefit to her training that Penny discussed was being more focused, as she needed to ensure she capitalised on both her training time and time away for competition. Wendy also discussed having to capitalise on her time to train saying it was about ‘fitting training in, now or never’, especially as she often had to rely on paid childcare.

‘I found I had to become a very organised person and I think sometimes other times you can be a bit sort of, ‘Oh I will go now, oh it’s raining, I will go later. But once you have to arrange it around your childcare you have a time and you have to go in that time because if you don’t go in that time you know you may not have the time to go, it’s just that practical side of things’

_Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017_

The idea of fitting in training and utilising time in the most effective way relates to the research of McGannon and Schinke (2013), which examined the relationship between physical activity and motherhood. They recognised how even at a recreational level women would strive to minimise the impact of their exercise on their family, utilising time effectively. Both Wendy and Penny worked hard in sessions and had to capitalise and prioritise. However, where Penny
was able to be flexible, Wendy did not have flexibility when it came to fitting in her training. With limited childcare and work commitments, Wendy had to book childcare and that was her window to train, negotiating this largely on her own, but in a similar way to Gemma, she reflects that it probably made her a better runner.

‘I think being a mother made me a better runner because, erm, I actually did become more focused on the training, Because of that whole ‘It’s now or never’ you know I have got a window to train today between 12 and two.’

Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017

Contrastingly, Penny and her husband were able to juggle her training with children and time together as a family, in some ways minimising the impact of her training on her family life and freeing her of guilt. Whether at recreational or elite level, research identifies the theme of guilt in connection to exercise and motherhood (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). However, work in this area largely concludes that this kind of guilt is dictated by society and is an inherent part of motherhood, underpinned by the fear of being negatively evaluated and seen as failing to conform to the idealized mother image (Sutherland, 2010). While the theme of guilt wasn’t a focus of Penny’s narrative it can be surmised that she perhaps took the approach of a highly flexible training plan, which did not impact on her family life or children, to mitigate for any potential guilt. This possible explanation links to the findings of McGannon et al. (2015) who examined the experience of distance runner ‘Kara’ and found that she was more at peace with going training when she felt she had fulfilled her role as a mother.

This idea of fulfilling the role of mother and subsequently minimising guilt relates to the findings of Liss et al. (2012) who suggest that minimising guilt can allow women to feel close to the idealised standards of the perfect mother. Like Penny, Wendy found creative ways to ensure she could balance training with family life.
‘On Sundays I would do a two and half hour-long run and afternoons would be exhausted. I always felt bad taking so much time at weekends training instead of family time (Jack was at school at this time) but devised the master plan of taking Jack to the cinema on Sunday afternoons then for tea in a restaurant. He loved it as it was ‘our treat’ and time together and watching a film meant I could just sit and recover. I watched a lot of appalling rubbish kids films but it was lovely family time’

Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017

Broadly the theme of guilt wasn’t prominent within the narratives of any of the athletes although when it was touched on it was discussed with a level of acceptance that guilt was part of being a mother. In recent years media portrayal of mother athletes has been wholly more positive, for example McGannon et al (2012) discussed the way the media celebrated Paula Radcliffe’s return to marathon running and how it had value and gave athletes a healthier perspective. The shift in media portrayal is likely to have contributed to a change in societal views meaning combining a career and motherhood is more normalised and accepted, removing the fear of social judgement which can create a feeling of guilt (e.g. Spowart et al, 2008). This was a unique finding within this study reflective of a shift in the culture around athletic mothers, showing that there is more acceptance and even celebration of women who manage these multiple roles (e.g., McGannon et al., 2017).

‘I think as a mum, even working mums, you will feel there is a certain element of guilt like every time I put Lola in pre-school and she cried I would probably cry when I left as well.’

Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017

While guilt wasn’t a key theme, all the athletes talked about missing their children and not liking being apart from them. This was especially evident within Rebecca and Gemma’s stories
as both had to spend significant periods of time away from their children due to the nature of their sports often requiring training and competition to take place abroad. Rebecca reflected at several points on the anxiety she felt when away from her daughter.

‘It was really horrible because you think what if something goes wrong on the flight erm it was alright because I knew I was going to see her in a week and everyone was like she is so young that she won’t ever remember being away from you for a week but the maximum she was ever away from me was one week and then she was constantly on circuit then we said look she is travelling on circuit.’

*Rebecca, Interview 3 – 18th July 2018*

However, all the athletes recognised that time away from their children was important, echoing the findings of Palmer and Leberman (2009) who found that it was important to balance the two roles as being an athlete was so integral to who they were as people. It was also key to their mental health with Yvonne stating that it was difficult to go for a run and leave her daughter, yet she knew it was beneficial, ‘I knew it was good for me to go for a run to have a bit of a mental break’. Wendy also talked about the time to train as a break that allowed her to focus on herself and revisit the selfish side of herself, ingrained from years of being an athlete, in contrast to the selfless side demanded by her role as mother (Mailey et al., 2014).

‘I enjoyed that time away actually and I felt that I could really focus on being me, because again I think when you are a mother you are suddenly always thinking about two people or three people aren’t you, not just yourself, whereas to be a good athlete you have to have the selfish streak in you I think otherwise you are just not going to commit and focus and do all the things you need to, so yeah.’

*Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017*
The emotions associated with becoming a mother and dealing with times away from their children link to the research of Bean and Wimbs (2021) who focused on women who were combining motherhood with marathon training. Their research recognised that there was always something of a conflict; fulfil the needs of the athlete and thereby threaten that of the mother or fulfil the mother needs and threaten their athlete identity. All the athletes in the current study were able to rationalise these emotions, with a key theme being the recognition that being an athlete gave them more time with their family than if they had a regular career. This could potentially be a factor that mitigated any guilt they felt about competing. This is a theme particularly evident in Penny’s story and was one of her motivations to continue her career in elite sport.

‘That was partly why I continued being an athlete, because I was able to have quality time, in fact I found I was able to have more quality time as a family unit compared to if I had another job …I still enjoy competing but most of all I am impressed we can have such quality time as a family’

Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018

Whereas Penny talks about having more quality time with her family, and Wendy was creative with her recovery time, Yvonne fitted her daughter into her training day from a young age. The experiences of the three runners illustrate how sport type can ease managing athletic demands with motherhood, for example, Yvonne’s daughter accompanied her while she trained, allowing for training as well as quality time with her daughter.

‘I was able to work Lola into my running life very easily and she was quite a good baby so yeah she was easily happy sat in the running pushchair and looking at the scenery and because we live in such a beautiful place there was often dog spotting going on or
Evident within each of the narratives was their joy in combining motherhood with a career, negotiating this successfully and in a positive way, yet recognising that there were several facilitating factors.

6.5 Managing motherhood and sport successfully – influencing factors

6.5.1 Type of sport

While there exists research looking at the impact of type of sport during pregnancy, for example, contact sport athletes stop training much earlier due to safety reasons (Tekavc et al., 2020), currently there is limited research examining the impact of type of sport on the return to sport post-partum, with minimal research looking at the impact of type of sport when athletes return to training and competition (Knights et al., 2016). While some of the implication of type of sport have been touched on there remain several other considerations that became evident throughout the narratives of the athletes. Type of sport did have a significant bearing on their return to sport and how they approached both training and competition after they became mothers. For example, both Penny and Yvonne mentioned how being runners made it relatively easy to combine their careers with motherhood due to the flexible nature of their sport, in contrast to the winter sports athletes. Penny also linked this to running being an individual sport rather than a team sport.

‘If you are in a team you have got to go to the team practice and you have got to do the competitions say if you are a hockey player or a football player you have got to go to team training which affects things in so many ways, so of course you have to live in that location too where the team trains.’
In contrast to the distance runners in the study both Rebecca and Gemma had different experiences due to type of sport even though both participated in individual sports. Both were involved in sports that required travel to get to training locations, a specialist setting, and both often required other people around them while they trained. These factors often resulted in their having to spend prolonged periods of time away from home. Both athletes recognised that this was one of the biggest challenges for them as they tried to combine motherhood with their career, and perhaps suggests why there is a lack of knowledge about how to support winter sports athletes as they transition back to sport, it being still less commonplace than in other sports. These challenges link to the findings of Culvin and Bowes (2021) who concluded that there was an incompatibility between motherhood and professional women’s football largely down to the lack of support and knowledge about how to support athletes. The lack of maternity policy within women’s professional football has seen as little as two per cent of players feel able to combine a career with motherhood. The lack of policy and support resonates with Rebecca’s experience and illustrates that, while not linked to the type of sport, the highly gendered culture within some sports can problematise combining motherhood with a career. One example of this, described by Rebecca, resulted in significant logistical challenges. A policy implemented by her sports organisation meant that, because they were travelling as a family, they weren’t allowed to stay with the team at the team hotel.

‘It was super, super hard logistically with this whole team thing, really awful, we weren’t allowed to travel with the team on flights or stay in the same hotels. We would travel with our parents, so her grandparents would always come out with us at races and whilst we were trackside she would either come up there and watch or just play on the side in the snow or be at home if it was really bitter but generally she would always be trackside on race, so that is how we basically did it.’
This example illustrates just one of the challenges faced by Rebecca and emphasises how a lack of guidance by the organisation or any policy to support a returning athlete resulted in challenging, upsetting situations. Such experiences only reinforced any distrust that Rebecca felt towards those involved in her sport. This type of distrust was also seen by the professional footballers in Culvin and Bowes’ study (2021), who concluded that players did not trust their clubs to support them contractually in relation to family. Furthermore, this example also highlights how some of these issues can be magnified when a sport requires an athlete to travel extensively abroad for both training and competition.

Conversely, while Penny still had to travel for competition, she recognised how the flexibility associated with training as a runner allowed her to combine both motherhood and her career as an athlete. Furthermore, the ability to be flexible and include her children in her training or adapt her training to fit around their needs kept her motivated to continue.

“One of the motivators for me is because I am a runner there are so many ways I can still be the mum I want to be and that is my main priority and that’s why I thought I would have retired because I thought it’s not going to enable me to do that but I have actually found it the opposite…… I feel extremely fortunate because also running is easier to involve your family in possibly rather than some sports because you can have your kid on your bike with you when you are running whereas you can’t do that with other things”

Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018

This perhaps explains why Penny was able to maintain such a long career even after the birth of her second child as her sport allowed her to feel both maternal and career success and not feel conflict between these two roles. These findings contrast with those of previous research
which has suggested that in attempting to fulfil one role women can feel that they compromise the other (e.g., Darroch & Hillsbury, 2017). These findings suggest that these athletes didn’t feel any compromise in terms of being successful in the mother and athlete role, something that could be attributed to the extensive support networks around them.

A final consideration when looking at sport type was the associated risks of the sports at which each athlete participated. Both Gemma and Rebecca participated in what would be termed high-risk or moderate-risk sports (Zuckerman, 1983) meaning they had an acute danger associated with accidents and fatal injury. When Gemma returned to sport, she openly said she asked herself if she thought and competed differently, feeling that she was able to switch off being a mother and focus on the task thereby not permitting it to impact her performance, although she reflected that at times she felt perhaps she should have thought differently about things and been more cautious. Like Gemma, Rebecca also returned to sport feeling confident and wasn’t worried about the risk associated with her sport until there was a fatal accident in a related sport. She describes how the death of a sliding sport athlete saw her become a media target and she received negative press for being a mother who still wanted to compete in such a high-risk sport. She discussed how this impacted her, making her feel guilty (for potentially putting herself at risk) and question herself, something she had not previously experienced. This treatment by the media reinforces cultural norms, that a mother’s role is to care for her baby and, as McGannon et al. (2012) concluded, the media affects athletic identity and influences the public view of the athlete. These findings resonate with those of Spowart et al. (2008) whose research with recreational snowboarders concluded they only questioned their participation because of the perception of others who deemed their sport risky and, in turn, hedonistic and irresponsible. This contrasts with research focused on runners which makes no mention of risk but rather discuss it being deemed acceptable to continue to run in pregnancy. The media response to Rebecca made her question herself (like the snowboarders in Spowart
et al.’s 2008 study) yet she made the decision to continue her career in sport. This subsequently presented further challenges for Rebecca to overcome, magnifying the difficult of negotiating two potentially conflicting identities (Krane et al., 2014).

While research still suggests that more women wait to retire to start a family (e.g., Tekavc et al., 2020) the current study suggests that type of sport need not be a barrier to combining motherhood with an elite sports career. Motherhood does present athletes with additional challenges and, as Gemma highlighted several times, much of this was connected to travel. An interesting reflection was that this logistical challenge, while manageable with one child would potentially be problematic if she had a second child.

‘I would quite like another kid fairly soonish, two on the road might be slightly impossible’

Gemma, Interview 2 - 21st August 2017

For both Rebecca and Gemma, the births of their second children did also mark the point at which they retired, highlighting how type of sport may have a bearing on the decision to have a second child. This area would benefit from further research to understand the demands of a growing family and the compatibility with an athletic career.

6.5.1 Support

Instrumental to the balancing act of motherhood and sport was the social support network around the athletes. The importance of social support at all stages of the athlete journey has been extensively discussed, however, this support becomes even more valuable during times of heightened stress or challenge (DeFreeze & Smith, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2014). Like the athletes in Darroch and Hillsburg’s (2014) study, the support structure around the athletes in this study was predominantly made up of their spouse and other family members as is typical at the mastery stage of the athlete journey (Wylleman, 2019). Furthermore, it is important to
recognise that four of the five athletes had partners who had some involvement in sport. Both Rebecca and Yvonne had partners who were also athletes, while Gemma’s husband worked in an official support role for her sport and Penny’s husband coached her.

‘Some people might say how can you have your husband as your coach but I think that was one thing that helps with being a mum, I mean it is fun working towards goals together and it’s fun and easier to involve the kids in the training ... you are not maybe asking someone else’s permission if that was suitable so I suppose that helps and also it means we can be more flexible and oh let’s do the run down the beach today or let’s go because my son will go on the bike while I am running and we can be spontaneous and make the training fit into our lifestyle ... I think if your husband is coaching you it just makes it easier to make those spontaneous decisions and making sure you have quality family time’

Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018

Having her husband as her coach afforded Penny significant flexibility when it came to her training as they were able to adapt sessions and juggle family life around her training. She often mentioned that his awareness of the demands of the children made this even easier. All the athletes recognised how support was essential to being able to return to sport and Rebecca’s reflections on this resonate with those of Gemma who also relied heavily on family support:

‘We couldn’t have done it without family and we kind of mixed it so Dave’s parents would come out because they were already retired and my parents would come out in between their work and everything like that, so it worked really well so we were always leaving her with family and then if we went to train they would come up so they were always there’

Rebecca, Interview 3 – 18th July 2018
Rebecca and Gemma had very similar experiences in terms of support as both competed in sports where they had to travel abroad to train and compete. This presented unique logistical challenges, as childcare required their family to travel with them:

‘When we went out on snow, Rob was looking after her from the first till about mid-November and then we got his dad out for a bit, so dad came out for a bit and then the next day my mum came out for a bit, so we had help straight away basically, so we had help which we needed. It felt like when there was three of us there it felt yeah this kinda works, when there was just two it was like oh my god this is hard.’

Gemma, Interview 2 - 21st August 2017

Both athletes expressed how they felt at ease because they had their parents supporting them and they did not worry about their children when they were with their parents. This has links to the findings of Brown et al.’s (2018) study which concluded that whoever is was providing the support was principal to the quality of the experience as, should the athlete feel genuinely cared for and understood, then the experience tended to be far more positive, as illustrated Rebecca’s and Gemma’s cases.

Interestingly, the need for family and parental support was necessary only for those athletes required to spend extensive time away from their children. The runners in the study were able to rely on their partner or others as often they only needed a few hours of childcare to fit in training and this did not require extensive travel unless for competition. Yvonne talked about this when discussing how she managed to fit in training

‘I think I am quite lucky in that I have got Joe at home, so he works from home, so his day is really flexible and because running is part of our income and at the time it was my job he was really supportive of that so he knew, he gave me the morning and he would have Lola every morning so I could go and do my training’

Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017
Of further benefit to Yvonne was her husband being an athlete who could understand why she made the decision to compete in one final Olympics before choosing to try for a baby. This understanding was also seen in Penny’s relationship with her husband, who was also her coach: he knew her world and the demands it made on her. Their relationship exemplifies the findings of Jowett and Meek (2000) who recognised how the coach/athlete dyad between married couples facilitates all aspects of the coaching relationship, salient being the open communication and understanding of all relevant issues. As Penny went onto explain, this understanding allowed for flexibility in how they worked.

‘It really helps that my husband is my coach because it means that he understands what is going on with the kids, you are not on the phone trying to explain things. We might end up down the track three hours later than originally planned but we still get there and get the work done and my husband is supportive and that’s very much key to how I can work around the children’

_Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018_

The support the athletes received from different sources was largely tangible in nature allowing them time to train and compete, and they all acknowledge that without that support they wouldn’t have continued, as Penny stated, ‘I wouldn’t have carried on without his support’. In contrast Wendy had very little support from family during her career in particular her husband as he was in the army and often away for long periods of time, meaning she had very limited spousal support when it came to supporting her post-partum: ‘One of the problems I had was if John was away I did not have childcare’. Moreover, Wendy’s return to sport was more challenging than the other athletes’ due to a very difficult labour, with the emotional impact still resonating. Throughout our dialogue it became apparent that, where she did not have family to support her or recognise the struggle she was having post-partum, it was her midwife and later her coach who provided the most impactful support. Wendy had a very close
relationship with her coach (Ray) and his wife who provided her extensive support as she returned to training by looking after her while she did so. The success of this links to the work of Brown et al. (2019) who concluded that when support was provided by someone with genuine care for the athlete it was most effective. Wendy often talked about the significance of the support from Ray and recognised how she would have been unable to return had he not helped.

‘(Ray) used to come over, he used to come over twice a week and he would just push Luke round in a pram and I would run, just run round this pitch, there was a sports field and I would run round the sports field, this was about 6 months after I had Luke I would run round, I would do a couple of laps of the sports field and strides and he did that for a whole year and half. Well, for the first year he came twice a week and then he came once a week and he would just push Luke round in the pram and I would do my training and it just got me back into running and the fact that I did not need to worry about the baby, I did not have to find someone to look after him, I did not have to go when John finished work, I could actually get back into running and erm within a year I was running and coming back, within 18 months I got my first Great Britain vest’

Wendy, Interview 2 - 26th September 2017

Other support received by the athletes has been touched on throughout this chapter, but the experience of Rebecca illustrates how a lack of organisational support can overshadow the athlete’s experience and present unnecessary barriers and challenges. Organisational support was discussed most frequently by the winter sports athletes in the study, but these experiences were very different for the two athletes. While Gemma had a much more positive return to sport it is important to note that when she announced her pregnancy her coach openly said he did not know where to start and had to go and seek advice to ensure he provided the right
information. This suggests that the knowledge within winter sports had not progressed, as the experiences of these two athletes was almost 10 years apart and, while Gemma had people willing to support her, there was still a lack of knowledge. It is important to recognise how such willingness may demonstrate a change in the winter sports culture, with more acceptance that women within these sports may want to combine motherhood with sport. This perception of a lack of knowledge is echoed in the recent findings of Darroch et al. (2019) who reported insignificant support from governing bodies and the failure to develop an adequate maternity policy for athletes. The research suggests that coaches and governing bodies have significant work to do to ensure that athlete mothers have the right information about training and returning to competition as well as adequate support to be able to take time out to start a family, without it having an impact on their financial support and on-going career.

6.5.3 Balancing identity

Through selection the athletes in this study made a successful return to sport after their first child, although all acknowledged that motherhood had a bearing on their life as an athlete. The decision to combine a career in sport with motherhood naturally presents challenges to gender ideology and in turn societally dictated cultural norms that see a woman’s role as having and caring for children and that to have a family would mark the end of their career (Romaine et al., 2016).

All the athletes in this study acknowledge how the social support they received from either their spouse, family or coach proved instrumental in facilitating their return to training and competition, while also letting them be the mothers they wanted to be. The melding of these two identities was often discussed in the narratives of the athletes and, while negotiated in different ways, was managed to allow the balancing of two powerful roles. This supports the earlier work of Palmer and Leberman (2009) who discussed how it was essential for athletes to maintain their athletic self by working on the management of multiple identities to maintain
their overall sense of self. The distinction between these two identities was exemplified in Gemma’s story as she quite often referred to having an ‘athlete brain’ and a ‘mummy brain’ and how she learnt to switch between the two. She talked several times about how, when she was training or competing, her brain thoroughly locked into athlete mode, that being all its focus. Like the findings of Kavoura et al. (2015) this suggests that athletes find ways to manage dual identities and negotiate the roles of mother and athlete. Clearly, while athletes did manage their multiple identities, the mother identity took priority, becoming their strongest identity and, while they felt able to fulfil both roles they were happy in continuing to compete.

All five athletes had a very strong athlete identity, specifically they were tightly attached to their identity as elite athlete. In a subtle contrast, while Wendy also had a strong athlete identity, her identity was more nuanced and it was her identity as a runner (whether recreational or elite) that was most significant during her pregnancy and during the post-partum period. In the post-partum period, it was not a desire to get back to elite competition and to reclaim her elite athlete identity but a craving to run and be a runner again. Only once back to running did she start to cope better with motherhood. The reclamation of identity being more complex than just wanting to be an athlete resonates with the runners in Bean and Wimbs’ (2021) study who also prioritised and valued their runner identity, as running allowed them to be themselves. Likewise, returning to running allowed Wendy to find herself.

The melding of the mother and athlete identity requires planning and at points presents challenges, however, findings suggest balancing these two roles can have several positive outcomes (Bean & Wimbs. 2021; MGannon et al., 2012). The desire to strive for both career and maternal success ultimately had many positive results for the athletes, and all looked back on this decision assuredly, please that they made that decision even if it had been challenging at times.
‘That is one of the things I am proudest of, that we did it. You see quite a lot of people, you know, promoting the fact that they are parents but unless they have gone through a really hard-core competitive circuit like we did...! It is bloody hard ’cause, you know, some people go away and then come back for their competitions but they are mainly UK based, like Gemma is doing now. It is flipping hard, but it is cool as well and it becomes quite easy, but when they are ill and you have to go off and compete it is really tricky, or if they are poorly in another country, that is always interesting but you basically become little doctors anyway and it works and it can work really nicely. It is nice that they are with you, they are almost with you more than if you were working a normal job because you have to have them with you so it is really cool. She is next-door. If you were to speak to her she would say can we go away on the circuit please. She loved it.’

Rebecca, Interview 4 – 31st July 2018

Finally, it seems likely that there is an additional benefit to the athlete in the management of the two identities of mother and athlete. The transition literature related to retirement and athlete identity frequently concludes how development of a new focus outside of sport and a new identity can facilitate a more positive transition out of sport and a gradual diminishment of athlete identity (Wojciechowski, 2018). Motherhood saw the athletes embrace a new identity and naturally their athlete identity was less prominent, in fact it became secondary to their identity as a mother. While this benefit was perhaps seen later in their retirement from sport, it also seems that it made disappointment easier to manage. Yvonne talked about this throughout her story and reflected how when things weren’t going well she could cope better as she had another identity.
‘I had a new identity as well so it wasn’t just about Yvonne the runner, I was now a mum so I think it softened the blow a bit and you are more easily distracted and you have a different focus...so if it did not go right it was annoying and frustrating ’cause you put all that effort into it, all the training but it wasn’t the end of the world whereas previously it was sometimes quite devastating and frustrating so I definitely feel like I had a different mind-set, not necessarily one that was ideal for performing well (laughter)’

Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017

Beneficially, the athlete combines their career with motherhood, providing a shift in perspective. This shift, apparent in the narratives of all of the athletes reflects previous findings of McGannon et al. (2017). Their case study involving Kim Clijsters suggested that motherhood saw her re-frame her position in sport, reducing the pressure and allowing her greater confidence.

6.6 Conclusion

Throughout the narratives of all five athletes the transition to motherhood received the most attention within each interview, reflecting the significance of this event in each of their lives. All the athletes made the decision to start a family during their careers, in contrast to more common narratives that see women combine retirement with motherhood (Tekavc et al., 2015). Their desire to return to sport meant that they all maintained some level of training throughout their pregnancy and their pregnancy was carefully planned (Darroch et al., 2019). For all the athletes this overshadowed career success and resulted in a shift in their priorities where their children became the focus. This shift also gave all the women a new perspective on their athletic career and perhaps explains why they were able to negotiate potentially disruptive events positively later in their career (McGannon et al., 2017). One key difference between
the experiences of the winter sports athletes and runners was in relation to post-natal support and how to best return to sport. This echoed the broader findings of Deering et al. (2020) who noted that there needed to be better information for pregnant and returning athletes. The three retired athletes all recognised how, in retirement, having the additional identity as a mother made this transition out of sport easier as a new focus was already in place. Furthermore, retirement for all of them coincided with a desire to have another child (Lally, 1997). Notably, this finding suggests female athletes perceive having one child as manageable but having a second could be more difficult.
Chapter 7 – Being ready to say goodbye

‘I have been travelling around all winter standing around the top of freezing cold mountains since I was 16 and I would like to be warm for a while.’

Gemma, Interview 3 - 1st December 2017

7.1 Introduction

Retirement from sport remains the most researched area within the transition literature, largely due to the significant psychological impact it typically has on athletes (Wylleman, 2019). A career in sport requires athletes to invest and attach tightly to their sport underpinning the development of their athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). While a strong athletic identity is important, in cases where athletes have developed solely an athletic or unidimensional identity, retirement can be particularly problematic (Kuettel et al., 2016). While the athlete journey is often marked by multiple transitional events that can challenge an athlete’s identity, it is only retirement that marks a decisive endpoint to a career in sport; retirement presents several challenges which may result in negative psychological responses such as depression and anxiety (Giannone et al., 2017). Furthermore, retirement from sport tends to occur early in life in contrast to more conventional careers (Hattersley et al., 2019). This means retirement not only impacts the athlete’s life within sport but can see them having to adjust to social and vocational changes, for example, the pursuit of a new career and new social groups (Wylleman, 2019). These adjustments in several areas of the athlete’s life can lead to much uncertainty about life after sport. This transition out of sport also sees the diminishment of the athlete’s athletic identity, which can lead to feelings of isolation ultimately effecting feelings of loneliness (Wylleman, 2019). Throughout this chapter, the focus of analysis shifts to the latter stages of each athlete’s career, including their plans for retirement, retirement and life after sport. At the time of interview Rebecca, Wendy and Yvonne were all retired. Gemma was
planning her retirement and through the course of the interviews competed in her final competition and announced her retirement. Penny was the only athlete without immediate plans to retire. The athletes’ stories surrounding their retirement or plans for retirement elicited four key themes: making the decision to retire; changes to identity; coping with retirement; and life after sport.

7.2 Making the decision to retire

The decision to retire may stem from myriad reasons and while for some this is carefully planned for others it can be a sudden shock event that forces retirement, such as a career ending injury (Park et al., 2013). Within Chapter Two, Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1998) Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transitions was introduced (figure 2.1) which identifies four key causes of career termination: age; deselection; injury; and free choice. They suggest that these causes, alongside a range of other factors such as perceptions of control, self-identity and coping resources, can impact on the quality of the transition out of sport. While dated, this model still informs researchers’ understanding of how to support healthy career transition, for example, it illustrates the need for athletes to have the relevant resources, coping skills as well as an alternative identity in place to facilitate a successful retirement (Choi & Kim, 2021). The model also suggests control and planning play a fundamental role in successful retirement. Through the stories of the retired athletes within this study it was evident that four were ready to retire from elite sport, however, their reasons were different. These reasons saw the identification of three sub-themes within the data related to being ready to retire: voluntary and forced retirement; performance decline and injury; and changing priorities

7.2.1 – Voluntary or Forced retirement

Many of the causes and implications of retirement from sport identified by Taylor and Ogilvie (1998) emphasise the importance of voluntary retirement from sport. The importance of
voluntariness in connection to retirement has frequently been cited within the retirement literature, for example, Torregrosa et al. (2015) concluded that voluntary retirement was a significant factor within their study exploring positive retirement experiences of elite swimmers. Yvonne and Wendy both made a voluntary decision to retire from sport although it is important to recognise that this was triggered by different factors. For example, Wendy was ready to have a second baby and, while she was still performing well, having a baby was of higher priority than continuing with her running career. Voluntary retirement allows the athlete to be in control of their retirement and to have a clear end-point in mind when they know they will be competing for the final time. The distinctive nature of the voluntary step into retirement was epitomised by Yvonne when she talked about the moment she moved from professional athlete into retirement.

‘I was choked I was holding back the tears and I couldn’t bear if you had spoken to me I would have just burst into tears. It was very very emotional and actually makes me feel quite emotional when I recount it as well, so it was really emotional but almost a relief as well so when I crossed the finish line it was like I was crossing over into retirement, almost crossing the finish line at the marathon is like I had moved from professional athlete and into retirement in that one race.’

Yvonne, Interview 3 - 9th January 2018

The emotion displayed by Yvonne when she evoked her final race was apparent even six years later, being visibly upset as she recollected her emotions. Listening to Yvonne was an emotional experience for me as a researcher as I could really feel the impact this experience had on her. This allowed me to gain some emotional understanding of how her retirement resonated. Yvonne’s experience emphasised how, even when retirement is voluntary, it can still be challenging. Yvonne’s final race was a highly emotional single event, where she felt
sadness that it was her final race, however, this sadness was balanced with feelings of relief to be saying goodbye to her life as an athlete. This concept of relief is fundamental to Cummings et al.’s (1960) Disengagement Theory which suggests that withdrawal at the right time can be a positive experience for the athlete as they recognise and accept it is part of a natural process. The importance of acceptance is one that underpinned Yvonne’s reflections on her retirement. She accepted that ‘I would never be as fit again, I knew I would never run a PB again, but I was actually really excited about the next stage in life’. Yvonne’s change in perception of her physical ability allowed her to approach retirement in a very positive way. These findings present a contrast to those of Stephan et al. (2003) who discussed how this shift in the athlete’s perceived physical condition could have a negative impact on their transition in terms of their physical self-worth. Yvonne welcomed the changes to her physical self as she was aware her body couldn’t continue to maintain the training she had been doing.

‘I am holding my body together and it’s becoming hard and taking more time sometimes mentally rather than physically like the training so you have to question yourself at some point as to why you carry on…. I was running slower and slower and seeing so many physios to try and correct my back and have so many treatments and driving all around the country trying to see the best people in the country it just became too much and I worried about the impact on my long-term health as well in terms of trying to keep my body together to try and train 100 miles a week’

Yvonne, Interview 3 - 9th January 2018

Yvonne had reached a stage where training and competition had become a negative stress rather than a positive in her life and she was both physically and mentally ready to retire. This shift resulted in retirement being a freeing experience and she described that ‘letting the running go was a good thing’. Yvonne’s narrative surrounding her decision to retire shares some
similarities with Wendy’s. Wendy also had a clear point when she had made the decision to retire – and like Yvonne this was largely determined by her decision to have another baby. However, unlike Yvonne, while she was ready to retire an injury precipitated this a little earlier than she anticipated.

’I think I just kind of admitted to myself I might feel fantastic but my foot is getting worse and worse and worse, but I can’t drop out so I was really I was really quite devastated I think but distracted by the fact that I was moving to Belgium and you know had already made the decision that I was effectively going to retire from elite athletics because I was going to have another baby and I was 37 and you know that’s fine, so in some ways I suppose in once sense I was devastated because I knew I was in really good form but in the other sense I had already made the decision that I was gonna you know retire from elite running after that’

Wendy, Interview 3 - 13th November 2017

Wendy’s experience supports both theory and research (e.g., Dowd, 1975; Lally, 1997) that suggest that a successful transition can be achieved when the athlete has already rearranged or reordered their live. The shift in focus to having another baby helped Wendy balance her upset at her injury and retiring a little earlier than she had hoped. Focus shift threads through the narratives of all the athletes, predominantly linked to their desire to extend their family and fully embrace their mother identity.

Wanting to extend her family and feeling ready to retire was also a notable theme within Gemma’s story. Gemma was still competing during the interview process but during this period she started to talk more about her possible retirement plan and ultimately made the decision to retire.
‘I contemplated it after the last Olympics, but I was not quite ready. I was going to carry on. Now it is more of a gradual thing in the back of my mind, and I have talked to a few people, and it has been more of a firm decision. For example, the competition I was at last week, the other day I was kind of thinking yeah this feels right, that this is the last time I am doing this competition, and yeah it just feels like the right time.’

Gemma, Interview 3 - 1st December 2017

Like Yvonne, Gemma talked a lot about retirement ‘feeling right’ and had established when would be the right time to retire. During the interview process Gemma built up to and competed in her final international competition. She decided in the months leading up to this event that this would be the right time to retire. Gemma talked a lot about how she wanted to really enjoy the experience and that her priority in that final event was to take everything she could from it.

In contrast to the voluntary retirement narratives of the other athletes, Rebecca had a very different experience. Rebecca felt forced to retire when she decided to take time out to have a second baby. Within Chapter Six the challenges Rebecca faced when she took time out to have her first child were discussed at length and sadly the environment and her experience did not improve. From the moment she announced her second pregnancy she faced another drop in her funding making her pregnancy a stressful and challenging time. Initially she was very clear that she wasn’t ready (or wanting) to retire, however, she was told that should she remain in the performance programme her funding would drop to D level funding, which she described as being ‘barely enough to survive on’. Whereas if she made the decision to retire, she would be entitled to three more months of A level funding (full funding as a professional athlete), which was financially better than a whole year on D level funding (minimal funding level for lower-level athletes). Rebecca therefore felt forced into retirement for both financial security and her physical wellbeing. The negative experience of returning to competition just eight weeks after the birth of her first child still resonated with Rebecca and was an experience she
couldn’t repeat. This illustrates how there had been negligible improvement within her sport between her pregnancies, her treatment both times being not dissimilar. The negative experiences Rebecca had during her career often overshadowed many of her positive memories. Her account of this period illustrates how again there existed distrust; Rebecca felt unable to challenge the organisation and felt forced out of her sport.

‘They would say we offered you a whole package. What they would say was Rebecca was not forced out because she had access to world leading coaches, world leading physios, world leading medicine, world leading track support and that is how they do it. I think I was forced out yea, but they still offered do you know what I mean? So not forced but no one can survive on that maybe a little junior can because that is all they have got and they would get their accommodation paid for, but someone in their thirties or forties could never do that. So they were really nervous, they still are a little bit nervous I think because I haven’t officially retired, although they pretty much know I have, I just said if I retire from the programme then I don’t have to go back, but I then set up this business and I said to myself if it works and I do ok from it financially then I will continue with this rather than continue competing, so at the moment it is doing ok, so that is where I am at with it.’

Rebecca, Interview 4 – 31st July 2018

While Rebecca felt she had no choice but to retire, she also viewed this as her taking back control of her life and leaving an environment she perceived as toxic but that she had been part of for years. Toxic cultures such as this can have significant bearing on an athlete’s wellbeing, seeing them feel controlled by the men who hold positions of high social value (e.g., coach or manager) (Breger et al., 2019). The lack of control felt at this stage of her career is an underpinning theme in her whole career narrative, and she was the only athlete who talked about poor treatment, bullying, and being told what to do. Essentially, she felt controlled by
her governing body - an environment which saw men in positions of power and decision making (e.g. performance director and coach), further reinforcing the gendered nature of sport. The lack of autonomy felt during her career was taken back in her retirement as, while in some ways she felt retirement was forced, it did give her back her agency. Rebecca’s experience illustrates how, even when retirement is forced, if it is ultimately beneficial to the athlete the retirement experience can be positive, contrasting previous research that has predominately focused on the positive correlation between voluntary and positive retirement (e.g., Torregrosa et al., 2015). While Rebecca’s journey through sport was characterised by challenges, barriers, and financial pressures, she was still very sad to leave the sport she loved.

‘I was on the start line at … crying, thinking this could be my last ever run. Oh, my goodness it was really quite emotional. I had to get Jim’s hankie he had no idea what was going on, but I was like oh god, I don’t cry I just kind of, I remember thinking oh my god, this could be my last ever run’

Rebecca, Interview 4 – 31st July 2018

Rebecca’s reflections on her final competition are similar to Yvonne’s, with both athletes remembering the heightened emotion. These two examples illustrate how even when the experiences of two athletes have been different for their whole career, and they have a different drive to retire (voluntary or forced), this event still carries the same emotion. The narratives of the athletes highlight how this final transition, whether voluntary or forced, is complex, with many other factors contributing to what ultimately results in an athlete’s retirement from their sport. One resounding factor in the narratives of all the retired athletes was decline in performance and injury.
7.2.2 Performance decline and injury

Performance decline has been frequently cited as key to in an athlete’s decision to retire (e.g., Lingam-Willgoss, 2021; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1996). All the athletes in the study had relatively long careers but all recognised that there was a point when they were no longer able to be competitive or achieve career success. This was something underpinning Gemma’s narrative where she related her plans to retire, further illustrating how voluntary retirement is often dictated by other factors such as current success.

‘I think there are lots of different factors. My results aren’t that great at the moment, compared to a few years ago. It’s not like I am winning world cups or getting podiums all the time or anything like that I am sort of just in there’

Gemma, Interview 3 - 1st December 2017

Gemma reflected on this decline in a positive manner, as she felt grateful; she had managed to continue to compete for so many years and discussed how many athletes within her sport had to retire much younger due to career-ending injuries. The significance of injury within the retirement narratives of the athletes is not unusual: as Park et al. (2013) discuss, it is one of the most common causes of career termination. However, while career-ending injuries can carry with them significant adjustment issues (Walker & Heaney, 2013), when retirement is already nearing or planned it seems these adjustment issues such as isolation and depression are negated.

Performance decline and injury are difficult to separate in the context of this study as, due to the length of the athletes’ careers, they often occurred in tandem due to natural age-related performance decline. Yvonne’s story exemplifies the relationship between performance decline and injury and how in its chronic form it can become unmanageable. Yvonne had managed to remain at the highest level for many years but talked about how hard her sport had
been on her body and how there comes a point when you cannot continue. Her body was starting to let her down and she had reached a point when she was finding training a burden on her both psychologically and physically. This physical decline culminated in a more serious chronic back and leg problem, which ultimately led to a decline in her ongoing performance and her decision to retire.

Stephan et al. (2003) discussed the challenge that some athletes faced in retirement, related to the shift in their perceived physical condition. This has links to the injury-based research of Scolnik et al. (2018), who also focused on the impact of inactivity on physical identity, which is something that can also be applied to the experience of the retired athlete. Contrary to these findings no athletes in the current study expressed concerns over physical identity and, in most cases, they had gradually shifted their perception of their own body, becoming accepting of this. For example, Yvonne acknowledged, ‘I know I would never be as fit again.’ She could feel the tangible decline in her body’s physical ability, which explains why she managed the change in her physical self-perception relatively smoothly. The impact that running had on her body suggests that the type of sport may play a part in the decision to retire, as some sports are harder on the body or carry a higher chance of injury later in the athlete’s career. However, it is important to recognise that Yvonne’s decision to retire was not just dictated by long-term injury and the resultant performance decline she experienced but was also influenced by other factors within her life.

Rebecca suffered some smaller injuries during her career but notably was left with chronic issues. At the point she retired she was having persistent problems with her neck which left her in almost constant pain. She also decided to try and get her neck treated at the same time as trying for a second child. It was the need for specialist healthcare (which was part of her A level funding) which also dictated her decision to retire as having this level for an additional three months was essential. Rebecca’s experiences show how athletes can have very different
experiences of injury in sport and while her injury did not cause her retirement, the need for treatment and funding did. These findings illustrate how the complexities within different sports impact the experiences of athletes, highlighting how more work must be undertaken within less mainstream sports cultures if athletes from these sports are to be supported better.

Wendy also had several injuries during her career and, ultimately, while she had made the decision to retire, the time of retirement was precipitated by the severity of injury when she ruptured her plantar fasciitis at the European Championships. Wendy was 37 years old when she retired from sport, having had a history of several quite serious injuries during her career. Her final serious injury, while not career ending, triggered her retirement, as she had reached the point in her career when she might reasonably be considering the options. She had already made plans for the next stage in her life (having a second child) which meant this injury did not carry any significant emotional or psychological impact.

7.2.3 Changing Priorities

The ongoing injury problems that Yvonne suffered were without doubt key cause of her retirement, however, other factors also had significant bearing. When viewed in the context of Wylleman’s (2019) HAC model, (introduced in Chapter Two), she recognised how both psychosocial and financial factors also had a bearing on her decision to retire from sport. As a mother she was aware that her daughter needed stability as she started school, that her husband was turning down potential work to support her and that she had reached a point where she had to consider the needs of her whole family. Yvonne had an acceptance that being an elite athlete was ‘a lifestyle’ that consumed the whole family, and it was time to leave that life behind. She also had a desire to have more children and was open about not knowing if that would be manageable with a career in sport.
The potential challenge of two children was also a consideration for Gemma who was also aware that her priorities were changing and was realistic about the challenges that having two children might bring in terms of maintaining her career, largely related to the feasibility of travel. This point also highlights how type of sport bears on the decisions athletes make. While Gemma made her decision to retire based on several reasons, it is important to consider whether she would have continued if she was involved in a sport with less logistical challenge. Her experience presents a contrast to Penny’s who, as a runner, was able to negotiate motherhood with two children. However, Gemma’s experience highlights how for some female athletes having one child might be deemed manageable but two could be problematic and present too much of a challenge. There was also the need to consider the needs of her daughter as she got older and reached school age. The balancing of priorities and the desire to have another baby was an influencing factor in the retirement decision of all the athletes in this study, demonstrating that there can still be tensions for women who want to extend their family. Even Penny who had not yet retired only continued because she was able to balance priorities. This finding presents an interesting area for future research and may go some way to suggest why winter sports athletes are less likely to maintain a career alongside parenthood, with Rebecca and Gemma being two of a very small pool of winter sports athletes who have combined an athletic career with motherhood. This also explains why the knowledge-based support was lacking for both athletes even though their experiences were 10 years apart.

The desire to have more children reinforced the athletes’ feelings of being ready to step away from sport, in part due to their awareness of the challenges of combining a career with motherhood. Within Chapter Six, Wendy’s experiences of a very difficult first labour and post-partum period were discussed and the longer-term impact was evident. Her experiences meant she was realistic about the challenges of having another baby and returning to sport. When she made the decision to have another baby, she accepted it would mean she would retire due to
logistics, awareness of the physical impact and her age. In contrast to Yvonne and Gemma, Wendy remembers being in very good shape and performing well but made the decision that having another baby was her priority: ‘I decided that having a baby at that point was emotionally more important to me than carrying on running.’. This further illustrates the choices women have to make when it comes to a career and family. Wendy had accepted that her career must take second place, as extending her family would signal the end of her elite career. This decision connected to her second pregnancy supports findings by Ronkainen et al. (2016) who discussed how female athletes often accept that pregnancy is the end of their career. Although it is important to recognise that the athletes within this study all successfully balanced motherhood with a career, they accepted that a second child could be problematic. Penny was the only athlete to continue to compete after having her second child, although she reiterated how her decision to compete was based on her still being able to be the mother she wanted to be and that she still viewed her career as secondary to her role as a mother. The secondary role of athlete also gives clarity to how the mother identity is the only one that might be stronger than the athletic one. Penny’s thoughts on this mirror those within Tekavc et al.’s (2020) research which suggests that social culture still dictates what behaviours are appropriate for mothers. Had Penny not been able to be the mother she wanted to be she would have retired. However, her experience and success provide a clear example of how an athlete can balance these mixed demands. In stark contrast are the athletes in Ekengren et al.’s (2019) study who felt that maintaining their career put too much strain on their family life and decided to retire. Penny was able to balance her two identities as athlete and mother in a way that allowed her to be successful in both domains. However, it is important to recognise how all five athletes were successful in terms of balancing multiple identities, and in doing so had a more balanced identity as they entered retirement.
7.3 The loss of athletic identity

The potential impact of retirement on an athlete links closely to the loss of their athletic identity. Athletes at all levels will develop their athletic identity over their years of competing but those at the highest (elite) level tend to have the strongest athletic identity which is reinforced by the external recognition they receive (Rasquinha & Cardinal, 2017). The relationship between recognition and the development of athletic identity relates to Kuypers and Bengston’s (1973) Social Breakdown Theory which explains how the loss of the athlete role results in a shift in external labelling. This theory suggests that if an athlete is no longer described and viewed as an athlete by others and has no new identity to be contextualised in, the loss of athletic identity even more significant. Of relevance to this study are the conclusions of Martin et al. (2014) who discussed a tendency toward a natural decrease in athletic identity of elite athletes as retirement grew closer, which led to a positive transition out of sport. The athletes within this study all had relatively long careers and decided to retire, however, it is also important to recognise how, even when retirement is planned, this period within the athlete journey may be problematic due to athletes saying farewell to their athletic self.

Yvonne’s experience of retirement illustrates how a gradual journey towards retirement can make the transition easier. Throughout her narrative Yvonne talked about how her relationship with running had gradually changed over time, meaning that when the time came to negotiate the break, she was ready.

‘my running identity was becoming less and less now, whereas it was my only identity and not having that, I think we spoke about this before, did scare me in my mid 20s and 30s I wasn’t ready, you kind of projected, you have got an injury if I can’t run again I am not ready for that, but I am quite happy not to have yeah Yvonne the runner as my main identity and occasionally people get a whiff that I used to be a runner and I went
This gradual shift in identity links with findings of Lally (2007) who discussed how a major identity crisis can be avoided when athletes have already redefined themselves prior to their retirement. Yvonne’s athletic identity had already slowly started to diminish; she was also a mother and a coach and felt successful in both of those roles. Also mentioned was how she felt she had achieved a lot in her career as a runner, so whereas the thought of losing her athletic identity earlier in her career scared her, when she chose to retire she was ready to let that part of her identity go as she had fulfilled her ambitions. This explains why athletes who are forced to retire before they are ready may struggle. They are likely to have only developed a unidimensional identity with a focus on just their athletic self which often overshadows all aspects of their life, without any thought about any other life outside of sport.

7.4 Coping with retirement

Successful retirement from sport like many transitions during the athlete journey relies on management strategies being in place, with research concluding that this is largely determined by the support networks within the athlete network (Wylleman, et al., 2013). The networks around athletes can vary from those who provide formal support such as career planning and education (Martin et al., 2014) to those from family and friends (DeFreeze & Smith, 2014)

7.4.1 Planning

Devaney et al. (2017) talk about the importance of planning and lifestyle support in advance of the actual retirement stage of the athlete’s career and a theme running through the narratives of the retired athletes was the planning that they had established pertaining to their retirement. Martin et al. (2014) emphasised how retirement planning was fundamental to a smooth
transition out of sport. Specific research with elite populations has concluded that lifestyle support throughout the athlete’s career supports their adaptation to new environments (Devaney et al., 2017). Martin et al. (2014) looked specifically at the role that advisors could play in supporting athletes to identify potential roles outside of sport. However, this kind of support wasn’t evidenced throughout any of the athletes’ stories, with them all drawing support from closer family networks. Yvonne always had retirement planning on her agenda, ensuring she had other revenue streams and options ready for when she retires, a ‘Plan B’ that allowed her to transition fully into a coaching role when she left sport. This contingency also ensured that Yvonne had another identity and a focus for her retirement, something Lally (2007) termed a ‘redefinition’, thus protecting the athlete from any form of identity crisis and facilitating a positive transition out of sport. By developing balance in her life and planning for the future, Yvonne had already developed a well-balanced identity and, while she pursued other interests in her retirement, her work as a coach allowed her to maintain elements of her athletic self.

Yvonne’s experience highlights how, even without formal lifestyle planning, a clear plan for a life after sport is instrumental in preceding a positive transition out of sport (Lally, 2007; Torregrosa et al., 2015). Planning was fundamental for a positive transition and, while Rebecca had a challenging time, her move to setting up a personal training business had always been a goal. This reasonably explains how she was able to experience a positive transition out of sport even when retirement was forced. Likewise, Gemma had no formal support to prepare for her retirement but had already started to explore other business ventures with her husband as well as coaching activity. Like Yvonne and Rebecca, she was proactive in her starting to build foundations in other areas. The findings from this study contrast with previous research which has emphasised the importance of structured retirement planning (Martin et al., 2014). One explanation could be the age of the athletes in the current study as lifestyle support wasn’t as prominent as it is in 2022 but their experiences also suggest that a supportive family network
can mitigate for any lack of formal or structured support.

7.4.2 Support

The importance of social support during the athlete journey has conclusively been found to be instrumental to a successful career in sport (DeFreeze & Smith, 2014). However, the importance of this support during crisis periods is even more significant. Brown et al. (2018) focused on the social support during retirement of eight former British elite athletes (four female and four male), concluding that type of support and who provided it was instrumental to how it was received. They also noted how there was still some stigma attached to asking for help, illustrating how this may present a barrier to athletes gaining adequate support. A key thread throughout the narratives at all stages of the athlete’s career related to the significance and importance of support networks around them. The value of social support for elite female athletes was the focus of research by Poucher et al. (2018) who concluded that female athletes were highly dependent on their primary support providers. They acknowledged that this support took a variety of forms including emotional, informational, and tangible (logistical and administrative). Furthermore, they noted how it is the perception of support that was most powerful and resulted in a positive impact. This perhaps explains why Brown et al. (2018) found that who provided the support was instrumental to how beneficial the support was, suggesting that support from those closest is perceived most positively and in turn is of most benefit.

The personal nature of support was seen throughout Yvonne’s story as her primary source of support was from her husband. Like the athletes in Poucher et al.’s (2018) study he provided all types of support to her during her career. Of key significance to Yvonne was the tangible administrative support he provided and at several points she reflected on how her husband’s planning during her career ensured she had a ‘Plan B’ that allowed her to transition fully into a coaching role when she left sport. She credits him with facilitating this and ensuring the
foundations were laid during her career. This support and planning ensured that Yvonne had another identity and a focus for her retirement and redefinition. This serves to protect the athlete from a complete loss of identity, facilitating a positive transition out of sport. The planning & support that Yvonne experienced illustrates that a successful career in sport is underpinned by a support team which includes both those within (e.g., coach) and outside of (e.g., spouse) of the performance network. The effectiveness of support from a spouse was also emphasised through Penny’s narrative as even though she was still competing she recognised how the support of her husband (and coach) was fundamental in her ability to continue to compete. She discussed at several points how his support was one of the reasons she had not retired even though her age could suggest she should have retired (at the time of interview Penny was 46 years old). ‘I mean of course having my husband as a support is a massive thing as I wouldn’t have continued if I did not have his support’. Furthermore, their unique coach/athlete relationship means he was able to support her through her training as well. The value of the married coach/athlete dyad as discussed by Jowett and Meek (2000) is exemplified by Penny’s experience at all stages of her career. Throughout Penny’s narrative she talked about retirement and openly declared that there were several factors that allowed her the choice to continue as well as the support from her husband. She frequently discussed how her success made continuing running viable to her and, unlike the other athletes, wasn’t battling injury or any decline in performance. Penny had significant success later in her career which links to the viability of which she often talked: while she loved to run and wasn’t motivated to run for money, she was realistic about finances and knew that if she had no money coming in then she wouldn’t be able to continue. This example illustrates how support can also be financial and this was a direct factor that allowed Penny to continue.
'I hadn’t had any lottery funding for a number of years that was on and off, and I had got dropped from my sponsor because of age, even with those great performances I got dropped after it, but because of what I had just achieved I did receive interest from other sponsors and I also got given opportunities to be involved in one off things, I don’t want to talk about it in money situation because that’s not the point, the point is because I had the success which I was not expecting it then gave me a new possibility, and enabled me to continue doing the thing I loved which was being an athlete and being a mum, what I am saying is if I hadn’t had those unexpected successes I wouldn’t have carried on because it wouldn’t have been viable anymore’

Penny, Interview 3 – 16th October 2018

In contrast to Yvonne, Penny and Gemma were the experiences of Wendy and Rebecca. Wendy’s husband had a career in the military, which meant her primary support provider was her coach rather than her husband. Her recollections of the support that her coach gave her were fundamental in her returning to sport after having a baby, however, in her retirement her support was largely derived from her family network. The lack of spousal support (due to his career) did ultimately mean that Wendy had a more challenging career path in sport. Like Wendy, Rebecca was the only other athlete to discuss a lack of support (organisational) during her career notably during her retirement which marked it as a sad and upsetting time, however, she did discuss having a supportive family and partner. This lack of support made both these athletes’ journeys through sport and into retirement more challenging and, in the case of Rebecca, at times could be seen to take the pleasure and enjoyment away. In summary, the support provided during retirement for the athletes in this study was largely tangible and for many of the athletes closely linked to planning and preparing for the next stages of their career.
7.5 Life after sport

The significant impact of retirement planning on a positive transition out of sport seen through the narratives of each of the retired athletes in this study lends further support to research within this area (e.g., Torregrosa et al., 2015). A career in sport is relatively short and athletes must prepare themselves for a life after sport, with which comes the potential for a new role (Hattersley et al., 2019). All the athletes within this study were at different stages in their lives: three had retired several years before these interviews took place, Gemma retired during the interview process and Penny was still competing. However, all the athletes (including Penny) had started to redefine themselves as retirement drew closer. For example, Yvonne saw a gradual detachment from her athletic self, due to physical decline whereas they all experienced a more obvious redefinition when they became mothers. It seems likely that the impact of the mother identity saw the diminishment of their athletic and unidimensional self, which gave some protection to their entire sense of self (Kuettel et al. 2016), in essence preparing them for life after sport. The overwhelming importance of becoming a mother and its impact is one of the key findings of this study, with motherhood significantly overshadowing athletic success. These findings have parallels with those of Ekengren et al. (2020) who concluded that when mothers retire from elite sport, they talk about enjoying retirement and enjoying being at home, suggesting that there are still some gendered norms that lead women to feel a pull toward spending time at home. While some similarities are seen in these findings, there are differences. First, once retired, all of the athletes in the current study developed other careers (e.g., coaching). In addition, Ekengren et al. (2020) concluded that the athletes in their study predominantly missed the team/solidarity aspect of sport, whereas all the athletes in the current study discussed missing different parts of their elite athletic life, something captured by Yvonne who missed the physical side of being an athlete: ‘you are always gonna have little
pangs, I really miss being really fit and being able to run effortlessly at pace’. This difference is likely down to all the athletes competing in individual sports.

While Yvonne missed parts of her life as an athlete, she remained connected to sport through her work as a coach, something that remained a constant in her life from when she was an athlete. She had also embarked on a new career as an interior designer, studying a degree and setting up a company with a friend. She talked about how, while this was a new identity it was really a case of revisiting another side of herself as she was very creative in her youth. This new career also facilitated the development of new social networks, something Wojciechowski (2018) identified as beneficial to a positive retirement. As she talked about her life now, she spoke with immense happiness that she was able to embrace elements of her old life through her coaching but also pursue a long-held dream whilst being a mother to her three children. Like the athletes in Ekengren et al.’s (2020) study, this allowed her to fulfil her desire to be present for her family, her work being based from home.

Towards the end of the interviews each woman started to reflect more broadly on their whole career, talking about what their career had meant to them and how it had shaped them, for example, Yvonne talked about how it had given her a different mindset:

‘I feel that running has given me a lot in life, not just, it’s not just my career, yes I got a bronze medal at the Commonwealth games, but it is more than that, it has shaped the person that I am today in terms of my mental strength and the experiences that I had. You know they weren’t all good but (laughs) and the travel that you do and the places that you get to experience you know you go to places you can’t speak the language you are there on your own, having to deal with situations like that I think it’s good for you, although at the time you are like what am I doing and just having to be really independent and I think it has made me quite a resilient person which I’m really quite
thankful for and you know for my own children I would like them to be strong and resilient and I quite know how to do that and instil that in them. I guess you know they will find another way but it’s but you just kind of find it sometimes in life, you don’t always plan for that’

Yvonne, Interview 3 - 9th January 2018

These comments from Yvonne also encapsulate how sport gives athletes so much more than merely material gains such as money, medal success or fame, but also valuable life skills, such as planning, organisation, and resilience which when fostered are likely to further support a positive transition and a positive life after sport (Vitali & De Brandt, 2019).

The way that sport can shape a person and give them a wider perspective on life is something that all athletes talked about. It opened avenues and feeds into retired athletes being seen often as assets to varied workplaces due to their work ethic, resilience, and mental strength (Fletcher, 2018; Holt et al., 2017). The development of resilience through sport was most notable throughout Rebecca’s story and at several points she discusses how her experiences shaped her as a person. Like the young female athletes in McManama O’Brian et al.’s (2021) study, who developed resilience due to the treatment they received, her experiences made her tougher and more resilient. She later reflected that perhaps that was no bad thing as it equipped her for future challenges in life.

‘Yes, I am a bit harder now from what I was, and my parents really realised that after Vancouver I ended up becoming a bit harder and not as happy go lucky and I had to just explain to them that I have just come out of this real big bubble of pressure and it has been really, really hard – you have got to almost put on a bit of a tough front’

Rebecca, Interview 4 – 31st July 2018
Wendy remained involved in sport when she retired and worked as a coach. She still ran, entering some recreational events and still identified as an athlete and runner. Like Yvonne, remaining involved in running allowed her to maintain some of her established social networks within sport. As Warriner and Lavallee (2008) discuss, this can support a more positive transition because often a loss of athletic identity is more about losing the relationships connected to that identity than the identity itself. While Wendy continued to see herself as an athlete, her relationship with training and running had shifted significantly and she draws distinction between her career as an elite athlete and that of a recreational runner who does some races.

*I don’t do all those other things that you have to do if you are going to be an athlete, you know I do eat properly but I used to be very careful about what I ate and when I ate it and you know you come in from a run and have a drink and something protein and carbohydrate and I just eat now, I don’t do any stretching I should do more especially now I am seeing the physio, I don’t do any drills I don’t do any strength and conditioning I don’t do double days I go for once a day and if I can’t fit it in with work I don’t go (laughs) I make an effort to fit it in but it’s not like before I fitted it in, there was no that was just something you know if I had training to do I did it whereas now I don’t know I do it less and I run much more socially so I run with the club a couple of times I go out with a friend who probably runs a minute per mile slower than I would do but I just quite enjoy going out for a nice run and a chat with her, so I run in a much more sociable way, rather I train in a much more sociable way, I was always someone who chatted and got to know different people but I do that in training as well now, so that is where I am, I am still working I work part time, partly because of the children really and childcare.

Wendy, Interview 3 - 13th November 2017
These reflections also illustrate how for all athletes it is not just the hours of training that can take them away from other commitments, but that the recovery and planning make it a full-time job. This level of organisation requires an athlete to be selfish and, as discussed earlier, may support why a career as an athlete was once deemed incompatible with parenthood. There are a myriad of reasons or challenges that can see female athletes potentially decide to retire to focus on family. Notably the full-time nature of being an elite athlete can result in an incompatibility with family life due to event scheduling and time away for training. Furthermore, issues around fertility, as touched on by Wendy, may result in athletes deciding to retire early to allow them the best chance of conception. A final point links to the sustainability of a career in sport - several of the athletes discussed changes in funding, or loss of sponsorship and, as such, it could be deemed an uncertain career. For some this was too much of a risk to balance with a family. For example, Penny talked a lot about only continuing to run because it was financially viable. These findings suggest, like Tekavec et al. (2020) that there are still social and cultural norms that influence the thoughts and subsequent behaviours of mothers, with a focus on caring and balancing life around a family. Furthermore, this goes some way to explain why the athletes were happy in retirement and happy to embrace their mother identity so completely, something the athletes in Ekengren’s (2020) study also reported.

‘I have had such a selfish 20 years doing what I want to do and now I’ve got the desire to give that time to my children, I am at that stage in my life, I am able to be at home with the kids which we are really fortunate with’

_Yvonne, Interview 3 - 9th January 2018_

Penny was the only athlete with no retirement plan, but she was also able to reflect on her career and what sport had given her. A theme within her narrative was her love of sport and how lucky she felt to have the career she did
‘I always look back at my sporting career and think about all the amazing people I have had met and the amazing experiences I have had being able to travel all over the world for races and training camps and just meeting so many different people it has been really, and I feel really lucky and that is the sort of memories that I take from my career really.

Penny, Interview 3 – 16th October 2018

Like the other athletes Penny had faced challenges during her career but also had a positivity about all those experiences. She saw her life in sport as a gift and talked passionately about how much she loved that world. The retired athletes had all carved out new roles for themselves, all being involved in coaching-related work. Each athlete found a new life after sport, with better balance but kept some of their athletic identity alive though their new endeavours.

7.7 Conclusions

This chapter has captured the experiences of each of the five athletes during the later stages of their career. Yvonne, Wendy, and Rebecca had been retired for several years and their stories illustrate how there was no single factor culminating in their retirement. Yvonne was struggling with ongoing injury problems and a general sense that her body couldn’t continue to perform at elite level - reasons that are commonly cited as causes of retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1996). However, like the other retired athletes, it was her desire for another baby and a shift in focus to family that ultimately led to her retirement. These findings suggest that while there is a shift that sees more women combine motherhood with an athletic career this may only be feasible (from their perspective) with one child and therefore a second is a cause for retirement.
Gemma’s case study provided extra interest as she retired during the interview process, a decision linked to both feeling ready, wanting another baby, and knowing that she wasn’t performing at her former levels. Like Penny and Yvonne, her decision to retire was planned and in her own control. She had a new focus and this suggests why all of the athletes navigated a positive transition out of sport (Torregrosa et al., 2015). Gemma did discuss how the process of the interviews helped her to organise her thinking related to her retirement and the reflections on her career allowed her to reflect on the success she had. In contrast to this, Penny’s success was a key motivator in her wanting to still compete as she discussed how this success made it viable to continue. Furthermore, where Wendy and Gemma recognised that two children would be hard to manage, Penny reflected how it was being able to balance two children with her career that also allowed her to continue but, like Yvonne, noted that this got harder as her children got older.

All five athletes had very different experiences towards the end of their careers but were ultimately able to navigate their transition out of sport in a positive way and have success in other areas. They successfully relinquished their athletic identity and were happy to be just ‘Yvonne the mum who used to run’ for example. These very different experiences highlight how, when exploring the experiences of elite female athletes, findings are hard to generalise. Future research should consider the difference that may be seen in the stories of athletic mothers who are forced to retire who didn’t have a desire for more children to understand the bearing on their identity.
Chapter 8: Discussion: sport, motherhood, and beyond

8.1 Introduction

This research has explored the stories of five elite female athletes, with a focus on how they have all negotiated shifts in identity but most importantly the transition into motherhood. Furthermore, it has illustrated through addressing each of the research questions that there are key differences in the experiences of individuals as well as between sports, specifically pointing to a need for further research which focuses on the pathways of winter sports athletes as they potentially have more challenges throughout their careers. This final chapter addresses the research questions and considers the key findings, with a focus on those that contribute new knowledge to the field. There is also an emphasis on how these findings can inform practices within sport surrounding athletic mothers. Both athlete and personal reflections on the research journey are included and finally the limitations and future avenues for research are explored.

8.2 Addressing the research questions

This research has sought to examine the transitional experiences and the shifts in identity of elite athletic mothers, exploring the challenges they face and how they successfully negotiate the role of athlete and mother. Through in-depth interviews their lived experiences were heard and within this first section the findings related to the four main research questions will be discussed.

8.2.1 How is athletic identity developed during the early stages of the elite female athlete’s career?

A key purpose of this study was to understand more about the development of athletic identity for female athletes. All the athletes in this study experienced early socialisation into sport through sampling a range of sports. Incidentally, all the athletes talked about this early
initiation in the context of parents and siblings providing the opportunity and support rather than school sport although, later, teachers are mentioned as influential. This point illustrates the importance of growing up in a home with a sport habitus (Coakley, 1996). As children, the athletes all saw sport as a desirable activity as it was modelled by their parents or siblings; they all talked about being ‘sporty’ or enjoying being involved in sport at an early age and viewed it as an identity they wanted to embrace, suggesting that their athletic identity developed at first involvement. This point suggests that, in line with previous research, the athletes started to develop their athletic identity at first socialisation into sport and that it is not attached to a particular sport (Ballie & Danish, 1992). After their initial initiation into sport and involvement in the sports they would later pursue, all the athletes discussed relatively smooth transition into elite-level sport and their athletic identity developed in line with Brewer et al.s’ (1993) definition, with each athlete gradually identifying more strongly with their athlete role. Notably, exclusivity was a key factor when it came to the strengthening of their identity as sport gradually became the main social role for each, evolving in line with their success. Success can be seen as a factor reinforcing their ability within the sport and in turn strengthening their athletic identity. Incidentally all the athletes had smooth transitions at this stage, with success coming linearly, allowing a continued development of their athletic self.

8.2.2 How do elite female athletes negotiate career transitions and challenges to athletic identity?

The second main area of focus of this study was on how elite female athletes negotiate the transitions they face during their career. The athletes within this study all experienced a range of transitional events which were largely negotiated in a positive way. The two key coping strategies identified as supporting athletes as they negotiated challenge events were social support and resilience. Their surrounding support networks were the main mechanism the athletes identified for coping in a positive way. A clear example of the importance of support
was discussed by both winter sports athletes, Rebecca and Gemma, who both recognised the importance of their family when they made the transition to an elite environment. This support also served to provide some stability for them. The need for stability was largely down to this transition not just being one into elite level competition but that they had also entered a thoroughly structured training environment, which took them away from their usual support network and from the familiarity of home. This is a unique element of the winter sport athlete’s journey but is likely to be comparable to the experiences of athletes in other sports, for example, team sport athletes who necessarily travel with a team. Both Rebecca and Gemma discussed how their mothers came out to see them on their first training camp abroad, which was fundamental to providing them the right support. This suggests that athletes involved in winter sports or those with similar logistical demands may require additional support to allow for stability if they are to successfully navigate this transition.

As well as the key role parents played in early transitions, support remained key during other challenging transitions, for example injury. During periods of injury, most notably longer-term injury, spousal support was key in providing the emotional support the athletes needed. In contrast, when support was readily available neither from family nor, more officially, from the sports organisation then the athletes reported more challenging periods within their careers. This was illustrated most notably by Rebecca who lacked organisational support at time of injury and indeed for most of her career. The challenges of injury are largely related to its leading to prolonged periods out of sport (Park et al., 2013) and the consequent range of negative psychological responses this may elicit, such as depression and sadness (Russell et al., 2018). Specifically, injury may well challenge their athletic identity (Scolnik et al., 2018). The threat to identity was discussed in detail by Yvonne but her case also illustrated how periods of injury can facilitate the development of resilience - a coping strategy all the athletes alluded to within their narratives. The early challenges (such as injury) experienced by the
athletes demonstrate the impact that adversity can have in developing resilience, suggesting that coping with early challenge events (of any type) will potentially determine later success as it allows the development of a key coping mechanism. This echoes the findings of previous research focusing on adversarial growth (e.g., Sarkar et al., 2015; Seery, 2011).

8.2.3 What is the impact of motherhood on identity and how is this managed?

All the athletes indicated that motherhood was the most significant transition they faced during their athletic career, but all managed a successful return after having their first child. Like other key transitional events, two mechanisms allowed this period to be negotiated successfully: support, being again instrumental in ensuring that this period was managed; redefining oneself, in essence how the athletes embraced their new identity of mother. Only two of the athletes discussed their pregnancy and early post-partum period in connection with their identity. Gemma talked about missing adrenaline sports such that, while she could continue to exercise, she missed the excitement of her sport and that aspect of her identity. Indeed, she was the one athlete that discussed missing their athletic self during pregnancy. Wendy was the only other athlete to be tested concerning her identity related to motherhood. Wendy talked about still running only a few days before she had her first baby, but the physical impact of her labour meant she was physically incapacitated after giving birth and was suddenly unable to run and therefore unable to adequately maintain her athletic identity. The loss of her athletic identity in conjunction with post-natal depression saw her struggle at this time. However, when she then received support and was able to start to run again there was a shift and Wendy felt she became a better mother as she rediscovered herself.
‘I wasn’t in any way back to being an athlete I was just trying to run I suppose to find myself a little bit again and get me back together, it was my identity I just wanted to be able to run, being an elite athlete was so far away from where I was at that time’.


The period around motherhood was negotiated in different ways by the athletes but throughout their narratives it is clear that it represented a period of redefinition where they saw themselves as primarily a mother and an athlete second. The mother identity was the single identity that rivalled their athletic identity, something that was perhaps best explained by Yvonne who described the impact of her daughter on her priorities.

‘... she kind of knocked running off my top priority so instead of running being up there, and my husband and life, Lola came along and took top position on that priority list’

Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017

The mother identity led to a shift in identity and priorities, initiating a change in life perspective which was in many ways beneficial to the athletes. To manage this shift, support was crucial again. Uniquely, identity was managed less as a melding of two identities seen in the suggestions of previous research (e.g., McGannon et al., 2012) but as the facility to switch between being an athlete and being a mother. Gemma talked about her two identities being entirely separate but she succeeded in jumping between these two roles, designating them her ‘mummy brain’ and her ‘athlete brain’. For example, in the gym she was Gemma-the-athlete but at home she was Gemma-the-mum. Likewise, Wendy discussed how when she went out for a run she was just a runner again and didn’t think about home or her children.

These findings also suggest that motherhood led to a more balanced identity for all the athletes and in turn afforded them an additional coping strategy to face challenges. By having another
focus in their life (their child) they were able to view sport through a different lens, not just the one that focused on it as the main priority it once had been.

8.2.4 How do female athletes negotiate retirement from sport?

The retired athletes within this study negotiated retirement positively, managing it through a variety of different means, some had career plans in place (for example, Yvonne chose to develop her coaching work and pursue a career in interior design); or had the need to focus on motherhood and having more children. This meant that most of the athletes made a conscious decision to retire based on several factors, including the desire to have more children, it being the right time and an awareness that age-related and injury-related decline were making their athletic career more challenging. Even in Rebecca’s case, while being more forced, it was ultimately her decision to step away from an environment she believed to be toxic and to follow other avenues in life. The free-choice element of the athletes’ retirement led to successful transitions out of sport and an acceptance that they had to leave behind aspects of their athletic self.

‘I had a new identity as well so it wasn’t just about I wasn’t just Yvonne the runner I was now a mum so I think it softened the blow a bit and you are more easily distracted and you have a different focus...so if it did not go right it was annoying and frustrating ‘cos you put all that effort into it, all the training but it wasn’t the end of the world whereas previously it was sometimes quite devastating and frustrating so I definitely feel like I had a different mind-set, not necessarily one that was ideal for performing well (laughter)’

Yvonne, Interview 2 - 7th November 2017
This example illustrates how the imperatives of family and its development allowed the athletes to fully embrace the mother identity making it easier to let go of an athletic identity.  This discovery within this research is significant. Its implications are that elite athletes who retire from sport and who already have children are protected from many of the typical negative psychological factors associated with retirement from sport. Furthermore, these findings support the earlier Theory of Disengagement (Cummings et al., 1960) as the athletes all viewed retirement as a natural stage.

8.2.5 Research findings summary

Largely, the research finds that there are several factors that allowed the athletes to successfully manage the challenges and shifts in their identity during their career. For some developing resilience early in their careers allowed them in a positive manner to cope with future challenges and setbacks associated with motherhood. Additionally, the transition to motherhood was largely positive and although Rebecca and Wendy faced their own challenges around this period both managed to return to competition and have success. A key predictor of the successful negotiation of shifts in identity and transitions is related to the support networks around the athlete; all the athletes had support predominantly from their spouse but also family and in some cases their coach. Without this support they would have been unable to manage their career alongside motherhood. This is of relevance for the winter sports athletes who needed more long-term support and for their family members to travel with them to allow them to train and to compete.

8.3 Key findings and new insights

As well as addressing the key research questions posed the nature of a phenomenological approach meant that the stories told presented additional insights. There were several themes to emerge from the athletes’ stories that would inform the practice of researchers, practitioners,
coaches and athletes, allowing them to develop better understanding of the needs of elite athletic mothers. For clarity these are summarised in table below (Table 8.1) and then addressed in sequence as they were presented within the main discussion chapters.

**Table 8.1**

*A table to show the key and unique findings of the study*

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teachers play a key role in early socialisation into sport and should be factored into the HAC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Models and theory within this area are all based on male athletes, this presents a challenge when using them to understand the experiences of female athletes. (e.g. HAC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The speed of progression to elite level sport can be significantly different between winter sports athletes compared to runners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Winter sports present unique cultural, organisational and logistical challenges to female athletes and are heavily gendered environments with no women in positions of power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>There were minimal negative responses to injury documented by the athletes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>In contrast to previous research (e.g. Tekavc et al, 2020) none of the athletes were governed by social norms that suggested they should retire when they had children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Most of the athletes had a positive transition from athlete to mother athlete in contrast to previous research (e.g. Ekengren et al, 2019) that have reported that women found it unmanageable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Type of sport can impact the athlete’s experience of pregnancy and their return to sport

Whilst they all successfully negotiated returning to sport after their first child, the four retired athletes all indicated that they didn’t think having two children was workable with their career, which contributed to their decision to retire.

In contrast to research (e.g. Bean and Wimbs, 2021) that suggests that guilt is prominent amongst working mothers, none of the athletes experienced guilt related to either their desire to continue with their career or to the time away from their children to train and compete.

A career in sport allows mothers more time with their children than an alternative career outside of sport.

Combining sport and motherhood can have benefits to both athlete and child.

The mother identity appears to have a protective effect against the potential negative consequences of retirement.

When retirement comes at the end of a long career and when other roles have started to overtake that of athlete, retirement is a smooth process.

8.3.1 Early Experiences

A key finding identified in Chapter Five was the influence of family and other key people such as teachers. All the athletes were socialised into sport at a relatively young age supporting Coakley’s (1996) family habitus concept. Furthermore, the choices and opportunities afforded to athletes can also be seen to be determined in part by family habitus, for example, Gemma grew up and lived in the French Alps. Subsequently her upbringing allowed her to pursue winter sports. This concept of family habitus links tightly to modelling and how having active parents can influence children and the choices they make. Laird et al. (2018) recognised this
to be particularly important for girls, something that was seen through Yvonne’s story, as her greatest influencer was her mother.

Parental modelling provides just one example of role modelling seen through the experiences of the athletes. Further examples were seen through the modelling of siblings; both Penny and Gemma talked about the influence that their brothers had on their participation in sport. While the impact of siblings is noted within the HAC model (Wylleman, 2019) there is very limited research treating the impact of siblings on youth sport participation. One study in this area by Osai et al. (2020) concluded that siblings were more likely to choose a different sport to their siblings, effectively to be ‘different’. In contrast, a unique finding within the current study found that two athletes wanted to pursue the same sports as their siblings. Gemma wanted to participate in the same sports as her brothers while Penny stated that when she was younger she wanted to be a footballer like her brothers, although she ended up a runner. These findings suggest that siblings can have a stronger influence than previous research suggests, in particular, on sporting choices, an area meriting further study.

As well as the influence of family, Penny and Wendy recalled how teachers were influential in their involvement in running – while the HAC model mentions coaches, teachers are not included. Penny spoke at length about a teacher at school who encouraged her with running when things became more structured as a small running group formed at her school. While there is research looking at the influence of teachers on early socialisation (e.g. Cheung, 2019) there is an absence when looking at the influence of teachers as the informality of play transmutes into the greater formality of sport. This suggests that the HAC might be beneficially reformulated to include teachers. Certainly, the role teachers played was significant within two of the athletes’ stories.
8.3.2 – The HAC and theoretical assumptions

Throughout the study the HAC has been used to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of transitions, and how it is important to view the athlete journey in a holistic manner. However, within a study where the experiences of women are at the forefront, it is important to recognise the limitations of a theory that was developed for male athletes further highlighting the male-dominated lens of much theory within this area. This suggests that, as well as development of the HAC in terms of influences, there needs to be more work to consider the applicability to female athletes as well as whether it is truly representative of all sports. For example, it was noted that not all of the athlete’s trajectory was in line at all stages of the model. These points suggest that the model could be remodelled to allow for more flexibility in terms of gender and types of sport.

8.3.3 Type of sport

The chapters of this thesis present a new insight into the difference between runners’ and winter-sports athletes’ respective pace of progression to elite-level commitment and, indeed, transition to elite level. The runners within the study all gradually increased training and started to compete at a higher level. Their successes at national level led to competition at higher level and their subsequently being selected for international competition. No clear point is appreciable at which they went from being a competitive runner to making a commitment to pursue a career in running. This progression features as a natural or organic evolution. In contrast both winter sports athletes had to make a definitive commitment to the pursuit of an elite career in which they would compete for their nation, in part due to the full-time training nature of their particular sport as well as the need to be in a specific location to engage with it. This finding suggests that sport type can lead to an accelerated transition to an elite environment due to the almost immediate full-time nature of some sports environments, again
supporting the need for development of the HAC to give some flexibility to accommodate the nature of different sports.

Closely related to the difference in levels of commitment to sport as seen at the earlier stages of their careers is the degree of confidence in their own abilities to craft their careers from their sport. Previous research by Tekavc (2017) concluded that female athletes tend to demonstrate a lower level of confidence in comparison to male athletes. Incidentally this lack of confidence was seen in the narratives of two of the runners, Penny and Yvonne, that lack of confidence being intimately related to whether they might make a career in sport. However, by contrast, the winter-sports athletes both had a clear goal to succeed in sport and demonstrated much more confidence in their decision to pursue an elite career. While previous research (e.g., McEwan et al., 2019), looking at personality type and high-risk sports athletes, has conclusively found they demonstrate traits such as sensation seeking, high self-efficacy and extroversion there appears to be limited evidence that female athletes in high-risk sports enjoy comparable levels of self-confidence to their male counterparts. This suggests that perhaps higher risk sports athletes have a different personality type and differing levels of confidence, which may explain the way they managed some potentially highly challenging transitional events and also developed their resilience. The difference in personality type and management of transition is an area demanding further research, as personality was not considered within this study.

8.3.4 Cultural and organisational challenges

This study has provided a unique insight into the cultural and organisational challenges in winter sport which have not previously been addressed in the literature, revealing challenges to female winter sport athletes that were not evident amongst the runners. While previous research has examined toxic cultures (e.g. Breger et al., 2019), there is no research looking at cultural and organisational challenges in the context of transitions in winter sports. Both
Rebecca and Gemma talked about inconsistency in terms of financial and coaching support and, in Rebecca’s case, an unsupportive culture within her sport, particularly when she announced her pregnancy and made her return to sport. This finding has direct implications for anyone working within the winter-sports environment, with a clear recommendation that there needs to be greater understanding of how mothers might be supported both emotionally and practically during their pregnancy in terms of what kind of and levels of training they might undertake. This is echoed by the recent BASES expert statement on pregnancy which also calls for guidelines (Atkinson et al., 2022). Furthermore, clearly defined protocols for the returning mother need to be outlined that are specific to the physical demands of the sport type, for example Rebecca discussed being in a very core-dominant sport. A unique point that arose through Rebecca’s narrative related to sports culture and the demonstrably gendered nature of her sport and how this energises toxic environments. Her environment witnessed men in positions of power who lacked understanding and who manifested neither the willingness nor ability to support Rebecca at all stages of her career. This finding points to a need for elevated gender equity within winter sports to remedy the disparity in power relations between men and women (e.g., most coaches are still men). By way of recommendation, winter sports must encourage more retired female athletes to return to the sport as support for emerging talent who might learn from these women’s wisdom-through-experience. Furthermore, there needs to be clarity of policy as it pertains to athletic mothers. As Atkinson et al. (2022) note in the BASES position statement, policy needs to be both developed and refined to allow women to transition into motherhood and return to sport. Further investment is needed to understand the type of support that women require as well as funding better education to allow for the development of sport specific evidence-based guidelines to inform the support provided. Of relevance to this study is the need within some sports for a better understanding of the physiological impact of pregnancy and labour to ensure that physiological support, specifically testing and
rehabilitation protocols are tailored to the needs of individuals. Finally, elite winter-sports athletes who manage motherhood with their career need to be celebrated, with their experiences shared to aid in the normalisation of combining the two roles in winter-sports settings.

8.3.5 Injury

A unique finding, absent in previous research that has found several negative psychological responses to injury (e.g., Von Rosen et al., 2018), is that the athletes within the current study experienced few negative responses to injury, indeed, they coped positively with injury setbacks. All suffered injuries during their career but viewed this as part of sport and something that by necessity needed to be managed. Furthermore, support was again seen to be instrumental in allowing athletes to successfully navigate this challenge point in their career. As discussed, their responses also resonate with the adversarial growth literature which suggests that when athletes face a challenge there can be opportunity for growth (Wadey et al., 2013). Gemma was able to cope with her most serious injury by framing it in the context of previous experiences which had obviously been a period of growth for her. She convinced herself that, having broken bones before, she would recover. All the athletes demonstrated adversarial growth during setbacks such as injury, indicating that early-career support for athletes should include some focus on coping with injury setback. This area is one where learning from other athletes might well form part of the performance environment so that younger athletes are able to develop a more positive approach to injury and have support to allow the development of a growth mindset around challenge events. This idea of role-modelling was discussed informally by three of the athletes in this study, who stated that one of their reasons for wanting to be involved in the study was to share their experiences as a way to support younger athletes.
8.3.6 Motherhood

The primary focus of this study was to explore the athletes’ experiences of motherhood, with this forming the basis of Chapter Six. This was a fundamental area when it came to developing new insights as there remains a lack of research focused on the experiences of female athletes at elite level (Atkinson et al., 2022). Throughout Chapter Six, numerous unique insights emerged, all of which reasonably serve to inform recommendations for those working with elite athletic mothers. Of key significance was the clear decision the athletes made to combine their career with sport and that they all managed this successfully. This finding illustrates how the athletes in this study were not governed by cultural norms that suggested they should retire once they were pregnant. Of note is that even within the winter sports, where there was no precedent for women making a return after having a baby, the athletes felt they wanted to try to combine these two roles. This links to a unique aspect of this research as Rebecca was one of the first UK athletes from a winter sport to try and combine a career with motherhood. Rebecca’s experience illustrated how within her sport there was an expectation that pregnancy and motherhood were not compatible and would see her retire, in part due to the gendered nature of her sports environment where the men in positions of power didn’t think it feasible for a woman to combine motherhood with an elite career. The androcentric nature of Rebecca’s sport as well as the lack of precedent go some way to explain why there was no maternity policy for athletes within winter sports and no understanding of how to work with a pregnant athlete. This point lends further support to the earlier recommendation that guidance and policy is needed within this area. In the context of this study Rebecca’s case was somewhat unique as she was the only athlete with a negative narrative surrounding pregnancy, in contrast to the other four athletes who all had thoroughly positive transitions into becoming sporting mothers. While Rebecca’s more challenging experiences were several years ago, the findings are still relevant, as while Gemma had a wholly more positive return to competition, the knowledge
within her sport (also a winter sport) hadn’t developed even with her experience being some 10 years later. The failure to develop understanding in this area is still apparent with Deering et al. (2020) and Atkinson et al. (2022) concluding that even in the last few years there has still been a lack of knowledge about how to support the returning mother.

This lack of knowledge about how to support a returning mother keenly featured in the narratives of both winter sports athletes, however, this is an area that needs further exploration for a range of different sports where perhaps there exists no culture of combining motherhood with an elite career. Herein lies a recommendation for the winter-sports community to develop maternity policies and develop institutional knowledge and understanding of how to support athletes in the pre- and post-natal period. For example, one of the concerns for Rebecca and Gemma was the core-dominant nature of their sports which led to their being uncertain as to how they could negotiate their return.

Type of sport presents us a unique finding related to training during pregnancy, as it influences the athlete’s quality of experience of pregnancy and their return to sport, that return maybe being slower and requiring detailed planning. Rebecca and Gemma were unable to maintain any sport-specific training during this time, in contrast to the runners who were all able to continue to run. This may create a tension as the type of sport can have a bearing on how quickly the athletes felt they needed to return to training and competition. This suggests that there is greater need for an understanding of the prerequisites of pregnant athletes within winter sports than other sports.

However, the impact of type of sport can be seen to be even more far-reaching than the physical implications. A further factor related to type of sport and motherhood can be seen in relation to the logistics around training and competition within winter sports, which added complexity to Rebecca and Gemma’s lives. The extensive travel for both training and competition
presented problems when they both made their return to sport. These logistical challenges meant the role of family became even more significant during Rebecca and Gemma’s careers. Both relied on their parents to provide tangible support in the form of childcare with both of them stating that without that support they would have had to retire. This was a central difference in the stories of the winter sports athletes and runners, as none of the runners mentioned parental support later in their career. Notably, these logistical challenges had a bearing on Gemma’s decision to retire as she clearly articulated how she thought it unfeasible to have two children and to travel.

The desire to have more children related to a key finding within this study that suggests that returning to sport with one child is workable but that having a second child would pose a challenge they were not sure they could manage. Penny was the only athlete able to manage two children and her sport but she also had the best of support in terms of having her husband as her coach. She discussed how if it had not proven practicable she would have retired. Again, this finding points to a need for more support within winter sports to reduce the logistical challenges that travel with a family can present, suggesting that flexibility in terms of policy is essential rather than the rigid policy that was in place when Rebecca was trying to combine family with sport.

A notable finding within the current study was that mother-guilt was a concept not discussed in any detail or even mentioned in the stories told. This contrasts with previous research that discusses the tensions that arise from combining any career with motherhood, with a focus on the associated guilt and sense of failing to fulfil the mother role (e.g., Liss et al., 2012; McGannon and Schinke, 2013). All the athletes were clear that having time to train was acceptable to them as their sport was their job and they were flexible in their approach to ensure it didn’t compromise their time with their children. While the athletes in this study successful balanced their two identities, they had still to manage two different roles with different
demands. Being a successful athlete demands an element of selfishness in contrast to the selfless nature of motherhood. For example, Gemma talked about having to suddenly think about someone else and plan for someone else’s needs, as well as how being a mother meant she had less time for recovery and found herself frequently fatigued. Like McGannon et al. (2015), fulfilling the role of mother first and then being an athlete seemed to mitigate any guilt feelings. Guilt was only mentioned in a normalised manner as it was viewed as something all parents will feel when they leave their children to go to work. While guilt wasn’t a prominent theme, missing their children was, most relevantly for Gemma and Rebecca who had to be away for prolonged periods of time and abroad. Contrastingly, the runners often left their children for only short periods of time (hours). This perhaps indicates why some women (in sports with extensive travel) decide to wait until they retire to have children.

A contrasting viewpoint and unique finding related to being an athletic parent was presented by Penny. She felt that being an athlete allowed her to better balance her time with her family and sport and to be a better parent than if she had a regular career. This was caveated by a focus on pre-school aged children: ‘being an athlete actually gives you more time with your children and allows you to be a more present parent’. However, she was cognisant of this being possibly unique to her sport as she was easily able to combine her training with her children.

‘If you are in a team you have got to go to the team practice and you have got to do the competitions say if you are a hockey player or a football player you have got to go to team training which affects things in so many ways so of course you must live in that location too where the team training.’

*Penny, Interview 2 – 16th October 2018*

The relative simplicity of running and the ability to combine it with family was echoed by Yvonne who also talked about having a running buggy and taking her daughter out with her.
Furthermore, the other two runners had a cross trainer or treadmill at home which allowed them to be creative with their training and to not even leave the house were it not possible. This provides stark contrast to the experiences of Gemma and Rebecca who predominantly had to travel abroad for all training. This illustrates the marked difference in flexibility related to some sports and highlights a potential area to explore in future research.

While motherhood did present some challenges these were largely logistical rather than emotional once the athletes had returned to sport, and the experience of motherhood was predominantly positive for all the athletes. For example motherhood led to a shift in mindset which actually benefitted them within sport:-

‘if it did not go right it was annoying and frustrating ’cos you put all that effort into it, all the training but it wasn’t the end of the world whereas previously it was sometimes quite devastating and frustrating so I definitely feel like I had a different mindset’.

Yvonne, Interview 3 - 9th January 2018

This comment was not unique to Yvonne but was a perspective that was conveyed by all the athletes. This finding suggests that more should be celebrated about the benefit of motherhood. A clear shift in mindset also led to a healthier perspective on life and other broader mental health benefits. The mental benefits of motherhood were also discussed by Penny who said being a mother made her happier and gave her a mental boost. The shift in perspective and mental impact that motherhood can give an athlete has been reported in previous research within this area, however, a possibly unique finding relates to other benefits that parenthood can result in. Gemma talked extensively about how becoming a mother had made her more confident both as an athlete and as a person, furthermore she was more organised, prioritised training more and felt that she was mentally much stronger. Being more focused and prioritising training was also discussed by Penny and Wendy. These points suggest that
motherhood and an athletic career can have clearly reciprocal benefits. These benefits should be made more visible to athletes as there is still a misconception that motherhood and an elite sports career may not be compatible.

8.3.3 Retirement

The narrative around retirement presented a series of unique findings and several contrasting experiences to previous research. Firstly, the four retired athletes all had positive retirement stories and embraced their retirement. However, it is important to place this in context as all the athletes decided to retire and had relatively long and successful careers. Furthermore, and of key relevance within this study, that has predominantly focused on motherhood, was that, when they retired, they already had another strong identity (of mother). These findings reveal a unique insight in that the mother identity has a protective effect against the potential negative responses of retirement. This was summarised effectively by Yvonne who said she had used 20 years being selfish and now she wanted to give the time to her children.

While theories that have been applied to sport are often considered outdated, some reasonably explain how athletes manage retirement. Cummings et al.’s (1960) Disengagement Theory positions retirement as a natural stage for the athletes and as such was perceived in a positive manner. Yvonne discussed this natural process in the context of the shift in her athletic identity, recognising how there was a natural drop in her athletic identity as her career progressed (something that can be attributed to all having a relatively long career), as articulated by her saying, ‘my running identity was becoming less and less’. This key finding suggests that when retirement comes at the end of a long career and when other roles have started to overtake that of athlete, retirement is a smooth process.

Furthermore, each athlete’s retirement took quite a different form due to the differences between the sports in which they were involved. For example, Yvonne and Wendy still
maintained some element of their athletic self, both being still able to run and both worked as coaches, allowing them to transition from one role in sport to another. This permitted a subtler shift in their identity as their involvement in coaching retained for them some of their athletic self. In contrast, Rebecca’s retirement while liberating, as she was able to step away from her negative environment, remained emotionally fraught as she realized that it could be her last ever competition, as she was unable to participate in her sport at the recreational level. While Rebecca did manage to transition positively away from competitive sport her experience illuminates an area for further research related to athletes whose retirement signals the prospect of never again taking part in the sport which had been central to their existence.

The idiosyncrasies characterising some winter sports mean that there will not be a recreational or accessible alternative; a ski-jumper will in all likelihood be unable to participate once they have retired. They are also unlikely to find a sport that would elicit the same emotions or adrenaline. In contrast a runner or hockey player could still participate and might still achieve competitiveness albeit at a different level. This suggests that those within sports limited to elite competition only may encounter additional retirement challenges and those athletes may need more support due to the finality of their retirement, in contrast to an athlete who may retire from elite level but might still have the opportunity to compete in their sport.

A final unique insight relates to formal retirement planning and support. None of the athletes had any formal support in terms of their retirement planning, however, they all had a contingency and had considered their opportunities or situations after sport. Additionally, as no one was forced into retirement they had the time to plan when they might retire. This suggests that starting to build a new role outside of sport before retirement helps, such as Yvonne’s coaching. Also, unlike other athletes, they all had worked in jobs in the past, had qualifications or had other career options. Markedly, within some sports there is a focus on
providing lifestyle support and retirement planning, but the value may be more for those who are forced to retire early.

8.4 Future Directions

While the current study has provided clear answers to the original research questions it has also posed several further questions for future research within this area to consider. These are summarised in Table 8.2 below, with the key areas discussed more fully:

Table 8.2

A table to show potential future directions of research in this field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>More work is needed to examine the impact of siblings on youth sport participation and choice of sport.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The difference in personality type and management of transition is an area worthy of future research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Future work should look at the experiences of women who aimed to return to sport but failed to or were unsuccessful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>More research is needed looking at pregnancy and motherhood within sports without a culture of combining sport and motherhood, for example other higher risk sports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>There is a need to examine the experiences of women who return to competition after a second child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Further exploration of the experiences of athlete mothers from other sports is needed i.e., Team sports/ sports that involve significant travel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clear differences were apparent in the career experiences of winter sports athletes and runners at all stages of their career. Future research might well explore in more detail the differences seen between sports, with a focus on the challenges that different sports can present during
pregnancy and motherhood. Furthermore, winter sports have been grouped together within this study and it would be valuable to explore further the differences seen between a range of winter sports.

By selection all the participants in this study made a successful return to sport following the birth of their first baby. However, it would be interesting to explore the narratives of athletes who aimed to return to sport but were unable to or were unsuccessful and examine the impact this may have had on their identity.

Within this study four of the athletes chose to retire at the same point as deciding to have a second baby. Only Penny decided to continue to compete. Future studies could look to focus on athletes who successfully return after second births to understand more about what makes this feasible and whether there are additional challenges.

8.5 Research reflections

No study is without its limitations, as no one study can do everything, and a case study approach to a topic may in itself be limiting for the purpose of this thesis. However, it is felt in the case of this study it allowed for rich and detailed data documenting all stages of the athlete journey. While the retrospective, recollective and self-reported nature of the data collection may mean recollections have shifted, this approach sees feelings and emotions reinterpreted in the present which can be highly beneficial. Indeed, in line with the approach adopted the athletes were given the opportunity to reflect on both the experience, how they felt at the time and consider how this still resonated with them. Furthermore, the self-reported nature of interviews means only the athlete’s perspective was taken, although in the context of a phenomenological study this is wholly appropriate as it was the lived experiences of the athlete through their eyes that was the focus.
Secondly, interviews were conducted both face to face and via Skype, which potentially impacted on the quality of the data, as Skype can inhibit the development of rapport and did mean the interviews were potentially not ‘equitable’ (Boland et al., 2021), although there was an attempt to mitigate this by ensuring that the first interview was conducted face to face to allow rapport to develop.

Finally, the study only compared runners and winter sports athletes which may limit the application of the findings. Furthermore, during the research process it became clear that there were further differences between the two winter sports athletes’ experiences as these were in themselves quite different sports. Certainly, athletes from more varied individual sports or across team and individual sports would have allowed for more points of comparison.

8.6 Researcher Reflections

At the start of this thesis, I stated that sport had always been part of my life, through engagement, reading, watching and study. This PhD journey has at times seen the academic study of sport take over my life but as I reach the end I can look back and see that this, like all those related to sport, has developed me in many ways.

When you engage in a research journey later in your academic career there is a tendency to place pressure on yourself to assume you should know exactly what to do and how to do it. This is not true! My learning over the last six years has been the most significant of my academic career, but also has been fruitful personally because a PhD is more than just the thesis. At the start of this journey I was excited, I had the chance to read about an area that I loved, started to examine gaps in the literature and find a place to position my research both methodologically and contextually. Without doubt the most rewarding aspect of this study was listening to the stories of the athletes and, as researcher, I felt honoured that each athlete shared their story with me. I got to hear about their biggest successes and for some their darkest
moments. They talked to me about their life in sport in an honest and unfiltered way. Over the course of the interviews, I grew to understand each athlete’s world both during their years of competition and now, meeting their children and husbands and hearing about their day-to-day plans. Throughout the interview process, all the athletes were simply invited to tell their story. As a researcher I had to carefully consider what the process was like for the athletes, as at times they exhibited high emotion, sadness, as well as happiness and joy, but all the athletes were open within their story and demonstrated a responsibility to give back to sport, as they shared their experience, to support other female athletes.

The process I have been through has not only allowed me to examine the lived experiences of the athletes and draw conclusions about their stories but also shed new light on the elite athletic mother. I hope that my findings can inform both practice and any further research that might provide better information and support to elite female athletes who are striving to combine motherhood with sport. To summarise the key recommendations to come out of this study are detailed in Table 8.3 below.
### Table 8.3

A table to show *key recommendations based on this research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Governing bodies need a better understanding of the needs of pregnant and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>returning mother athletes within their sport and clearer sport-specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>protocols are needed to support them through training and a return to sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>In keeping with recent findings of Pullen et al. (2022) there remains a need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for more gender balance on support teams within winter sports to address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unequal power between men and women. Links to Pullen et al. 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Governing bodies and mainstream media need to celebrate the success of elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>athletic mothers from winter sports which will normalise combining these two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>roles for future athletic mothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Having retired athletes within the performance environment (as mentors or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>staff members) would support younger athletes so they are able to develop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>more positive approaches to transitions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These recommendations when viewed in conjunction with the BASES Expert Statement (Atkinson et al., 2022) give some clear actions that are needed to support athletic mothers at all stages of their career.

As I declared at the start of this thesis, I started this journey lacking confidence in my ability and at times I have felt the task was insurmountable, but I have achieved my aims, I have explored my questions and, while this study has raised as many questions as it has answered, I am proud of the finished article which tells the story of five elite female athletic mothers,
highlighting new insights and providing much needed guidance to those working with or supporting elite female athletes.

8.7 Athlete Reflections

While the process of research is designed to provide the researcher with key information to explore a concept, I wanted the athletes to take something from it. Subsequently, at the end of the interviews I asked informally for their thoughts. This showed that there was a benefit to each athlete in talking about their career. They all said how they enjoyed the process, and how nice it was to be able to reflect on and remember their career. They also commented on how it felt a little indulgent being asked to tell their story. This point is possibly a gendered response when placed in the context of the work of Reinharz and Chase (2003) who discuss how women have traditionally felt they lack a voice and potentially how being given one can feel like an indulgence. Two of the athletes spoke about this within the interviews when reflecting on their career. Yvonne talked a lot about how the process was beneficial to her:

‘It’s kind of quite nice to get it out there, I think I thought about all of these things, they float about your head but you don’t really ever tell someone, so it is quite bizarre just blurting them out, yeah it’s kind of quite nice to reflect on what you have achieved and what you have done and yeah it’s it is quite emotional, I get different waves of emotion when I speak about it and I still do when I get interviewed about that games and stuff when I fell over, but yeah it’s it is a huge passion for me and it is lovely to talk about it, I don’t mind talking about it.’

Yvonne, Interview 3 - 9th January 2018

This reflection suitably illustrates the points of Reinharz and Chase (2003) who discuss the potential impact that an interview can have (such as eliciting emotion) and shows how the process of interviewing is emotional and the significance of some of the events in these
women’s lives means that emotion is still raw. At times when Yvonne spoke her emotion was visible and so strong it elicited emotion in me, emphasising the significance of events during her career. Wendy also found the experience emotional but also described how it was a nice reminder of her career.

‘Yeah it is interesting to reflect, particularly reading the first transcript, I was a little bit sad reading it but also felt a bit better about it. Just reflecting back on what I have done over the years and sometimes I don’t think I was that elite or serious and then I look back at the training that I did and the hours that I devoted to it and all the other things that I did around eating and drinking you think ah yeah actually I was very professional in many ways so yeah it is nice – anyway I am egotistical I like talking about myself (laughter)’

Wendy, Interview 3 - 13th November 2017

For both Yvonne and Wendy, the process gave them the chance to reflect on their careers, relive their career highs and have a moment to remember what it was like to be an athlete and what that experience gave them.

As mentioned throughout the athletes’ narratives most of their transitional experiences have been largely positive in nature. Only Rebecca had a more challenging journey through her career, but she still had a very successful life as an athlete. Through talking about their careers each athlete reflected on what their career or their sport had given them outside of the more obvious competitive success.
8.8 Conclusion

Through careful exploration of the stories of five elite female athletes this study has provided a rich understanding of the unique transitional experiences each athlete navigated. With more women returning to sport after having a child it is becoming more normalised for women to combine a sporting career with motherhood. This research has indicated that a successful return can be facilitated by two key factors: support from family and support from the organisation. Like the athletes in Ekengren et al.’s. (2020) study the retired athletes all transitioned into retirement in a positive way and enjoyed being able to focus more on family and other career goals. This was in part because all the athletes had already started to redefine themselves before they officially retired. While numerous findings lend support to previous research and illustrate how there are a number of similarities between the experiences of athletes from different sports, several new findings that will contribute to the literature have been identified, as detailed in Table 8.1. The lack of examples of winter sports athletes who combine motherhood and a career in winter sports may in part explain why there is a lack of understanding of the experiences of athletes within these environments. However, maintaining this culture will only continue to deter female athletes from considering combining these two roles, in contrast to other sports where this is becoming more normalised. The findings of this study illustrate the need to develop understanding and knowledge around how to support athletes from winter sports backgrounds. Women from winter sports or higher risk sports need to be celebrated in the same way that other elite athletic mothers have been (e.g., Paula Radcliffe and Kim Clijsters).

The study has also identified several areas that are worthy of future research, for example, the experiences of elite female athletes who return to sport after having a second baby, as well as those who fail to make a successful return to sport after their first child. Furthermore, there is
still a lack of transition research focused on female athletes within the winter sports environment.

Conducting this research and production of this thesis has taken me on a journey both academically and personally, it has allowed me to learn more about a topic but also more about myself. Likewise, each of the athletes gained something from the process, which allowed them to reconnect with their former athletic self as well as provide a new lens through which to view their career in sport and, for some, to better appreciate their successes. As with all journeys this one has not been without changes of direction and blocks in the road, but these challenges have been the ones that pushed me to develop as a researcher. It’s been the hardest journey but the most rewarding as the findings are ones that I know will make a difference.
References


Deering, R.E., Christopher, S.M. and Heiderscheit, B.C. (2020). From Childbirth to the Starting Blocks: Are We Providing the Best Care to Our Postpartum Athletes?. journal of orthopaedic & sports physical therapy, 50(6), pp.281-284.


Kuhn, T.S. (1962). Historical Structure of Scientific Discovery: To the historian discovery is seldom a unit event attributable to some particular man, time, and place. Science, 136(3518), pp.760-764.


Ryba, T. V., Schinke, R. J., & Tenenbaum, G. (Eds.), (2010). The cultural turn in sport psychology. Morgantown, West Virginia: Fitness Information Technology


https://doi.org/10.2307/2064244


Appendix A - Example interview questions (interview 1)

Example Interview questions for each interview

Interview 1 - Early life and initial pathways into sport.

Thank you for agreeing to participate within this research, today is the first of four potential interviews in which you will be invited to tell me more about your life and career in sport. I am as interested in your life broadly as well as your sporting career. I also don’t really think interview is the right term as you are really telling me your story and we will no doubt have a conversation about that story, so it won’t be rigid with lots of set questions. Today we are going to focus on your early life and your early memories of sport moving on to when you started to take the sport you are now involved in more seriously. For some that is the move to senior level for others the transition to elite performance. I want to know your story so no detail is irrelevant and I am as interested in the description of your life as the emotions and feelings associated with each event. As I have said I won’t ask lots of questions but may follow up if I want a little more detail on a particular point. Please feel free to ask me to stop the recording at any time or if you need a break.

Before we get into the main part of the interview I need to just gather a bit of basic information so I have a few short questions.

Age:

Number of children:

Marital status:

Years competing at elite level:
Years since retirement (if retired):

Career high point:

Perceived level of risk within sport:

So, onto the main interview, as I have said this is your story so I will only ask additional questions as needed.

- Tell me about your early life and initial sporting experiences?

Possible follow up questions

- Who introduced you to your sport?
- When did you realise you had potential to compete at elite level?
- Tell me about the transition to senior/elite sport?

Probing questions such as.

- Tell me more about ............
- What did you mean when you said........
- Could you give me a little more detail about.....
Appendix B – Example interview questions (interviews 2/3)

Interview 2/3 Within career transitions

Thank you so much for talking to me last time, it was great to learn more about your initial pathway into sport. I have a few questions linked to that which would be great to cover before we move on to today’s main interview.

Ask any follow up questions related to interview 1.

That is great, so today we are going to start to look at the main part your career, this interview can end up quite long so if you are limited on time we can always split this and meet up again/talk again to pick things up. As I have said the focus is on your main career today, with a focus on within career transitions as well as what was going on in your life during this point. For example, moving team, moving house, getting married, having an injury, and of course having children. Like interview 1 I will really just ask you one opening question and then just let you tell your story but will also pick up if I want to know more. As before if you do want us to take a break at any point just say.

Last time we left off talking about your move to senior/elite level and you mentioned xxx (pick up the last points they made). Moving forward take me through the next stages in your career and life more broadly.

Possible follow up questions
• Have you suffered many injury setbacks within your career?
• How have you managed injury?
• Ask more about support networks if they aren’t touched on.
• How did becoming a mother impact on your sport?

Probing questions such as:

• What emotions do you remember when…….

• What was the support like when you were going through (insert transition) ….

• Impact of partner/family
Appendix C - Example interview questions (interview 4)

Interview 4 – Next stages in your career or retirement

(This session was far more diverse as the athletes were all at very different stages of their career, so questions were slightly different based on how much was covered in the previous interviews) Below is a guide.

We are at our final interview; it has been so interesting learning more about your career especially the period around becoming a mother. In this final session the focus is looking at retirement and the next stage in your life. I know you haven’t retired yet but I would be interested to know your thoughts on the next stages of your career OR I know you touched on retirement in the last interview, but today I would like to learn more about what that experience was like and what life is like now.

RETIRED – we left off last time talking about that decision to retire from sport, tell me about that period of time.

NOT RETIRED – I know you haven’t even considered retirement from sport, but have you thought about what that might look like for you.

- Other career goals
- What would she do next

Possible follow up questions
• Tell me about the retirement planning you had in place?

• Do you miss competing at elite level?

Probing questions such as:

• Tell me more about the emotional impact of your retirement?

Before we finish it would be great to just reflect on your career to date/the career you have had, how do you feel about your time as an athlete?

Finally, what has the experience been like of talking about your career?
Appendix D – Participant letter and information sheet

Study Title: A study investigating transitional experiences of elite sports women

Dear (insert participants name)

Following our introduction through (insert name) I wanted to formally contact you and invite you to participate in my research project which is being undertaken as part of the requirements for my PhD at The Open University.

This participant information sheet provides details of the research process, your involvement as a research participant, and your rights in the collection, analysis and reporting of data. Please ensure that you read this information carefully and are clear about the research process prior to signing the participant consent form overleaf and committing to be part of this research project. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and I thank you for considering my request.

If you decide to consent to participate in this research, you will consent to a maximum of 4 one-to-one interviews with me the interviewer, relating to your personal and sporting
experiences and in particular the transitional experiences you have encountered. Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted at a venue of your choice.

This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked to have not been determined in advance but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. To give you a guide, questions will be about your early experiences of sport and physical activity, moving to elite level competition, transitions that occurred during your sporting career and retirement from elite competition (if you have retired). Although the Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. Therefore, in the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

I am aiming to conduct the interviews between March 2017 and December 2017. The interviews will be recorded and I will also take a few notes. The notes and recordings will only be reviewed by myself who will transcribe and analyse them. You will not be named in the research but allocated a pseudonym and your sport will be categorised rather than names, for example (insert category of participants sport). You will be sent a copy of all the interview transcripts to check and approve. The original notes and recordings will be kept for a maximum of 10 years before being destroyed.
I, and my supervisors, will be the only people with access to raw data until the research is completed. The data will be held in electronic format on The Open University system, and in a hard copy, in a locked filing cabinet. You have the right during the period of data collection (March 2017 –December 2017) to withdraw from the study at any point and your interview data will be destroyed immediately. Taking part in the study is your decision and you are free to terminate the interview at any time during the interview process and request that your data be discounted, without prejudice.

We hope that through your participation in this study a better understanding can be gained of how female athletes experience sporting career transitions, and in turn that this can enable the various transitions experienced to be managed in a positive manner.

Thank you for your consideration. To confirm your willingness to participate or your wish not to be included in the study all you need to do is complete the form below.

If you have any queries or concerns about the research at any point please feel free to contact me or my supervisors:

Dr Helen Owton (H.Owton@open.ac.uk) (please note supervisor changed half way through)

Dr Caroline Heaney (caroline.heaney@open.ac.uk)

Dr Martin Polley (martin.polley@dmu.ac.uk)
Candice Lingam-Willgoss

The Open University, WELS, Stuart Hall Building - Level 2, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA

Tel: 01908 332310

Mob: 07739710760

Email: c.lingam-willgoss@open.ac.uk

Thank you for your participation, it is much appreciated.
Appendix E – Consent Form

Consent Form

Study Title A study investigating transitional experiences of elite sports women

Researcher: Candice Lingam-Willgoss

Please sign your initials in the box next to each of the points:

I have read the information sheet for participants overleaf.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.

I have received enough information about the study

I was given enough time to consider whether I wanted to participate.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection period, without having to give a reason for withdrawing.
I am aware that in order to guarantee anonymity I will be given a pseudonym and my sport categorised by type

☐ I agree to take part in this study.

__________________________________________   ____________________________
Signature                                      Date

__________________________________________   ____________________________
INVESTIGATOR’S STATEMENT

I confirm that I have carefully explained the nature, demands and foreseeable risks of the proposed study to the volunteer.

Signature                                      Date
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix F – Initial codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>advice for other athletic mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advice from other athletes on pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>athletic identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad relationship with teammate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>becoming a mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>becoming well known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being accepted as an athletic mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an elite athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being away from children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being happy and impact on sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being prepared for life after a baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being ready to retire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being selfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>benefits to child of athletic mums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bond with baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>break in sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>career highs and lows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenges of the sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change of coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change of priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change to relationship with coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changes to protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changing training due to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child giving new focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>childcare challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coach athlete relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>combining motherhood and sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competing in pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>considering comeback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties post-partum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distrust of set up around her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs cheats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Family Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite level competition experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotion connected to child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotional impact of injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entry into sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environment of elite sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feeling as if you have achieved what you have to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feeling like a celebrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feeling she had achieved everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feelings of not competing due to pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finding a new passion-hobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fit training around family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flexible approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>getting an agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>getting married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giving birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>going against convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>going against her coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>going to uni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happy with decision to have child mid-career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>having a plan b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>having life made difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high risk sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Olympics kept me going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>how a baby changes you as a person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>how elite sport changes you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impact of injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impact of partner on career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>implication of injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>injury in a race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury vs pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>juggling identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowing it’s your last Olympics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of firm base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of retirement plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of support following retirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of understanding of being a mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of understanding of pregnancy and athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leaving sport the first time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life after competition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life after sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logistical challenges with a baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>love of sport</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix G - Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of understanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of being an athletic mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing motherhood and sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning to sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition to elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning to retire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being ready to retire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life after sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in retirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting injured/ill</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative performance set up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to compete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The nature of the sport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sport allowed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>