

The Athletic Reckoning: A Study of Former College Athletes' Identity, Realization, and Career Preparation

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Athletic identity, as scholars have demonstrated, shapes the perceptions and experiences of college athletes. Likewise, scholars have also shown that career preparation (or the lack thereof) is an important component of athletes' general preparation for life after sport. This study focuses on former college athletes' perception of how their athletic identity and commitment to their athletic role shaped their career preparedness. It does so by interviewing former college athletes who have had the requisite time to reflect on their career preparedness, and by considering what the authors call 'the athletic reckoning.' This is the juncture at which participants come to the realization that their athletic career is over and, often correspondingly, take on a heightened focus regarding their vocational development. Findings also shed light on the job market experiences of unprepared athletes. The study has implications for both scholars of intercollegiate sport and for practitioners in athletic departments who work with current and former college athletes.

Keywords: athletic identity, career preparedness, college athletes, athletic reckoning

Given the scale and complexity of college athletics, a thorough appreciation of the college athlete experience is necessary. Furthermore, since college has both a profound and prolonged effect on the trajectory of attendees' lives, it is important to consider the implications of their experiences (Cairó & Cajner, 2018; Stambulova et al., 2009). Athletes' collegiate experiences differ from those of the general student body due to the intensive nature of college sport participation (Paule-Koba & Farr, 2013). Athletes compete on college sport teams that are permitted 20 hours of practice per week during the season, and no more than eight hours of practice per

week in their sport's off-season (NCAA, 2024). Hour limits are necessary to ensure athletes have enough time for their academic responsibilities. In reality, however, athletes often spend more time in the sport environment than rules permit (Ayers et al., 2012). Therefore, athletes can find balancing sport participation with academics challenging (Hextrum, 2020; Navarro & McCormick, 2017).

College athletes' career preparation may not only be inhibited by time constraints, but also by the norms of their sport subcultures which often emphasize a prioritization of sport over academics (Coakley, 2021; Rubin & Moses, 2017). An intense dedication to sport, however, can affect athletes' future. Individuals' intense dedication to sport is associated with identity foreclosure and strong athletic identity development, whereby individuals identify exclusively with their athletic role (Brewer et al., 2017). Strong athletic identities are linked to diminished academic identity, in which individuals' athletic role eclipses their academic role (Brown et al., 2000). This can be concerning, as athletes with diminished academic identities are less inclined to explore vocational development and are more likely to experience a turbulent transition out of sport (Kidd et al., 2018; Petitpas & France, 2010; Stokowski et al., 2019).

Athletes' management of their athletic and academic roles, as well as their preparation for life after college sport has garnered considerable attention (Park et al., 2013). Despite this, college athletes continue to feel unprepared for life after sport, as recent studies have demonstrated (e.g., Bopp et al., 2024; Harry & Hammit, 2024). The lack of resolution in addressing athletes' preparedness underscores the need for further investigation. Furthermore, the extant literature focuses more broadly on college athletes' preparations for life after sport (e.g., Lally, 2007; Lavelle & Robinson, 2007; McKnight et al., 2009; Paule-Koba & Farr, 2013; Stokowski et al., 2019; Zvosec et al., 2023). This restricts the depth with which each aspect of preparing for life after sport can be explored (e.g., diet, exercise, psychological, social, wellness). While numerous studies have examined athletes' preparedness, fewer have explored specific components of athletes' career preparation in-depth.

Athletes' career preparation is crucial, as some athletes transition directly from college into the workforce (Stokowski et al., 2019). Studies on college athletes' career preparedness or related concepts (e.g., career maturity, career readiness, career development), have primarily used quantitative approaches to examine current college athletes (e.g., Davis et al., 2022; Houle & Kluck, 2015; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Parietti et al., 2016; Van Raalte et al., 2017). The quantitative study of college athletes' career preparedness is necessary, but insufficient. Quantitative inquiry can identify relationships between the athletic role and career preparedness but cannot explain how or why. Qualitative methodology can. Examining in-depth the experiences of former college athletes can also make a telling contribution. Former athletes know precisely how prepared they were as they have tested it. Current athletes can only share how prepared they think they are. Former athletes who were well-prepared for their careers can share insights into their preparation process, while those who were less prepared can explain the reasons behind it. This will provide a clear illustration of what college athletes can do to improve their career preparedness.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine former college athletes' perceptions of how their athletic identity and commitment to their athletic role shaped their career preparedness. To meet the purpose of the study the following research question guided the study:

RQ1: How do former college athletes believe their athletic identity and commitment to their athletic role influenced their career preparedness?

Literature Review and Conceptual Frameworks

The study was guided by the conceptual frameworks of athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017) and career preparedness (Marciniak et al., 2022). Athletic identity has been broadly used in the college athlete literature to ascertain the importance of sport in individuals' lives. In their recent review of the career preparedness literature, Marciniak and co-authors (2022) proposed an organizing framework to consolidate the fragmented body of career preparedness research into a unified conceptual framework.

Athletic Identity

Originating in the fields of psychology and sociology, and used extensively in the college athlete literature (e.g., Huml et al., 2018; Newton et al., 2020), athletic identity is conceptualized by Brewer et al (1993) as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role" (p. 237). Established and developed in the form of a survey instrument (Athletic Identity Measurement Scale, AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993), the concept of athletic identity has also informed numerous qualitative works (e.g., Newton et al., 2020; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Originally developed as a ten-item unidimensional construct, athletic identity was later redefined by Brewer and Cornelius (2001) as a seven-item multi-factor construct, comprised of social identity (i.e., "I consider myself an athlete"), exclusivity (i.e., "Sport is the most important thing in my life"), and negative affectivity (i.e., "I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport").

Although the athletic identity of college athletes has been studied extensively, findings regarding athletes' competition level are inconsistent (Sturm et al., 2011). For example, Huml (2018) discovered that Division I (DI) and Division II (DII) athletes exhibited stronger athletic identities compared to their Division III (DIII) counterparts. This finding aligns with the recent work of Stokowski and co-authors (2022), which determined that DIII college athletes demonstrated a weak identification with their athletic roles. Mathews and co-authors (2021), however, did not find the athletic identities of football players to differ significantly according to NCAA division. Sturm and colleagues (2011) also reported comparable findings between DI and DIII athletes, as did Smith and Hardin (2018). Greater consensus regarding the strength of athletic identity exists when comparing male and female athletes, with male athletes exhibiting stronger athletic identities (Sturm et al., 2011), which is attributed to females prioritizing their academics (Rubin & Moses, 2017).

Athletic identities are believed to be dynamic, shifting and evolving over time. Research has found athletic identities dim as athletes progress through college and as graduation approaches (August, 2020; Lally & Kerr, 2005). Further, numerous studies have reported that athletes experience a loss of identity after college (Bopp et al., 2024; Harry & Weight, 2021; Manthey & Smith, 2023; Menke & Germany, 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019). College athletes' athletic identities are also influenced by their support teams, such as coaches, whose regard for academic ability can predict athletes' athletic identity (Feltz et al., 2013). Athletes' athletic identity can also be impacted by the organizational culture of DI college athletics, as it pushes athletes toward a greater focus on athletics at the expense of their academics (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016).

Possessing a strong athletic identity or holding collegiate athlete status can be strategically leveraged to enhance career opportunities and compensation. Athletes with strong athletic identities are more enthusiastic regarding their future and more likely to pursue a career in a sport-related profession (Weight et al., 2014, 2015). Athletes also report higher wages and job satisfaction compared to non-athletes (Sauer et al., 2013; Weight et al., 2018), with their membership on collegiate sport teams seen more favorably than non-sport experiences (Chalfin et al., 2015).

To address the study's purpose, Brewer and Cornelius's (2001) three constructs of athletic identity and the existing body of athletic identity literature (August, 2020; Harry & Weight, 2021; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Stokowski et al., 2019) guided the exploration of former athletes' social identity, the significance of sport in their lives during and after college, and how they were affected by poor athletic performances.

Career Preparedness

The study was also guided by the conceptual framework of career preparedness. To date, researchers have adopted several comparable terms to examine athletes' career preparedness, including career readiness (e.g., August, 2020; Davis et al., 2022), career maturity (e.g., Houle & Kluck, 2015; Mathews et al., 2021), career development (e.g., Park et al., 2017), and career planning (e.g., Lally & Kerr, 2005; Tyrance et al., 2013).

In their recent review of the literature, Marciniak and colleagues (2022) presented career preparedness as an organizing framework, which they defined as "the attitudes, knowledge, competencies, and behaviors necessary to deal with expected and unexpected work- or career-related transitions and changes" (p. 22). Their review also found career preparedness is best explained by three components: (a) attitudes (i.e., an individual's thoughts and feelings toward a career decision and entering the workforce; Crites, 1978), (b) knowledge and competencies (i.e., skills and abilities pertaining to career preparedness that are developed by an individual; Akkermans et al., 2015), and (c) behaviors (i.e., the behavior of career exploration; Hirschi et al., 2015).

As acknowledged by Brewer and Petitpas (2017), the career planning and exploration literature is also inconsistent. Several studies have identified inverse relationships between athletic identity and factors related to career preparedness (Houle

& Kluck, 2015; Murphy et al., 1996; Tyrance et al., 2013), while others have found no significant effect (Brown & Hartley, 1998; Kornspan & Etzel, 2001). In contrast, some research has reported a positive association between athletic identity and career decision-making self-efficacy (Cabrita et al., 2014) as well as career exploration (Poux & Fry, 2015).

College athletes' sport participation restricts athletes' opportunities for career exploration as it acts as a barrier to internships and job experience during college (Turick et al., 2021). To temper athletes' lack of preparedness while accounting for the restrictions and time constraints athletes face, scholars have recommended athletes place a greater emphasis on developing multiple identities (e.g., Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Harry & Weight, 2021) universities develop purposeful athlete programming (Kloetzer & Taylor, 2023; Navarro et al., 2019) and educate athletes on how best to utilize support systems (Davis et al., 2022; Ishaq et al., 2023).

The inconsistencies in the college athlete athletic identity and career preparedness literatures speak to the difficulty of examining a vast sport setting with multiple levels of competition and dozens of sports (cf., Stokowski et al., 2019). Studies examining college athletes' experiences are often restricted to athletes from one institution, sport, or division (e.g., Adent et al., 2024; Zvosec et al., 2023). But college athletes' experiences vary greatly (Coakley, 2021). To maximize the representativeness of the study's sample and minimize its limitations, all divisions and sports were included in this present study.

Method

The researchers approached the current study from a phenomenological perspective to understand how the participants make meaning (Van Manen, 2007) of their experience of how their athletic identity and commitment to their athletic role influenced their career preparedness. Through the interview process, participants reconstructed and reflected on their experiences as they were lived, felt, and understood (Wertz, 2011). A phenomenological approach allowed space for the temporality and transitory nature of human experiences (Seidman, 2013), which helped the researchers grasp what was pivotal to participants' experiences in this study, as interviews were conducted after the period of time under investigation.

Participants and Procedures

Upon receiving institutional approval, participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Bryman, 2012). Participants were recruited through two of the researchers' college sport networks and via private social media groups exclusive to former college athletes (e.g., NCAA After the Game LinkedIn group). Upon receipt of approval to share the study from group administrators, an initial post informing group members of the study was sent in the Fall of 2023, with one follow up post sent one month after the initial post. Data collection continued into Spring 2024. To be eligible for participation, individuals must have graduated no less than four years and no more than twenty years prior to the interview. This

range was considered appropriate as it facilitated the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of college athletes. It avoids being overly specific to a particular cohort of former athletes, while also allowing for an adequate period between graduation and the interview to enable participants to reflect on the effectiveness of their preparation.

The study's purpose along with requirements for participation were shared, with those interested in participating asked to contact the primary investigator (PI). The PI then coordinated with participants to determine an appropriate time for conducting the interviews via Zoom. Twenty-two semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted by two researchers. For a breakdown of participant demographics, see Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Stage of Athletic Reckoning

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Sport	Graduation	Division	Athletic Reckoning Stage
Anna	Female	White	Soccer	2011	DI	2
David	Male	White	Swim	2012	DI	1
Holly	Female	White	Soccer	2019	DI	1
Jane	Female	White	Tennis	2017	DI	1
Mike	Male	White	Soccer	2015	DIII	3
Tina	Female	Hispanic	Soccer	2018	NAIA	3
Caitlin	Female	White	Lacrosse	2014	DIII	2
Craig	Male	White	Baseball	2011	DI	3
Kyle	Male	White	Baseball	2007	DI	2
Taylor	Female	Hispanic	Swim	2020	DI	2
Abby	Female	White	Softball	2020	DI	2
Jeannie	Female	White	Softball	2005	DI	1
Chris	Male	Black	Track	2013	DI	1
Katie	Female	White	Softball	2019	DI	3
Lilly	Female	White	Lacrosse	2006	DI	3
Rosie	Female	White	Track	2006	DI	3
Scott	Male	White	Hockey	2015	DI	1
Jasmine	Female	Black	Basketball	2007	DI	2
Leo	Male	White	Gymnastics	2018	DI	2
Tom	Male	White	Soccer	2010	DII	3
Aaron	Male	White	Baseball	2011	DIII	2
Henry	Male	White	Track	2015	DI	3

The previously identified conceptual frameworks and the review of the extant literature informed the interview guide. Probing and interpreting questions were employed to foster greater insight into participants' lived experiences (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Interviews began with fact-based questioning (e.g., "What sport(s) did you play at the collegiate level?", and "What college(s) did you attend?") to put participants at ease. Questions then evolved to examine participants' college selection (e.g., "How did you end up at your specific college?", and "how did you decide to pursue your specific degree program?"). Questions were framed to acknowledge the variance in how college athletes may select their college and degree. For instance, some athletes choose a school they believe to be the best fit, while other athletes choose the school extending the greatest scholarship offer. The interviews then progressed to examine the collegiate experience of participants, which included questions on athletic identity ("How important to your identity was your athletic role throughout your years as a college athlete?") and career preparedness ("How would you describe your behavior toward career preparedness in college?").

Interviews then segued into discussions about participants' career experiences. Questions probed how athletes' initial career experiences were shaped by their collegiate years (e.g., "How were your initial years in your career impacted by your career preparation in college?", and "How did your initial career experiences align with how prepared you felt as you approached graduation?"). The interviews concluded with participants asked what they might have done differently during college, knowing what they know now, and with requests for advice they would provide to current and future college athletes.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and sent back to the participants for member checking to enhance trustworthiness (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Participants were given the opportunity to amend, add, or retract any data. All participants were satisfied with their transcriptions. In the first cycle of coding, the researchers coded the interviews individually using initial or open coding, whereby the researchers broke down the data into discrete parts, and compared them for similarities and differences (Saldaña, 2021). The researchers then met as a team to review their initial codes and to establish a codebook for second cycle coding. During second cycle coding, all transcriptions were coded a second time using a combination of two coding methods. The researchers employed both axial coding in which the number of codes was reduced by combining codes, and pattern coding during which themes began to emerge as similarly coded data were grouped together (Saldaña, 2021). After second cycle coding, the researchers met to discuss and finalize themes. The researchers' analysis by way of in-depth discussion produced the athletic reckoning process in which four themes emerged as well as several associated subthemes.

Positionality

It is important to acknowledge that the researchers inherently come to this research with biases as they are all former college athletes. As such, the researchers

regularly confronted their own biases as it related to the research. Throughout the process of conducting this research, the researchers' positionality as former college athletes contributed to reflexive findings. Frequently during the analysis process, discussions returned to their shared experiences as college athletes. The researchers even found themselves questioning how well they had transitioned from their own athletic identity to professionals, as they all currently pursue academic careers in the sport discipline.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine former college athletes' perception of how their athletic identity and commitment to their athletic role shaped their career preparedness. In addressing the study's purpose, data analysis identified four broad themes: Deep-Rooted Athletic Identity, The Athletic Reckoning, Deficient Preparedness, Regrettable Scholar, Unregrettable Athlete. Athletic identity was deep-rooted within the experience of every participant and emerged as an overwhelming experience shaping all aspects of the study's findings. Given the interconnectedness of athletic identity's to the study, as well as its role as a standalone theme, it informed the remaining themes to varying degrees. Findings, therefore, are structured to reflect how (a) Deep-Rooted Athletic Identity interconnects with (b) The Athletic Reckoning, (c) Deficient Preparedness, and (d) Regrettable Scholar, Unregrettable Athlete.

Deep-Rooted Athletic Identity

This study provides another dose of material for the ballooning body of literature emphasizing and detailing the deep-rooted nature of the athletic identity. However, our findings diverge from much of the current literature indicating college athletes suffer a loss of identity after retirement (Bopp et al., 2024; Lally, 2007; Manthey & Smith, 2023; Stokowski et al., 2019). Rather, our study found that the athletic identity remains a central part of former athletes' identities, long after their collegiate careers have ended.

Among the 22 former athletes interviewed, the degree of identification was high across the board, if difficult to quantify exactly in these qualitative sources. But certainly, the stickiness of athletic identity deserved pause. Our participants talked about their athletic identity as a near constant through college and continuing into adulthood. Even when the circumstances changed dramatically, identity seemed to be a lagging indicator. Said Anna, "It's because I enjoyed it so much. I feel like in my heart and in my head, I am a soccer player even to this day. I'm 33 years old and I still consider myself a soccer player." Craig has had a similar experience:

I don't know, even now, I mean, it's weird because I don't see myself identifying that way. But then when we do an icebreaker at work or something, I always go to my go-to, which is I played baseball. So, I guess maybe in a sense I do sort of identify that I was an athlete and played baseball, but I try not to, or maybe consciously don't think I do.

The sport was different for Abby, as was the location in the United States, but the stickiness of athletic identity sounded similar, “Even to this day, I’m still like, ‘Oh, I played softball at [University].’ It’s still something that I associate really heavily with.”

As demonstrated by previous scholars (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Mathews et al., 2021) there can be academic costs to this intense athletic identity. The hyphenated student-athlete (Paule & Gilson, 2010) was rarely balanced in our sample group. As Kyle pointed out, the attention for academic achievements often didn’t match up to those for athletics:

Identity-wise, it was definitely athlete first. And I think some of that was probably me internally, you like that and you’re proud of it. I mean, you dedicate so much of your day and your week to that, it’s kind of all consuming, but also just culturally, it’s like it’s the only thing that people talk about with you. I mean, I would come home on breaks or whatever, and it’s like people are asking about practices and sports and team and the upcoming season. And so, it’s also driven externally quite a bit too.

Or as Aaron put it, much more succinctly, “So yeah, I was proud to be an athlete. I would say, at the time, I was definitely an athlete-student, not a student-athlete.”

Like the extant student-athlete athletic identity literature (e.g., Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020; Harry & Weight, 2021; Smith & Hardin, 2018), we too found participants identified strongly with their athletic roles during college. Importantly, our findings also illumine the challenge of shedding or suppressing strong athletic identities well beyond athletic retirement. This is important as it contrasts with many studies of former athletes (e.g., Bopp et al., 2024; Lally, 2007; Stokowski et al., 2019), as findings suggest an athletic identity can remain a salient part of individuals’ long-term and after-sport identity.

The Athletic Reckoning

A different phenomenon rose to the surface as we analyzed the interviews: the athletic reckoning. We define athletic reckoning as the watershed moment athletes realize the formal, organized portion of their athlete life is over, or soon to be over, and begin to shift their focus to other aspects of their development, specifically their academics and career preparedness. We found athletic reckoning to be inherently tied to athletic identity, career preparation, and academic focus.

The occurrence of an athletic reckoning varies based on a wide set of circumstances. For some, it can be as simple as the exhaustion of eligibility and/or graduation. For others, it’s being cut from a team or having a scholarship revoked (Burns et al., 2012). Or it’s a career ending injury (Perrier et al., 2014) or the realization that there’s no professional future. We also noted the variable timing of athletic reckoning, which we found generally occurred at three different stages 1) before competition ended, 2) just as competition ended, or 3) long after competition ended (Stage 1 = 6 athletes, Stage 2 = 8 athletes, Stage 3 = 8 athletes). Interestingly, only DI athletes experienced an early athletic reckoning, and athletes from small colleges (e.g., DII, DIII, and NAIA) were among those who experienced late reckonings. This finding is surprising, as it counters prior research that has attributed the organizational cul-

ture of DI universities to heightened athletic identities (e.g., Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Our findings suggest neither the Division nor sport impacted the strength of athletic identity, which aligns with prior research determining no difference in athletic identity according to Division (e.g., Mathews et al., 2021; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Sturm et al., 2011). Our findings may be explained by the low-profile sports our participants played and suggest athletic identity development or athletic reckonings of athletes in lower-profile sports may not vary considerably across Divisions or sports. Six athletes interviewed explained the process of winding down as a student athlete before the athletic music stopped. Consider Holly:

I kind of knew from the get-go that I was going to be done in four years, and then what was I going to do then? And so yeah, I had kind of been thinking about it for a while, just because I knew that I probably wasn't going to go play pro.

Scott also experienced his athletic reckoning voluntarily, and prior to graduation, "I took the opportunity in school. I became curious and wanted to learn. It stemmed from knowing I wanted to do more with hockey, but knowing I was excited for my next journey in life."

David, on the other hand, realized after his junior season that he would not make the Olympic team. A specific event, therefore, helped him downshift and move away from athletics towards academics:

And honestly? Reflecting back on it, I was extremely fortunate that the [Olympic] trials fell when they did. For me, it was at a point in my college career where I still had enough time to really turn things around academically. I wasn't doing poorly but really turn things around and improve my GPA. I had enough time then to create networks, understand where I wanted to go, get a vision while I was still in school, and adapt my courses to move towards that vision. Because if that had happened in my senior year, I think I would've been up shit creek without a paddle.

Jeannie and Chris had similar experiences to David, in that an event such as an injury incentivized them to shift their focus from sport and explore vocational opportunities, as Jeannie noted:

Getting injured was advantageous because I was able to do an internship and I was able to use my year off to catch up and explore education. Getting injured was like, 'Okay, there is more to life than this.' And that is when I really kicked into gear academically, career-wise.

For eight athletes, the athletic reckoning arrived when we might expect it. It occurred when one's eligibility expired. The student was forced to grapple with the end, or with the beginnings of the end of athletic competition. Caitlin reflected that the "Band-Aid was ripped off with no warning. It was hard and a weird state of mind. And I remember thinking, 'Well, what do I do now? What do I do now?'" I don't think I was prepared for that." For these athletes there was outright shock as the end arrived, despite the 4-year parameter of college competition being a ubiquitous fact in American athletic life. Said Abby:

Midway through senior year I was like, "Oh my gosh, there's a real world

out there. What's a job even look like?" I went to my academic advisor and being like "Okay, so here is my major. What do I do with Art History?" and so I thought a little about museums or some sort of art auctioning.

Perhaps most interesting are the eight former athletes who indicated that their reckoning was delayed well beyond the time when their final competition occurred. The reckoning dragged on for months or years. For six of these participants, transitioning to a Graduate Assistant, coaching or a sports related career served as a bridge that allowed the athletic identity to remain intact. Lilly was among those who used coaching to blur the finality of her athletic career ending: "I don't know if maybe some of the underlying reasons why I just transitioned into coaching was a needing to figure out how to close the door with soccer and athletics in general." As did Tom:

I think I wanted to just keep playing soccer and either try to play after soccer somewhere or coach. I wanted to stay in soccer in whatever capacity I could. So, it was somewhat of an easy transition to go from being a collegiate player to a collegiate coach.

Like Lilly and Tom, Tina was not prepared to walk away from sports, and found a path for staying in athletics, "When I got the chance to come back and be a graduate assistant for athletics, that was my way of getting reconnected with the sports world, getting my foot back into that athletic world."

Our conceptualization of 'The Athletic Reckoning' provides an important contribution to the extant athletic identity and career preparedness literature as it pinpoints a pivotal moment in all college athletes' career preparedness journey. By identifying the significance of the athletic reckoning's timing, our findings illumine how earlier athletic reckonings may enhance career preparation and smoothen transitions out of sport. We also found our participants experienced a watershed moment where their mindset altered, instead of a gradual shift overtime. Further, our findings indicate this moment can occur long after sport retirement, which does not align with prior work (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Steele et al., 2020). Overall, the idea of 'Athletic Reckoning' deserves further investigation. Although it seems straight-forward ("In sports, it's kind of like you have an expiration date" explained Jasmine, for example), in reality the dimming of one's athletic identity and career is often a complicated, traumatic, and drawn-out life experience.

Deficient Preparedness

Ideally, college is spent preparing for and exploring future careers (Turick et al., 2021). However, this theme reflects former athletes' sense of ill-preparedness resulting from their dominant athletic identity. Participants described experiencing career indecision and confusion, missing professional development opportunities due to their involvement in sport, and using graduate school to correct deficient preparedness. They also shared the consequences they faced due to their poor career preparation.

Fourteen participants explained how their athletic priorities during college left them insufficiently prepared. For example, Leo shared what he would change, in hindsight, to better prepare himself, "What I would've changed is maybe less about

specifically what I'm studying, but putting the emphasis on analyzing what careers are, what actual jobs exist in the world in anything that I think is interesting." When asked why he had not put the emphasis on analyzing what careers are, he responded "The thing is, although gymnastics gave me an unbelievable amount of opportunities, it kept me from being able to learn about things, other things, areas of interest and passion." Tina also explained how sport was her focus:

As an athlete, the focus is just your sport. Yeah, you're doing your homework, going to class, and getting the grades. But at the end of the day, your focus, your attention, is in the sport. The biggest thing that did not prepare me for a career was that my mind was so plugged in the athletics world.

This was also true for Craig, a baseball player who harbored thoughts of a professional career, "I just never really thought about what if baseball never works out."

All participants who experienced a delayed athletic reckoning, and half of the participants who experienced their reckoning as they graduated treated career preparation as an afterthought. For instance, Anna struggled for direction after she graduated, "I was lost after college and maybe I would've had better direction, which maybe would've set me up." Anna continued to reflect on her preparedness by recalling an uncomfortable job interview. She recollected:

The recruiter was like, 'You're a little unprepared. I suggest you go back, review your resume, and figure out what you want, and then maybe come back to us.' And then when I went home from the interview, I was like, 'No, I actually don't know what I want, and I don't know what I like.'

In discussing what he would do differently if he could have his time over again, Tom mentioned, "Maybe thinking about what's the degree I want to get, how's that going to translate to a job? So, maybe being a little more hyper-focused academic and career wise parallel to soccer." Craig felt his lack of preparation was caused by a failure to prioritize work experience, "I remember looking, and starting to look at internships. And this is my last year. It's like, 'No, no, you should have been looking at internships a year or two ago.'" He ended up "doing a little bit of a scramble like, 'Oh yeah, what do I do?'"

Nine participants corrected their lack of career preparedness by pursuing a graduate degree with greater academic purpose. For example, Henry explained, "I learned my lesson from undergrad. The reason I am in my current career is through networking while I pursued my MBA." Kyle acknowledged his undergraduate degree misaligned with his career aspirations and doubted he was the only one. He said, "I had to go back, I had to go back to school again. And it's like, 'How many athletes are doing that?' That's unfortunate." Aaron was one of those athletes, and lamented the time and cost of graduate school:

I figured out I wanted to go into accounting. My father-in-law is a CPA, so I learned a little about that pathway. But it sure would have been nice to just go and get my four-year accounting degree straight out of the gates and be done with school.

Jasmine chose graduate school because she was "terrified of real life." She said, "I have no idea what I'm going to do, I've got to go back and figure this out."

Former athletes who felt unprepared for their careers also shared their experience of the job market. As years had passed since their graduation, they were able to describe in detail how their career progressed. For instance, Rosie explained:

I had a couple of interviews before I graduated. One of them was with a special school for behaviorally challenged girls. It was really cool what they were trying to do. But it was minimal pay, and not really for someone with a teaching degree. I thought I wanted to focus on teaching. I ended up not taking the job. The job search was so overwhelming. I went into the restaurant industry for a while. Then I became a restaurant manager. I did that for a couple of years. I've done various jobs. It's so hard. I just found it difficult to think about a career in college.

Mike also spent years after college exploring careers, before settling on his current occupation in the nutrition industry:

Let's see, I had three jobs straight out of college. I coached. From about five to eight AM, I worked at a FedEx facility doing packages. And then during the day, I worked at a community college at their bookstore. And so, I had those three jobs going for about a year and then decided, "All right, I want to get into the workforce. I want to have one job with a salary and work the nine to five life." That job was in the auto industry. I did that for about two years. And again, it just wasn't a great situation. I wasn't into it; I wasn't interested in it. So started looking for roles, new jobs, and this one job came up that was in a nutrition company. So, I said, "All right. I never thought about getting into nutrition," but being an athlete, I was very nutrition conscious. Right?

In line with the emerging career preparedness literature, we found college athletes feel unprepared for their career after sport (August, 2020; Houle & Kluck, 2015; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Tarver III, 2020; Tyrance et al., 2013). However, by qualitatively investigating former athletes' preparedness in-depth, our findings provide a needed contribution by capturing the perspective of athletes who have tested their career preparedness. Former athletes were able to express how and why they were unprepared, the consequences of poor preparation, and how they tried to mitigate their lack of preparedness. This approach proved valuable, as findings suggest a delayed athletic reckoning may lead athletes to attend graduate school. Better career preparation might have saved these athletes from both the time commitment, and expense of graduate school.

Although Zvosec et al. (2023) recently examined former athletes' career preparedness, their sample consisted of high-profile student athletes in one sport (Division I football players). By including athletes from low-profile sports, all divisions, and both men's and women's teams, our findings represent a far broader population. Since low-profile college athletes' odds of competing professionally are likely lower, one could argue their career preparedness is even more important.

Regrettable Scholar, Unregrettable Athlete

The theme of Regrettable Scholar, Unregrettable Athlete underscores this dis-

cordant relationship between student and athlete. The participants in this study had divergent experiences when reflecting on their time as college athletes. While the participants did not hold many regrets regarding their sporting experience, the same could not be said for their academic experience. The theme of Regrettable Scholar, Unregrettable Athlete addresses the dichotomous experience of college athletes who perceived their athletic experiences positively while simultaneously regretting their academic experiences.

Academic Regrets

Fourteen participants in this study regretted their academic experiences in a myriad of ways. These regrets were sometimes the result of personal academic choices, but also due to the time demands associated with college sports, and in some cases the influence or coercion from athletic coaches.

Over half of the participants with academic regrets bemoaned their own lack of effort. For instance, Jasmine said, "I do regret that I really didn't study as much as I knew that I could. I was just kind of coasting." Katie very plainly stated that she did not have the appropriate academic focus, "I feel like I really didn't take school as seriously as I should. So, it caught up with me in the end."

For one participant the lack of academic focus and associated regrets still haunts them. Leo said, "I just maintained good grades. I wasn't a poor student, just wasn't as good as I'm now realizing I could have been, which is super, super frustrating for me right now."

Athletic Satisfaction

Not one of the participants in this study regretted their athletic experience. Some participants spoke more generally about how they did not regret their experience as a college athlete while others had more concrete reasons for holding their experiences in high regard. A notable pattern within this theme is that the participants' satisfaction could be largely attributed to the intangible skills related to personal and professional development learned through sport participation, not to say there was no satisfaction in the physical pursuit as well.

Rosie recognized the challenges that came with the college athlete experience and yet still labeled it positively saying, "Yeah, it was just all-consuming, and I don't regret a lot of it or anything like that. I think it was a really great experience for a lot of reasons." An example of the appreciation for the soft skills learned through sport came from Mike when he said:

I think sports for me, in general, taught me a lot in life. Discipline was a big one being applied. Getting to where you need to be on time, listening, paying attention. Those were huge. Being a team player, learning how to basically shake off mistakes and do better.

Craig commented on both the perceived social and career benefits associated with his experience, "There are so many relationships I still have today with people. And I mean, it is really a resume builder in a lot of different ways." Jasmine also spoke of the virtues of college sport participation, further reinforcing the social benefits

saying, "...it was what it was, and it was the most amazing experience in my life, and I still have the greatest friendships from that." Chris summarized this idea of the future life skills attained through college sport participation when discussing the advice he would give to current college athletes. He said, "I hope that it provides them with the resilience to handle what's to come in real life. I think that's what my experience did."

Even the participants who struggled with their athletic performance regarded their sport experience as mostly positive. For example, in the case of Henry, he said, "But I was satisfied with it at the end. I was satisfied with the (athletic) struggles and everything." Taylor echoed a similar sentiment:

I'm very happy that I swam in college. I'm happy I didn't quit, and I swam all four years. And I'm happy that I went through kind of the struggle and the transitional struggle that I went through because it's gotten me here.

An example of a participant acknowledging satisfaction from the physical pursuit of sport came from Jane when she simply commented, "I gave it my all on the court. So, when it was all said and done, I hung it up. I was satisfied with what I did." She went on to recognize the feeling of satisfaction that came from her on-court growth commenting, "For me, to actually play at [University] and play for five years, I was satisfied with how far I came."

Lack of Mentorship

As participants discussed mentorship beyond their athletic participation, all but five participants deemed it insufficient. This was particularly true of former athletes attending smaller schools, like Tom who explained:

There just wasn't good input and advice of, 'What do you like? And here's what you can do and here's where you can go and here's what a career looks like.' I really had none of that. I felt like I had very little support.

Tom's experience was not unique. Rosie shared a similar experience, "There was never any thought given to what might happen for me. I was recruited for this sport. There was never a mention of like, 'maybe you should have a plan B in case sport doesn't work out.'" Although athletes expressed dissatisfaction with institutional mentorship, 10 participants acknowledged the existence of resources and admitted fault for failing to utilize institutional support. For instance, Chris confessed, "I wish I would have been more intentional about networking, career opportunities and attending career fairs. Actually attending career fairs and taking them seriously." Craig was equally honest in his self-assessment of his intentions during college, "They gave us study hall, tutors, everything. I'd say a lot of it was on me. I had all the resources. I decided I'd party and play ball rather than tap into all that. It was more on me."

As athletes described themselves as Regrettable Scholars but Unregrettable Athletes, athletes articulated their regrets and assumed partial blame for some of their actions that contributed to their suboptimal career preparedness. This is a key finding, as athletes acknowledged how their own failings contributed to their lack of preparedness. This is likely explained by our sample's benefit of hindsight. Former

athletes have had time to marinate on their experiences and gain greater emotional distance from the events they are describing, which allows for more honest reflections (Liberman & Trope, 2008).

This finding is also noteworthy as institutional programming is often proposed as the solution to transition issues (Navarro et al., 2019). Our findings show the building and implementation of resources, interventions, and programing alone is not enough. Athletes do not appear to see sufficient value in available programing or appreciate how engagement can help. To promote greater athlete engagement, encouragement from influential figures may be required, such as former college athletes or other members of their college sport environment.

It is striking that in spite of their participation in college sport appearing to inhibit their career preparedness, former athletes would still elect to be college athletes if they had their time over. Intuitively, one would expect if individuals believed an activity hampered their vocational development, that one would disengage with that activity. But this is not the case here. It is, perhaps, further evidence of the significance of sport and the athletic identity.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Like Harry and Hammit (2024), our data diverge from most of the extant athletic identity scholarship which reveals athletes experience a loss in athletic identity (Bopp et al., 2024; Manthey & Smith, 2023; Menke & Germany, 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Stokowski et al., 2019). Yet, unlike Harry and Hammit (2024) the existence of an athletic identity was prevalent in our data, which highlights the enduring nature of social identity. Specifically, our findings show the social identity component of athletes' athletic identity can remain prevalent for a decade or more after collegiate careers, even when exclusivity and negative affectivity have receded.

The concept of the athletic reckoning also emerged from our data, which denotes the moment when the exclusivity of sport in an athletes' identity is challenged, and reprioritized. Moreover, the athletic reckoning may function as a marker of career preparedness among athletes. An earlier athletic reckoning may be associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in career preparedness. This is important, as our findings suggest that career preparation is a process requiring time and sustained, intentional engagement well before a work or career change takes place. Finally, our study illuminates the potential outcomes associated with deficient career preparedness. Specifically, our findings show that a lack of career preparedness can result in frequent job changes or enrollment in graduate degree programs to address their career preparedness gaps.

Most athletic departments' support programs and resources available to athletes are tied to enhancing their collegiate experiences (Navarro, 2015). Like Harry and Hammit's recent study (2024), our findings support a rethink for how best to support athletes' preparedness. Although some participants reported a lack of available support programs, of most concern in our study was the discovery of former athletes' avoidance of available support programing. Given athletes' avoidance, we recommend coaches and athletic administrators concentrate efforts on ensuring athletes

recognize the enormity of their career preparedness. Athletic departments could establish alumni mentorship programs and invite former athletes to share their vocational experiences with current athletes. Former athletes with sport-specific ties (e.g., invite former swimmers to speak to current swimmers) can deliver the most accurate depiction of what to expect, while also fostering a level of relatability that others cannot achieve, thereby maximizing the likelihood of athletes being receptive (Harry & Hammit, 2024).

Athletic and university administrators could also introduce a mandatory course or seminar during athletes' sophomore year, requiring them to develop a 'Plan B.' Offering this course in the sophomore year aligns with a stage one athletic reckoning, providing athletes with sufficient time to prepare for their career. Through this course, athletes establish an early career objective and develop a vision for how to achieve it. Even if the course fails to prompt an athletic reckoning, it will offer a valuable framework for athletes to return to when ready.

Finally, efforts to reduce or shed athletic identity should be avoided. Academic identity and career preparedness should not be treated as mutually exclusive from athletic identity. Instead, athletes might find alternative forms of sport and exercise participation (e.g., coaching, exercise habits and routines, sport club membership) a vehicle for adapting their athletic identity without abandoning it. In addition to adapting their athletic identity, alternative forms of sport and exercise participation can help athletes develop community after college.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all studies, ours has limitations. First, although we intentionally recruited former college athletes, recognizing the potential value their perspectives could provide, we acknowledge the limitations of asking participants to recall experiences from events that occurred years prior (Colombo et al., 2020). To mitigate this potential limitation, we employed member checking practices with all participants. Member checking allowed participants to review their interview transcripts to reaffirm their accuracy. The representativeness of our sample is also a limitation, as nearly 80% of our participants competed in Division I sports. This imbalance in divisional representation may have influenced our results.

It is clear that further investigation into the athletic reckoning is necessary. Although we are confident in the legitimacy of our findings, as the first study to identify this pivotal reckoning, additional studies are needed to ensure our study's reliability, and to extend our understanding of it. Our conceptualization of athletic reckoning could be used to guide further exploratory studies, with both college athletes and other elite athlete populations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we found former college athletes experienced an 'athletic reckoning'. That reckoning sometimes occurred before an athlete had actually stopped competing, and sometimes long after an athlete left college altogether. At the time

of this reckoning, college athletes acknowledged their elite sport participation was ending, or had ended, and shifted their focus and priority to their vocational development. We found the timing of the athletic reckoning could also be an indicator for athletes' career preparedness. It is important to understand that athletes must experience a reckoning of some sort as it allows us to explore pathways for facilitating this process, with the aim of mitigating some of the negative outcomes experienced by a late reckoning.

Our study also highlighted the importance of fostering athletes' engagement with, and appreciation for, career development programs. The design and implementation of tailored programming to support athletes is necessary but insufficient. Athletes are aware of these programs but elect not to attend. Therefore, tailored programming must be accompanied by efforts to stimulate athlete engagement.

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