

Examining the Athletic Career Experiences of Canadian Major Junior Hockey Players

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Abstract

This project explored the unique athletic career experiences of Canadian major junior hockey players. Six recently retired players' experiences were collected using semi-structured, qualitative interviews that were analyzed in accordance with the interpretative phenomenological analysis method. Themes identified in each participant's account of their CHL experiences were compared and contrasted across all participants to generate an in-depth portrayal that gave voice to participants' career experiences. The findings have the potential to enhance career and mental health practitioners understandings of the specific sport context, whereby highlighting important considerations when working with athletes undergoing personal and/or career transition.

Keywords: athletes, athletic career transition, interpretative phenomenological analysis, qualitative

Considered one of the world's top professional development junior ice hockey leagues, the Canadian Hockey League (CHL) is comprised of 60 major junior hockey teams among three associate leagues. Each CHL team

operates as a for-profit business, showcasing the talent of elite 16 to 20-year-old players. Every year, more than 1000 young athletes relocate across Canada and the United States to join their respective teams. They must adapt to a new city, a new high school, new teammates, and new coaching staff and if traded to another organization, their transition process begins anew. Many CHL athletes devote up to five years in the league with the hope of advancing to the professional level; however, less than 20% of CHL athletes will ever play a single National Hockey League (NHL) game and only 5% of CHL players will ever achieve long-term NHL careers (Campbell, 2007; Campbell & Parcels, 2013). The CHL has been described as a closed community, with many coaches and management officials who commonly restrict access to the institution and its players (Allain, 2013; Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; Robinson, 1998). Players are socialized to guard the best interests of the institution to protect their own athletic careers (Allain, 2013). Given these barriers, limited exploration has been conducted into the psychological, social, and physical experiences of CHL players during their athletic careers or upon athletic retirement.

During the athletic career, elite athletes' lives are dedicated to sport and are structured by coaching staff and highly organized around competition; however, athletic retirement often serves as a catalyst to athletes' restructuring and independently managing their lives (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013), impacting how athletes perceive themselves, their abilities, and the quality of their lives (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). Athletic career transition literature has suggested that experiences within an athletic career often impact the subsequent retirement transition. For example, pre-retirement planning, psychosocial support, and balance of life have all been associated with positive athletic career transitions (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Conversely, a perceived lack of control over athletic career transitions (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004), failure to achieve sport-related goals (Ceric Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004), and a strong athletic identity (Lally, 2007; Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014) have all been associated with poorer transition outcomes among athletes. Therefore, understanding the athletic career experiences and perceptions of players in the CHL's unique, amateur sport context was the focus of the current study, with the hope that such accounts



would also provide knowledge that could be used in facilitating athletic retirement transitions.

Method

The qualitative method of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected to understand former CHL players' experiences and uncover how they perceived events during their athletic careers. This method prioritizes giving voice to each individual's subjective, personal accounts through its emphasis on the conceptualization of meaning-making processes at the level of the person in context (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

Participants

Participants included six recently retired CHL players, who ranged in age from 20 to 21 years old, and represented top round, late round, and undrafted players in their respective CHL entry drafts. Each participant played between two and four seasons in the CHL and, across their athletic careers, collectively represented 11 different CHL teams. Participants varied in their temporal relation to CHL career termination and, thus, represented retirements that occurred between four weeks and 12 months prior to data collection. Reasons for retirement also varied to include voluntary retirement, de-selection, and exceeding the maximum age of eligibility in the league. Like the majority of CHL athletes, none of the players

represented in this study were drafted to the NHL.

Data Collection and Analysis

Consistent with the IPA method, data was collected using semi-structured interviews lasting between one and three hours. Interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate verbatim transcription. Interview questions traced athletic career and transition experiences from a flexible, temporal perspective—collecting information regarding the participants' experiences as elite hockey players, the circumstances surrounding their retirement from major junior hockey, and their experiences around transition away from elite sport.

Data analysis involved developing an evocative representation that illustrated the relationships between themes derived from the interview data and acknowledged the researcher's own perceptions, conceptions, and processes (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As a provisional registered psychologist, the older sister of a former CHL athlete, and a professional figure skating coach, the first author approached this research project with a unique perspective. Consistent with the IPA approach, subjectivity is not claimed to be removed from the research process but rather is acknowledged for its contribution to the interpretive process of data collection and analysis (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015).

As an iterative and inductive process, IPA data analysis cycled through Smith et al.'s (2009) recommended steps. First, transcripts were open coded and loosely annotated for initial impressions of the interview content, the participant's language, and potential concepts (e.g. identity loss) (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Next, each transcript was reviewed and reread with the intention to engage more deeply with the participant's experience to create a line-by-line analysis that acknowledged additional associations, connections, amplifications, and contradictions. To introduce additional structure into the analysis, all emergent themes were listed; abstraction was used to cluster themes that shared meaning or contextual references while subsumption was used to synthesize or collapse emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009). Next, the data analysis processes shifted to examining participants' accounts for points of convergence and divergence (Smith et al., 2009). Final themes were not selected purely on prevalence but, rather, the interpretative coding was developed from and connected to the core topic of inquiry to generate pattern of themes that best illustrated the meaning of the participants' athletic career experiences and athletic career transition experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Results

In accordance with participant responses and the researcher's interpretation, re-



sults were organized into a total of eight superordinate themes, including (a) precariousness of ice time, (b) frustration over role constraints, (c) being at the mercy of the business, (d) navigating coaching styles, (e) damaged confidence, (f) a culture of silence, (g) an emotional rollercoaster, and (h) personal development. In the interest of space restrictions, a selection of four superordinate themes will be presented with support of participant quotations. In an effort to protect participants' anonymity, all participants will be referred to by pseudonyms.

Being at the Mercy of the Business

Participants recounted the gradual realization that the trajectory of their careers was not based solely on their skill or merit. Participants discussed their athletic careers as being at the mercy of the business interests of their respective hockey clubs and, therefore, largely beyond their control. Jim remarked, "I worked so hard and got absolutely nothing. You're trying to do everything you can, but it's just kind of like a road to nowhere." Paul attributed some of the discrepant opportunities to league structure and politics, stating, "Just the opportunity some guys had...and me sitting there like 'oh, what the heck, I can work just as hard and do more if I had the chance...'" but his dad played in the NHL or something you know. Yeah, that kind of stuff makes me hate hockey. All the politics and gar-

bage like that. Politics and who you know and what you know... that kind of stuff away from the game that shouldn't matter but [it] has the biggest impact on the game."

Trade decisions and de-selection decisions also seemed to emphasize the best interests of the team and not the individual player being impacted. Four participants were faced with the realities of unexpected trades and five of six participants were traded at least once during their CHL career. When asked about these trade experiences, most players indicated that such events occurred "out of the blue" (Tim) and left them "shocked" (Paul) as they "never saw it coming" (Paul). Similarly, Scott recalled his experience of being traded as sudden and unexpected.

And they told me at 5 a.m. and I went home and packed my stuff and I was on the road. So I probably shouldn't have been driving, but [the other team] called me and said 'okay, you have practice at 2 p.m. and you better be here'. I know during that eight-hour drive or whatever it was, I know I was l...probably a bit of a wreck.

Damaged Confidence

Many participants felt their confidence had been damaged by a combination of factors, including the perception of insufficient ice time, role constraints, and mistreatment from coaches. Scott related these

experiences to developing a habit of second-guessing himself. He retraced the thought process, remarking: "I'm not doing something good enough. Does the coach just not like me? Does he have his favourites? I mean am I not skilled enough for this? Am I not experienced enough? Like what do I got to do better?" Similarly, Tim explained that he also felt as though his confidence had been damaged by maltreatment and verbal abuse from one of his head coaches. He explained: "Like everybody can only take [the coach screaming and demeaning] so long...before you do really internalize it and then you start to suffer and then you just don't have the same belief in yourself."

A Culture of Silence

Despite the challenges facing players, participants also indicated that they often felt constrained in their ability to speak out or seek assistance for physical and emotional struggles in fear of negative consequences on their athletic career. While participants recognized that "it was not in [their] best interest," two of the participants interviewed admitted to playing with suspected concussions due to pressure from coaches and the perceived need for ice time to further their athletic careers. Robert recalled playing with an injury:

I remember I broke my hand and I went to the hospital in the morning and got a cast or



whatever and that night I just assumed I wasn't playing. And then [the coach] was kind of like 'Oh no, you're playing. Like it's a broken hand and you've got a cast on and you're fine'. Honestly, our trainer was so scared of [the coach] that he didn't even say anything, so I just played with this cast for a month.

Several participants explained that this cultural expectation of physical impenetrability extended to include an assumption of emotional toughness among CHL athletes as well. Tim noted that there is a "stigma of hockey in general and you're just supposed to be able to tough through anything and get through it and be able to deal with everything and anything." Despite this expectation, Jim explained that following several injuries and battling for ice time he "was in a very, very dark place like all around...it's just like so sad and a long time being miserable and just not mentally kind of stable." Tim explained that after months of trying to navigate difficulties with coaching, he felt as though he was "in a bit of a depressive state," adding that "it was very rare for someone to step out and say I need help" as "you're not sure exactly what the consequences might be." Jim echoed this fear of stigma, stating that he never reached out for help with the pressures and expectations of the CHL because "You can't really trust anyone. We wouldn't

want to admit anything to anyone in case it got back to a coach...."

An Emotional Rollercoaster

Many participants referenced the term "rollercoaster" to describe the "peaks and valleys" of their athletic career experiences in the CHL. Tim explained that battling the fluctuations in his mood was the most challenging part of his major junior hockey experience. Paul shared a similar experience noting that, for him, "winning was the best thing in the world" and, conversely, "when it's not going right you're kind of moody and you're kind of mad, you're kind of on edge all the time." Fluctuating emotions were described to be "flagged to the fortunes of the team at the given time" (Tim). Scott indicated that these cycling emotions could be dependent, not only, on winning or losing, but on ice time opportunities as well, noting "I'd be upset or rattled and that because 'oh, I didn't play tonight' or I'd be happy because 'yeah, like I got the chance to play'... the emotional rollercoaster side of it."

Conclusion

Participants in this study described many similar athletic career experiences. Although participants acknowledged benefits of personal development and the formation of lifelong friendships while playing in the CHL, the perceived lack of control over career trajectories was recounted as an ongoing difficulty throughout

participants' athletic careers. The stigma and shame associated with pursuing support silenced participants and prevented them from seeking resources when coping with physical and emotional challenges. The majority of participants articulated an intense, and often singular focus on their athletic career while playing in the CHL. When this commitment was challenged by unmet personal expectations, coaching difficulties, and organizational decisions that benefited "the business," participants described a loss of self-confidence and a degree of emotional instability.

Although the amateur sporting structure of the CHL is unique (Allain, 2013), the experiences that former CHL players in this study described as having impacted their athletic career experiences and transitions were not. A meta-analysis by Park et al. (2013) identified several factors that have been associated with the quality of athletic career transitions, including athletic identity, voluntariness of the retirement transition, injuries, sport career achievement, and relationships with coaching staff. The participants in this study also discussed most of these factors; however, the organization and culture of the CHL seems to result in participants experiencing a high number of experiences associated with athletic career transition difficulties and a relatively low number of perceived resources. In accordance with Stambulova's (2003) athletic career transition model, this mismatch between resources and barriers



leaves athletes at a greater risk of maladaptive transitions and a greater need for intervention.

This research study intended to explore the athletic career experiences of former major junior hockey players, and although it is not designed to represent the experiences of all CHL athletes, this study provides a representation of multi-level factors that interact and interconnect to impact athletic career experiences and subsequent athletic retirement transitions. The athletic career transitions of participants in the current study were not solely impacted by individual factors including age, athletic ability, and physical aptitudes (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Rather, the social system of teammates, coaches, parents, and sport culture also played a significant role in how participants experience their athletic careers and, subsequently, their athletic career transitions (McMahon, 2005). The findings, taken together, have the potential to enhance career practitioner understandings of the sporting environment and the specific experiences of this unique group of athletes. As such, career transition assistance and interventions should take into account the competition level, sport, and athlete age (McKnight, Bernes, Gunn, Chorney, Orr, & Bardick, 2009) as well as environmental factors (e.g. culture, sport context, sport structure; Park et al., 2013).

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