

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT, HOW DO THEY TURN BACK ON?: A CLASSIC  
GROUNDED THEORY ON THE TRANSITION OUT OF THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL  
LEAGUE (NFL)

---

A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Graduate School  
At the University of Missouri

---

In Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

---

By  
AMBER RENEE LATTNER  
Dr. Alex Waigandt, Dissertation Supervisor

December 2016

© Copyright 2016, Amber Renee Lattner

All Rights Reserved.

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School,  
have examined the Dissertation entitled

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT, HOW DO THEY TURN BACK ON?: A CLASSIC  
GROUNDED THEORY ON THE TRANSITION OUT OF THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL  
LEAGUE (NFL)

Presented by Amber Renee Lattner

A Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

---

Dr. Alexander Waigandt

---

Dr. Stephen Whitney

---

Dr. Candace Kuby

---

Dr. Ty-Ron Douglas

---

Dr. Joe Johnston

---

Dr. Patrick Ivey

---

Dr. Richard McGuire

## DEDICATION

“For I know the plans that I have for your life, says the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and future.” (Jeremiah 29:11). My work and my life is dedicated to fulfilling the plans and purposes to which I believe I have been called by Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you for Your strength, Your wisdom, Your guidance, and Your unfailing love through this entire process.

To my parents, Cindy and Doug Lattner – Thank you for your continued support and belief in all of the “plans and purposes” I have felt compelled to pursue. Thank you for instilling in me a “great spirit” that has frequently, if not always, “encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds,” and the courage to pursue truth and goodness despite setbacks and opposition.

To my brother and sister, Kyle and AshLee – Thank you for being fellow BPTs, and for inspiring me as I watch you pursue your own greatness in this world.

To my grandparents, Bob and Shirley Lee – My life would not be the same without our weekly Sunday calls and your unconditional love and support...thank you, Grandma and Papa!

To all those who have traversed the transition journey, and/or are fervently working to help others prepare for and navigate this season of life – Thank you for your courage and your work. This study is for you – for us – and for a more engaged and purposeful future, that we may all live into the Greatness for which we have been created!

And finally to my amazing fiancé and soon-to-be husband, Aaron James Selking – Thank you for your consistent love, unwavering support, and aggressive encouragement to

*write my dissertation!* I love you from eternity and back, and feel blessed to have shared this portion of the journey with the *One that my soul loves*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to my amazing Committee members: I know that the dissertation path I chose was novel to some, and I sincerely appreciate your trust, and for joining me in this space of discovery. It has been exhilarating journey, and it would not have been possible without your insights, guidance, and support. Now more specifically, to:

Dr. Alex Waigandt – Thank you for your belief in me as a doctoral student. I would not be at Mizzou if it were not for you seeing potential in me to not only be successful but also contribute to the legacy of great scholars that have come from our Institution.

Dr. Stephen Whitney – Thank you for your professional support of Sport Psychology as a field and for advocating the need and fit of Classic Grounded Theory as a methodology.

Dr. Candace Kuby – Thank you for teaching me the foundations of qualitative inquiry, but even more for igniting in me the passion to write, and to write from the very core of my being. You are an inspiration in both expertise and creativity.

Dr. Ty-Ron Douglas – Thank you for holding the vision of “Dr. Amber” before me, even when navigation of the Academy was challenging. You are indeed a border crossing brotha, and have been a force in helping me become and be a border crossing sista!

Dr. Joe Johnston – Thank you for your energy, positivity, and example of what it means to pursue a powerful balance of the “pleasant life,” the “good life,” and perhaps most importantly, the “meaningful life.”

Dr. Pat Ivey – Thank you for your support in pursuing work I feel God has placed on my heart – young men in sport, and in particular football – and for giving me opportunities to work alongside of you in our pursuits.

Dr. Rick McGuire – Last, but certainly not least, THANK YOU! Thank you for pursuing your life’s mission to “Win Kids With Sport!” and for intersecting my life with renewing, refreshing, and revolutionizing greatness. It has been a fun journey thus far, and I believe it has only begun!

To my Master’s degree Professors, Drs. Mark Aoyagi, Artur Poczwardowski, Steve Portenga, and Jamie Shapiro – Thank you for laying my sport psych foundation; nothing great ever happens without a solid foundation and you provided mine.

To my friend and designer, Tim O’Connor – Thank you for your humor, your efficiency, and your expertise. One day I will have you on retainer so we can always make greatness!

To my friend and mentor, Bill Brennan – Thank you for believing in me and helping me build frameworks and skill sets to be productive and successful at every level of my career.

To my friends and colleagues, Joanna Foss and Lea Walsh – Thank you for being my rocks, motivators, sanity, sounding boards, and supporters through this process. Your work, passion, hearts, minds, and love have made me a better person and professional.

To my guys, aka, my participants – Thank you for sharing your hearts, minds, and spirits with me. This work could not have been generated without your courageous beings, your humble natures, and your passionate beliefs in a better way to transition to life beyond the gridiron. Continue believing in your greatness, and leading purpose-driven lives that inspire others to do the same. I cannot thank you enough, and will forever cherish our hours spent together.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>TABLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.....	1
DISRUPTIVE QUALITATIVE INQUIRY.....	2
WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT.....	4
<i>Personal Stance Amid Darkness</i> .....	5
TRANSITIONING THROUGH DARKNESS.....	7
<i>Researcher Positionality Amid Light</i> .....	8
WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT FOR A PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYER.....	11
<i>The Need for a Grounded Theory</i> .....	12
<b>CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>15</b>
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY .....	16
PRAGMATISM AS A PHILOSOPHY AND A PARADIGM.....	16
THE CLASSIC GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH DESIGN.....	19
<i>Participants</i> .....	22
<i>Data Production</i> .....	24
<i>Data Analysis</i> .....	26
TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	27
<i>Reliability</i> .....	28
<i>Validity</i> .....	29
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	30

PILOT INTERVIEW .....	31
<b>CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>32</b>
EMERGENT GROUNDED THEORY ON THE TRANSITION OUT OF THE NFL.....	33
<i>Grounded NFL Transition Theory: A 3-Model Conceptualization</i> .....	34
SUMMARY.....	97
<b>CHAPTER 4: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>100</b>
TRANSITION MODELS .....	100
SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY .....	106
<i>Competence</i> .....	108
<i>Autonomy</i> .....	109
<i>Relatedness</i> .....	109
AMERICAN MASCULINITY .....	110
GRIT.....	114
SUMMARY.....	119
<b>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>121</b>
GROUNDED IN CLASSIC GROUNDED THEORY.....	123
IMPLICATIONS.....	125
<i>Model 1: Former Player Life Timeline</i> .....	128
<i>Model 2: Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence</i> .....	130
<i>Model 3: Process of Purpose Post-NFL</i> .....	131
CONTRIBUTION TO THE ACADEMY.....	138
LIMITATIONS .....	139
FUTURE DIRECTIONS .....	139
CONCLUSION .....	142
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>145</b>

<b>APPENDIX A.....</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>APPENDIX B.....</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>VITA .....</b>	<b>167</b>

## TABLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

TABLE 1: Types of Grounded Theory .....	20
TABLE 2: Participant Demographic Data .....	24
FIGURE 3.1: Artifact from Participant 1 .....	32
FIGURE 3.2: Grounded NFL Transition Theory .....	35
FIGURE 3.3: Model 1: Former Player Life Timeline .....	36
FIGURE 3.4: Model 2: Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence .....	45
FIGURE 3.5: Artifact from Participant 3 .....	50
FIGURE 3.6: Model 3: Process of Purpose Post-NFL .....	54
FIGURE 3.7: Artifact from Participant 2 .....	63
FIGURE 3.8: Artifact from Participant 8 .....	70
FIGURE 3.9: Artifact from Participant 11 .....	80
FIGURE 3.10: Artifact from Participant 6 .....	82
FIGURE 3.11: Artifact from Participant 5 .....	83
FIGURE 3.12: Artifact from Participant 12 .....	87
FIGURE 3.13: Artifact from Participant 7 .....	91
FIGURE 3.14: Artifact from Participant 4 .....	97
FIGURE 3.15: Grounded NFL Transition Theory .....	99
FIGURE 5.1: Grounded NFL Transition Theory .....	122
FIGURE 5.2: Model 1: Former Player Life Timeline .....	128
FIGURE 5.3: Model 2: Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence .....	130
FIGURE 5.4: Model 3: Process of Purpose Post-NFL .....	132

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this classic grounded theory study was to examine the process of transition out of the National Football League (NFL) for former NFL players, and to develop a grounded theory around this substantive area. Twelve, diverse former NFL players were interviewed and asked to submit artifacts that represented or symbolized their transition experience. Based on interviews, artifacts, and relevant literature, a three-model theory was generated around the phenomenon of transitioning out of the NFL. Model 1 outlines the *Former Player Life* Timeline, Model 2 depicts the *Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence*, and Model 3 displays the *Process of Purpose Post-NFL*. The main concern that participants sought to address emerged as *rediscovering and redefining purpose in life post-NFL career*. The supporting categories emerged as (1) vision for success in life; (2) intentional engagement in the process; (3) flesh out self-identity; (4) humble yourself; and (5) replicate the blueprint for success. Five properties for each the latter three categories emerged, each supported by relevant literature in neuroscience, sport psychology, and positive psychology. The resulting theory demonstrated a 95-100% reliability measure through professional triangulation, and was validated by fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability through participant and professional reviews. This theory offers a conceptualization of the psycho-emotional experience of the transition process, while also offering a framework/game plan to assist individuals in preparing for and navigating life beyond the game.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

In everything in this life, there is an end. There is a moment when the lights go out, and eventually, one stands in realization that it is indeed, dark. The transition out of elite sport is a challenging experience for most athletes, and research confirms that it is a process rather than a singular life event (McPherson, 1980). The purpose of this study was to explore the process of the transition experience out of the National Football League (NFL) for former NFL athletes, and to develop a grounded theory out of the data that clearly described this substantive area. By using the Classic Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2009; Glaser, 2014; Christiansen, 2011; Christiansen, 2014), a three-model theory emerged around the phenomenon of transitioning out of the NFL.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Figuratively speaking, “when the lights go out” on the football careers of former NFL players, a process of transition begins to occur. For some, the end was anticipated and they were able to prepare in advance for it. This is known as a normative transition. For others, however, the end is much less predictable and they experience what is known as a non-normative transition (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009; J. Harris, personal communication, 1 April, 2016). In a 2009 study, 78 percent of retired NFL players had filed for bankruptcy, been divorced, struggled with chemical dependency, or experienced a combination of the three within two seasons of retiring (Pendergast, 2016; Torre, 2009). With little empirical research conducted around this phenomenon in general, and no specific theories developed from the phenomenon itself, such statistics articulated the need for more focused research to address this problem. The Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology selected for this study permitted the development of a theory specific to the transition

experience out of the NFL. It allowed the data to “speak for itself,” without forcing emerging nuances into categories based on grand sociological theories or other athletic transition frameworks which were developed for other substantive areas (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2014; Christiansen, 2011; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013).

The topic of athletic transition is one wrought with emotion, uncertainty, and disruption (Stambulova et al., 2009). When the lights go out on one’s athletic career it is often associated with one’s very identity, and it can be traumatic to one’s psychoemotional states, relationships, and self-identity (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). Driven by the disruptive nature of the topic itself, I chose to engage in a version of disruptive qualitative inquiry (Brown, Carducci, and Kuby, 2014), that challenged our notion as researchers to explore the possibilities of finding and sharing truth in our chosen area of study. *Chapter 1: Introduction* begins with an overview and description of disruptive qualitative inquiry; leverages vignettes to position the researcher amid the research; and concludes with the final rationale for a CGT approach to the topic of transitioning out of the NFL.

### **Disruptive Qualitative Inquiry**

The purpose of disruptive qualitative inquiry is to explore the “tensions and possibilities” that exist within the phenomenon of interest, and to challenge the fixed mindset on “proper ways” of conducting research (Brown et al., 2014). Ultimately, the research problem should drive the approach and method(ologies): whichever is best suited for the problem is the best approach. Disruptive inquiry engages multiple facets of disruption as it: (a) “Disrupts dominant notions of research roles and relationships; (b) Disrupts dominant approaches to the collection and analysis of data; (c) Disrupts dominant notions of (re)presenting and disseminating research findings; (d) Disrupts rigid epistemological and

methodological boundaries; and (e) Disrupts disciplinary boundaries and assumptive frameworks of how to do research” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 5). This study adopted elements of disruptive qualitative inquiry to highlight the emergent findings and to share my personal tensions with the research process. This was done by sharing artifacts from participants that they believed represented their transition experience as figures throughout the text, by *\*starring* the text with reflexive memos throughout the research process (Brown et al., 2014), and by including vignettes where appropriate. Although CGT is not a “disruptive” methodology in and of itself, these three elements broke the typical disciplinary bounds of how data is analyzed and how findings can be shared and represented.

*\*April 20, 2016 - The choice to engage in Classic Grounded Theory is this awkward position of choosing one of the “big 5” methods of qualitative inquiry, and yet, of course, choosing a version of it (CGT) that leverages the most up-front ambiguity and autonomy. So it’s classic and yet novel, conventional and yet disruptive, all at once. Communication will be key throughout this process as I manage the ambiguity – and excitement – that comes with this chosen path.*

As a child, I fought it when people tried to tell me what I could and could not do, and whom I could and could not become. So I decided, if I was going to be the star athlete, then I would also be the valedictorian; if I was going to be the tomboy, then I would also be the pretty girl; if I was going to be the country kid, then I would also have city class; if I was going to be the strongest Christian you knew, then I would also be the person you wanted to hang out with on the playground. I straddled these various identities rather intentionally throughout my elementary and high school years. Since the intentional “practice” of flexing in and out of various identities, I have become very comfortable with a diverse, and yet integrated, sense of self. In short, my life has been a disruption to the status quo, to the “norm.” So not only does the research topic beg of disruption but also my own being as the researcher thrives in this very state – a unique combination that Brown et al. (2014)

encourages one to pursue. Ultimately, by leveraging aspects of disruptive inquiry, it allowed the data to be shared in ways that proliferated current understandings of the transition phenomenon, while encouraging those who experience the phenomenon to conceptualize and engage with the transition in new ways.

This study, then, was conducted as such. By beginning with not only an introduction to the topic but also my personal stance and positionality, the remainder of the study can be read through the appropriate lenses that guided the study. Research is not neutral, and understanding the researcher allows those who read the study to more clearly understand the purpose and passion behind the inquiry (Brown et al., 2014). Through personal vignettes, the first part of the introduction explores my personal stance and positionality within the research topic. It goes on to include the relevance of this topic in our current society and the importance of developing a well-grounded theory around the transition out of the NFL.

### **When the Lights Go Out**

*For the first time in my life, I felt hollow. I stood on the corner of the Joyce Athletic Center for what seemed like ever as I struggled with the realization that I had just been released from the Notre Dame Women's Soccer team. Air was going into me, but once it hit my nose it seemed to disappear into a hollow pit of my body. I literally couldn't feel anything from the base of my neck to my hips. Nothing. I took two steps in the direction of my dorm on the far side of campus and stopped. "No I can't go there," I thought, "What if someone says something to me? How will I respond?" I backed up into my former position on the sidewalk. I took two steps in the other direction toward Jordan Hall of Science to perhaps continue studying for the finals that loomed just two days away, but stopped. "No, I can't go there," I*

*thought, “My brain isn’t even working right now, and what if someone asks me something about soccer?” I backed up into my former position on the sidewalk and just stood there. “If I am not ‘Amber Lattner the soccer player,’ who am I???” I stood frozen in fear of this realization, struggling to understand my identity outside of being an athlete. Where was I supposed to go? Who was I supposed to call? Unsure of everything, I shut myself away for two days to study, take my finals, and attempt to avoid conversation with anyone...*

### **Personal Stance Amid Darkness**

This vignette is my experience with my own “lights out” moment as a Division I college athlete. One of the most critical aspects of who I was and to what I devoted my time, energy, and attention was suddenly stripped away from me due to injury. I was left with the begging question, “Who am I?” Other studies demonstrated the plethora of traumatic effects of career termination, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, identity crises, decrease in self-confidence, substance abuse, and even suicide (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Ogilvie, 1987; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Wylleman et al., 2004). This moment of darkness has been demonstrated to have profound effects on one’s life in a variety of ways. It is a moment that is not abnormal, but one that must be empirically understood in context-specific settings to help mitigate the potentially irreversible damaging aspects of it.

Unsure of how to process this life changing moment myself, I did not share anything with any one. I feared that if I opened the door for discussion my whole heart would come pouring out and nothing could stop it. On one of my final days on campus before going back to my family’s home in northeastern, Pennsylvania, a member of the ND men’s basketball staff stopped me while walking out of a campus café. As the faculty representative for Notre

Dame Christian Athletes (NDCA), he asked me if I would be interested in leading the group next year. My heart throbbed in my chest as I stared at the ground in silence; finally, I looked up at him with tears in my eyes and said, “I’m not even an athlete anymore.”

There. It was out. Standing before me, his 6 foot-7 inch tall, 250-pound frame seemed to loom over my 5 foot-3 inch, 125-pound self as a judgment throne. I felt as if the nothingness inside of me created an even greater discrepancy in our physical differences. He inquired as to what happened and I shared an abbreviated account. I stood before him like a disgraced puppy, and waited to hear how he would respond. I felt his big hand on my shoulder and his gentle eyes piercing me with a knowing look as he said, “Amber – once an athlete, always an athlete. I think God wants you to lead NDCA. If you decide to stay at Notre Dame, the program is yours. Just let me know sometime this summer once you have time to make some decisions.”

As a Caucasian female, who came from an upper-middle class home in a predominantly white, rural community and was playing on the #1-ranked women’s soccer team at a private Catholic institution, my experience with the lights going out on my athletic career may seem trivial to some. But for me, the pain was real, it was deep, and it was exasperating. Despite having a painful ACL-tear with a long and strenuous recovery process, I acknowledged that I would tear my ACL every day of my life if I never had to feel the emptiness that engulfed my body, mind, and spirit when I lost the love of my life, soccer.

Even through that pain, however, my Christian faith served as an anchor to my meandering self, and embedded within me a sense of hope despite the darkness that flooded me. Over the years, I have come to conceptualize that pain as a loss of identity. This notion of “identity” has thus fueled my conceptualization of performance excellence in my work as

a sport psychology practitioner. I have come to value the importance of a diversified identity, but reflexively, I must acknowledge that athletes often have little time to diversify. I have come to value the importance of hope in the process of pain, but I must acknowledge that hope as I know it may not exist for some. I have come to value the necessity of a support system in the process of more fully understanding one's self worth, but I must also acknowledge that some athletes may not have access to such trusted advisors.

So while these elements of my personal stance inform my way of understanding the world, and in particular this transition experience out of elite sport, I must acknowledge that my race, gender, and/or class will be different than those of my participants. A critical element of the reliability and validity of this study, then, was ensuring that my personal stance did not grow into a negative bias (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Therefore, reflexive journaling was conducted throughout this study, *\*starring* the text to share the process.

*\*March 19, 2016 - As I reviewed my Qual I book today, I was reminded of the importance of reflexive writing so I can try to sift through my personal stances and avoid biasing the theory based on my experiences. Two things that already stand out to me that I must manage my biases around the transition out of elite sport are:*

- 1. It is a painful moment when you realize your sport is gone. Perhaps it is, but I need to let the data tell me that, or not.*
- 2. It is an identity crisis that occurs. Perhaps it is, but I need to let the data tell me that or not.*

### **Transitioning Through Darkness**

*As I considered his proposition to lead NDCA, I began to expand my perspective on the situation at hand: I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, I have a family at home that loves me, and I am at the University of Notre Dame. I am fairly certain that I'm going to be ok... But what about athletes who have none of that? Perhaps my purpose is not to continue being an elite athlete but rather, help others plant seeds now so that when their*

*inevitable 'lights out' moment occurs, they will have something from which to continue growing.*

### **Researcher Positionality Amid Light**

Needless to say, I decided to stay at Notre Dame. The acknowledgement of losing my sport was followed by a painful process of truly transitioning into a life outside of being an elite athlete. I threw myself full-heartedly into building NDCA into a thriving organization within the Notre Dame Athletic Department, one that still serves student-athletes today. Although the process was not devoid of pain, isolation, and frustration, having a new sense of purpose around which to organize my time and energy was indeed a critical aspect of me being able to turn the lights back on in my own spirit, and transition toward productivity beyond sport.

Although my personal experience with transitioning out of elite sport was not entirely unique (Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danish, & Murphy, 1997; Petitpas, Brewer, & Van Raalte, 1996; Petitpas, Cornelius, & Brewer, 2001), it was the impetus for this dissertation topic, which centered on understanding and theorizing the transition experience out of the NFL. It inevitably, then, influenced my positionality in the study and thus was intentionally reflected upon to avoid biasing the emergent grounded theory. Reflexivity serves as a major source of quality control in qualitative research (Berger, 2015). As already noted, it is critical that qualitative researchers engage in deep reflective and reflexive practices as it relates to not only who we are as individuals but also who we were in relation to those we seek to serve through our research. As Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) noted, "Acknowledging positionality may be accomplished in three primary ways: locating the researcher in relation

to the subject, participants, and research context and process” (p. 71), and thus is subsequently explored.

**Locating the researcher in relation to the subject.** As the vignettes suggest, the subject of transitioning out of elite sport and into life thereafter is derived from my personal experience with the subject. This experience not only helped me understand my past but it also molded my future; my personal challenge with losing my identity in sport drove me to pursue a career in sport psychology that positively transforms the lives of those with whom I interact. That is, the overarching goal of everything I do is to broaden the psycho-emotional skillset of athletes and coaches to positively impact performance on and off the field of play. Petitpas et al. (2001) referred to such skillsets as transferable life skills, and Ehrmann (2011) and McGuire (2016) posited that sport is an opportunity to prepare individuals for productive lives far beyond the field of play.

**Locating the researcher in relation to the participants.** Two questions that I frequently receive in my applied work with athletes and coaches are, “Why males?” and “Why football?” To understand my relation to the male participants in this study, it is pertinent to answer these two questions.

I grew up with an older brother and therefore, all of his friends. My peer group became “the boys” at an early age. I learned their currency of toughness, trust, and competence (Farrell, 1993; Kimmel, 2011; Majors & Billson, 1992) through the rules that drove engagement in the meaningful activities of our youth: no crying, no tattle telling, and never be the weak link, respectively. Because I learned the currency of the masculine world and how to manage it at an early age, being around and working with men has always been an area of ease and comfort for me. In college, my friend group continued to be

predominantly derived of men, and in particular, football players. Through our relationships, I learned about their lives, their goals, and their frustrations. I became very sensitive at the personal level to the struggles of constricted masculine role identities that research confirms are faced by men, and particularly men in a high-profile, revenue-generating sports like football (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thogersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Comeaux, 2010; Farrell, 1993; Gray, 2003; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Njororai, 2012; O'Neil, 1981; Sussman, 2012).

Also, I am a businessperson at heart. I was raised in a family business, and launched my own livestock business by the time I was 8 years old. My undergraduate degree in management consulting furthered my understanding of critical success drivers, leading and lagging indicators, return on investment (ROI), and more. I came to believe that everything rises and falls on leadership (Maxwell, 2007), that sport could and should be a breeding ground for developing leaders (Lattner & Portenga, 2015), and that we are desperately lacking good male leadership in our society. Because football has the largest roster of any male sport, I believe it can offer the greatest ROI for society at large if it could be positively influenced. My research and applied work in graduate school, then, centered on mindset and leadership development with men in sport, and most specifically, within the sport of football.

The currency of masculinity - toughness, trust, and competence - served as the foundation for engagement with my participants. Although there is usually a general sense of respect that exists among elite athletes, such respect is typically not granted by professional football players to athletes in other sports (E. Green, personal communication, July 6, 2015). Herein laid the *opportunity*, from my personal experience working in the space, as a female: these men were not comparing my expertise to theirs in football but rather in my own

sporting space (Notre Dame women's soccer) and advanced education (doctoral work in sport psychology). Furthermore, the participants were purposively sampled leveraging a snowball approach (Heppner & Heppner, 2004), which allowed me to gain further trust and rapport based on the recommendations of trusted friends by which I obtained new participants.

**Locating the researcher in relation to the research context and process.** Given my personal experiences with the subject and my passion to do applied work in the football space, as the researcher I could have influenced and been influenced by the research context. This meant there had to be awareness about how my influence affected the construction of meaning and the theory derived throughout the study (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). A CGT approach, however, required me to engage in constant reflexivity to allow the theory to emerge from the data itself - not my personal experiences, passions, or goals (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2014). Although these facets motivated me through the dissertation process, reflexivity helped ensure they did not overshadow the data or force thematic findings (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Heppner & Heppner, 2004).

### **When the Lights Go Out for a Professional Football Player**

*“Standing in the tunnel, you can feel the adrenaline searing through your veins, the energy coursing through your body. The cheering crowd is a loud rumble that taunts you to terrorize the other team. You take a deep breath of the stale sweat laden within your shoulder pads and lick the salty trickle that just ran down out of your helmet. The clicking of anxious cleats on cement reminds you of childhood fantasies of reindeer hooves on rooftops, and a sly smile creeps across your face...As you hear your name and number announced through*

*the stadium you give a loud war cry and sprint out onto the field, knowing that every eye in the stadium – in the world for that matter – is on you at that very moment.*

*Suddenly you stop. Something is wrong. The lights in the stadium are not on...the crowd is silent. You look around and there's not a soul in sight. That's when you realize it was just another dream, another memory of a life you used to live and an experience that will never again be yours..."* (Lattner, 2013).

### **The Need for a Grounded Theory**

Recounted by numerous friends and former football players, the moment standing in the tunnel prior to running onto the field is one of the most unique and invigorating moments in the football sporting experience. As Lattner (2013) noted, however, when that is over a void is left in the athlete himself, with an uncertainty about how to refill it: “Mays reminisced, ‘How do you replace that adrenaline? That emotion? That whole hoopla and rah-rah? What do you replace that with?? Sport is so mental and so emotional...when it all goes out, how does your body and mind adjust to that?’” (p. 6).

The statistics around the current NFL transition experience highlight the need for not only a better understanding of what these men go through but also a better strategy for helping them manage the transition experience more effectively. A well-grounded theory offers such a foundation. As the average NFL career shrinks to 2.66 years (Arthur, 2016), the financial earning curve is drastically different for NFL players than their comparison age group (Pendergast, 2016). These men make hundreds of thousands of dollars early in their careers, and then it shrinks drastically almost immediately following retirement. In a 2009 study, 78 percent of retired NFL players had filed for bankruptcy, been divorced, struggled with chemical dependency, or experienced a combination of the three within two seasons of

retiring (Pendergast, 2016; Torre, 2009). The NFL Players' Association (NFLPA) has developed programs and services to assist current and former players with financial planning, career management, education, networking, drug and alcohol-related issues, suicide prevention, etc. ([www.nflpa.com](http://www.nflpa.com)). However, this study revealed that there was a general sense of distrust that permeated any service associated with the NFL because it was viewed as a "business" that was only out to serve itself. This often compelled athletes to not engage with anything supported by the NFL or NFLPA (Pendergast, 2016; Bien, 2016; Y. Bruce Brooks, personal communication, February, 17, 2016; E. Green, personal communication, July 6, 2015; W. Pippens, personal communication, June 11, 2015). In a recent attempt to increase player usage, however, current Cincinnati Bengal offensive tackle and NFLPA president, Eric Winston, pushed for more active engagement with the free NFLPA programming offered to those men who have credited two or more years in the League (Pendergast, 2016). Furthermore, the company AthLife is partnering with most professional sport organizations to offer career transition services to retired professional athletes and is starting increase its traction with former players (J. Harris, personal communication, 1 April 2016).

Because recent media attention around NFL retirements is positioned around serving the demands of popular media, empirical research on the transition experience out of the NFL could offer a more theoretically sound perspective. A grounded theory around the subject offers a model by which researchers and applied practitioners can more intimately operate in this substantive area. Furthermore, as grounded theories are intended for the researcher and layman alike, this study offers a clearer understanding of what occurs during the transition process for those it directly affects: the men for whom the lights have turned

off, and the men seeking to find a way to turn them back on through their transition process. Classic Grounded Theory becomes a mechanism to achieve not only the process of rigorous qualitative inquiry but also the product of substantively grounded theory.

*\*March 19, 2016 - In classic GT style, I see CGT research as both an approach and a product, and I am invested in each because it not only aligns with who I am as an individual but it also aligns with my desire to have an output that can hopefully honor and serve the population with whom I am working (former NFL players).*

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative inquiry, rooted in cultural anthropology and American sociology (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Creswell, 2009), is an investigative research process engaged by researchers to gain a deeper understanding around a social phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As Creswell (2009) highlighted, there are several distinguishing characteristics of qualitative research, including a commitment to remaining “close to the data” to accurately depict the phenomenon as experienced by the participants; an inductive analysis approach to identify and construct patterns and themes within the data; an emergent design strategy to ensure the method utilized is best suited for answering the question(s); multiple sources of data to build a robust understanding of the phenomenon; the positioning of the researcher as a key instrument in gathering, analyzing, and reporting data; and, having an interpretative component to understand and convey what the data produces (p. 175-176).

Although qualitative inquiry offers a breadth of approaches, methods, and methodologies for understanding social phenomena (Crotty, 1998), the selection of the approach should be driven from the paradigmatic alignment of the researcher and the purpose of the study (Brown et al., 2014; Creswell, 2009; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). A researcher’s positionality in relation to the study (which was described in the introduction) and the paradigmatic lens through which he or she views the research process impacts and informs the method(ology) and data production processes as they unfold (Brown et al., 2014; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative to understand these components and how they informed the study.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this pragmatic study was to explore the process of transitioning out of the National Football League (NFL) for former NFL athletes, and to develop a grounded theory that succinctly articulated this substantive area. This chapter begins with a description of pragmatism - the paradigmatic perspective with which I, as the researcher, most align - and how this paradigm guided the methodological approach selected. It continues with an overview of Classic Grounded Theory (CGT; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2004; Glaser, 2009; Christiansen, 2011; Christiansen, 2014), the design of the current study, and a discussion around validity, reliability, trustworthiness, and ethicality. It concludes with feedback from an interview conducted for a graduate-level course on the topic of transitioning out of the NFL that helped convey the need for the continued empirical investigation around the topic that this study offers.

## **Pragmatism as a Philosophy and a Paradigm**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggested that one's philosophical and paradigmatic lenses should guide and inform the entire research process, not merely be an addendum. As a businessperson and applied practitioner who seeks to solve problems and enhance performance, I aligned with the philosophy of classical pragmatism in that the purpose of thought is to guide action, and the objective of research is the practical application of discovered truth (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). This philosophy informed my pragmatic paradigm, or my worldview. As a paradigm, pragmatism situates the researcher as an interested observer seeking to understand a phenomenon and seeks to test (in this case, develop through the constant comparison method) theory in practice as it relates to contextual insights for practical application.

Pragmatism as a paradigm keeps the research problem central, and thus applies any method appropriate to gain insight into the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). According to a 2009 study, within two seasons of retirement, 78 percent of former NFL players had filed for bankruptcy, been divorced, struggled with chemical dependency, or experienced some combination of the three (Pendergast, 2016; Torre, 2009). The problem that this study addressed, then, was the personal challenge that men experience as they transition out of professional football. Classical pragmatism suggests that meaning and understanding of a phenomenon should be sought in their ability to be practically applied (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). The National Football League Players' Association (NFLPA) continues to place an emphasis on offering assistance to help mitigate the number of men who experience bankruptcy, divorce, substance abuse, depression, and suicide upon retirement ([www.nflpa.com](http://www.nflpa.com)). As pragmatic research seeks solutions to problems (Patton, 1990), there was a need for practical knowledge around this substantive area so that organizations like the NFLPA and AthLife, who offer transition assistance to former professional athletes, can more intentionally and strategically offer services. The product produced by the CGT approach to this study – that is, a theory intricately linked to the phenomenon – can thus be practically applied in this context.

Pragmatism encouraged freedom of choice for methods and techniques, as the researcher's main purpose was to discover insights that may lead to solutions for context-specific problems (Creswell, 2009). I engaged with various paradigms and methodologies throughout the course of my graduate studies, including phenomenology (as both a paradigm and a method), constructionism, pragmatism, and case study in attempt to identify which method would be most suitable to this study. As I wrestled with my positionality and overall

objectives as a researcher and practitioner, pragmatism continued to emerge as an anchor to my approach. As I continued to hone my research questions and seek guidance from Committee members, pragmatism led us to identify CGT as the most appropriate methodology to approach the problem. CGT allowed me to gain a breadth and depth of insight on a topic that has personal significance to me, while simultaneously addressing a critical issue within the population with which I work as a sport psychology practitioner. The “product” of CGT – a theory grounded in the data produced by the researcher – became a framework for understanding and addressing the problem of transitioning out of the NFL.

Both pragmatism and CGT maintain a vision on the process of understanding, and permit the researcher to adapt and evolve throughout the study, as guided by the data (Creswell, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2014). This autonomy offered by both the paradigm and the method invigorated me as a researcher, and Glaser (2014) stated that this sense of alignment and excitement are strong indicators for one’s success with the grounded theory (GT) methodology. As a reflexive memo I wrote early in the research process depicted, CGT was an appropriate fit not only given my worldview but also because of the research topic:

*\*March 1, 2016 - The more I read about GT and the more I consider my objectives both for this dissertation and in my professional career in the future, the more I feel a sense of peace and passion around leveraging this approach. There is so much autonomy in this approach. And, given all the research I have done on Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (SDT; 1985), GT fosters this sense of autonomy that I so value as an individual, researcher, and practitioner.*

*Come to find out, after reading more about GT, my excitement around GT is part of the essence of classic GT!! As Glaser (2009) states, “The Eureka syndrome is never mentioned, nor the joy of discovery through emergence, or the intense motivations linked with each GT procedure. They do not mention the afforded autonomy given by doing GT and how it leads to originality.”*

## **The Classic Grounded Theory Research Design**

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) developed Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) as a method of qualitative inquiry that would inductively analyze a phenomenon and build a grounded theory that explained behavior and gave understanding of a process. CGT has continued to develop and hone its approach over the decades. A dedicated group of scholars, including the founder Barney G. Glaser, seek to uphold the rigors of the classic grounded theory method through their own research and writing; through the Grounded Theory Institute, which is a nonprofit organization for the advancement of CGT; and through The Grounded Theory Review, an international peer reviewed journal for the advancement of CGT scholarship ([www.groundedtheory.com](http://www.groundedtheory.com); [www.groundedtheoryreview.com](http://www.groundedtheoryreview.com)).

Since its inception in the literature, GT has been adapted and modified by other researchers (See Table 1). Although pragmatism guides the earlier versions of GT, later types work from paradigms ranging from constructivism to post-structuralism and have unique key features of their approach to theory development. Glaser (2009) positioned CGT, also known as Glaserian Grounded Theory, as the purest form of GT in that it adamantly relies upon the data for codes to emerge, and the focus of the research is solely the generation of theory. Later types of GT also seek theory generation but allow for existing codes to be utilized and have additional areas of focus (e.g. mapping, theory deconstruction, etc.).

Table 1

*Types of Grounded Theory (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013).*

<i>Type</i>	<i>Commonly adapted paradigms</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Key features</i>
Classic grounded theory Glaser and Strauss (1967)	Pragmatism	Generation of theory	Reliance upon data Codes come from data themselves Use of memoing 'All is data', including related literature
Modified grounded theory Strauss (1987) Strauss and Corbin (1990)	Pragmatism	Generation of theory	Adoption of many classic grounded theory tenets but less focused upon emergent design and allowing for the use of existing coding schemes
Constructivist grounded theory Charmaz (2000; 2006)	Constructivism	Generation of theory with participant data as central	Adoption of modified grounded theory methods but allowance for the notion that individuals construct their own realities
Post-modern grounded theory Clarke (2003; 2005)	Post-modernism	Mapping and generating theory	Adoption of modified constructivist grounded theory methods with situational mapping employed
Discursive grounded theory McCreaddie and Payne (2010)	Post-structuralism	Mapping, generating and deconstructing theory	Adoption of modified grounded methods with a focus on language interaction and discourse

Classic Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) challenges researchers to deeply engage with data in any form around the topic of interest, and to trust in their cognitive abilities to create new knowledge as it emerges from the data (Glaser, 2014). I chose CGT because it not only most aligns with my philosophical and paradigmatic perspectives but it also required that codes emerged from the data itself. There is a lot of experiential and popular media information around the topic of the NFL transition experience, but a scan of online journals revealed no empirical studies that assess the process from a CGT perspective.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (2014) emphasized the need for more classically grounded theories in the social sciences, stating that historical grand theories have been inappropriately applied to multiple domains. Furthermore, they argue that as qualitative research accepted the temptation from traditional quantitative methodologists to validate its

findings, the social sciences have focused more on proving grand theories than on developing original theories tied to specific contexts and phenomena. Subsequently, this has left the social sciences remiss of deeply grounded, highly applicable theories that help explain specific processes, procedures, and experiences.

Procedurally, no formal literature review was conducted prior to initiation of a CGT study so that the researcher was not tempted to force prior theories, experiences, or frameworks as explanations for the phenomenon of interest. Although Glaser (2014) acknowledged that not all prior knowledge can be put aside, he did implore grounded theorists to leverage the memoing process to minimize application of one's presuppositions. Once original variables and codes emerged, they were subsequently put into conversation with other relevant literature and theories (Glaser, 2014; Heppner & Heppner, 2004). Because "all is data" in CGT, literature was used to help inform the theory, but only once the core variable and categories emerged. Following *Chapter 3: Findings*, the emergent grounded theory was strategically positioned with current, relevant literature in *Chapter 4: review of Relevant Literature*.

Christiansen (2014) stated that the three hallmarks of CGT were to, "(1) Identify the core variable – that is, the main concern of the phenomenon and its recurrent solution - as the first stage of the study, and then delimit investigation to the core variable; (2) Identify what is occurring in the participant's recurrent solution of their main concern by suspending one's preconceptions and trusting in the process of emergence of concepts from the data; and (3) Avoid descriptive interpretations of the phenomenon in favor of abstract conceptualizations that can be used broadly to understand the topic by leveraging the method of constant comparison. This facilitates the discovery of stable patterns in the data (i.e. the emergence of

concepts).”

The following sections propose how the CGT method guided the research process in terms of participants, data production, and data analysis.

### **Participants**

Twelve former NFL athletes who personally experienced the transition process out of the League were interviewed for this study. By leveraging the theoretical sampling strategy outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their seminal CGT text, the initial participant pool was recruited through my personal contacts in the sport space. Although CGT typically does not include initial inclusion/exclusion criteria for participants in favor of allowing the data to determine the bounds, it does offer the researcher liberty to make professional judgments on this issue. Based on initial researcher inquiry, one criterion emerged for the first participant set:

1. Participant was out of the League for at least two years.

This criterion was selected because research inquiry protocols state participants should be far enough removed from the experience in question to be able to reflect upon and share meaningful insights on the phenomena (Crotty, 1998).

Five individuals were initially contacted through telephone and email to inquire about their interest in participating in the study. All five agreed to serve in the initial participant pool, and offered to help recruit additional participants should the emerging study necessitate. Glaser and Strauss (1967) described theoretical sampling as, “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his

theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory” (p. 45).

Theoretical sampling did not support a pre-definition of the exact number of participants, as the saturation of the emergent key concepts signified when the researcher ceased data production. Furthermore, it did not mandate or prescribe a particular sample size; the emergent data drove the sample size (Christiansen, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2014). However, as Glaser (2014) described, it can be helpful for researchers to estimate a range for their participant pool to manage the scope of the project. With this guidance in mind, I expected my sample size to range from 5 to 15 individuals, with the length and content of each participant engagement varying based upon how the individual contributed to the emerging theory. Ultimately, as Josselson and Lieblich (2003) posited, saturation, or the point at which responses become redundant, is the key determinant of sample size. Through this guidance, saturation of each category and its properties occurred at twelve participants.

If initial inquiry resulted in too much variance of responses for the scope of this study, a process known as homogeneous sampling could have been used in CGT. This would have narrowed the participant pool to those who share a common characteristic around the transition out of the NFL, such as years played in the League or Years retired from the League (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). However, homogenous sampling was not necessary because no variance was found among participants. Table 2 offers an overview of each of the twelve participants and the demographic information that was obtained from each man.

Table 2

*Participant Demographic Data*

Part #	Age	Race	Religious Aff.	Raised By...	Child. SES	College	Degree(s)	Draft Status	Position	Years in League	Years out of League	Current SES	Marital Status	Kids
1	43	Mixed	Spiritual, Christian	Mom	Middle Class	D1, Independent	BA	1 <sup>st</sup> Round	Offensive Guard	6	16	Upper Class	Married	3
2	33	Black	Christian	Mom & Dad, Divorced	Lower Middle	D1, SEC	BA	1 <sup>st</sup> Round	Defensive End	9	2	Upper Class	Married	3
3	33	White	Christian	Mom & Dad, Married	Middle Class	D1, Mountain West	BA	6 <sup>th</sup> Round	Tight End	9	2	Upper Class	Married	2
4	32	White	Open	Mom	Upper Middle	D1, Mountain West	BA & MBA	7 <sup>th</sup> Round	Wide Receiver	6	5	Upper Class	Married	0
5	35	Black	Spiritual, Christian	Mom & Dad, Married	Lower Middle	D1, Big 12	BA & Exec MBA	6 <sup>th</sup> Round	Tight End	8	5	Upper Class	Single	1
6	32	Black	Christian	Mom, Dad, & Gma	Middle Class	D1, Independent	BA, Double Major	Free Agent	Line-backer	5	5	Upper Middle	Single	0
7	30	Black	Spiritual, Christian	Mom & Gma	Middle Class	D1, Big 12	BA	4 <sup>th</sup> Round	Wide Receiver	2	6	Middle Class	Single	3
8	43	Black	Christian	Mom & Dad, Married	Middle Class	D1, ACC	BA	2 <sup>nd</sup> Round	Line-backer	6	15	Upper Class	Single	1
9	44	Black	Christian	Mom	Middle Class	D1, Independent	BA	1 <sup>st</sup> Round	Defensive Back	10	13	Upper Middle	Single	3
10	53	Black	Christian	Mom & Dad, Married	Middle Class	D3, PAC	None	Free Agent	Running Back	1	28	Middle Class	Single	3
11	37	White	Catholic	Mom & Dad, Married	Middle Class	D2, GLIAC	BA & MBA	Free Agent	Tight End	3	12	Upper Class	Single	0
12	31	Black	Christian	Self & Mom	Poor	D1, MAC	BA	Free Agent	Tight End	2	4	Middle Class	Single	3

**Data Production**

In CGT, “all is data.” That is, any data relevant to the topic was used to inform the development of the emerging theory. This does not imply, however, that every data point has equal merit. Intensive interviewing that rapidly develops the core variable and then uses theoretical sampling strategies, is the most commonly used and most highly valued strategies for data production (Christiansen, 2011). Thus, interviewing served as the main approach to data production for this study. As Creswell (2009) posited, interviews are especially helpful when direct observation cannot occur. The initial interviews in CGT were open-ended inquiries with participants around the topic, in this case, the individual’s transition process out of the NFL. In attempt to elicit more elaborate responses from participants, I primed them

with the purpose of the interview and the overarching study prior to the open-ended prompt of “Tell me about your experience transitioning out of the NFL.” I also requested that participants bring with them to the interview an artifact that they believed symbolized or represented their transition out of the NFL, along with a brief description of its relevance. Then, by leveraging motivational interviewing techniques (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) and remaining theoretically sensitive (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I probed participants to dive deeper as appropriate, and followed emotion (or lack thereof) in attempt to uncover hidden gems in the stories of their lives.

Glaser (2014) highlighted that the “core variable” often emerges quickly from the first several interviews as recurring patterns are referenced. The core variable is simply the main concern that individuals identify through the transition process. Once the core variable was identified, interviews were delimited to allow the key concepts surrounding the core variable to emerge. This required theoretical sensitivity throughout the process as the data to guided me through rigorous analysis of the concepts. Ultimately, these key concepts, or categories and their supporting properties, were integrated to form the emergent, three-model grounded theory.

**Additional data sources.** Multiple data sources are recommended in qualitative inquiry, and since all is data in CGT, informal interviews with professionals working for the NFLPA and AthLife also served to inform the theory. Also, online documents from these two organizations and books written by former NFL players on their transition experience were incorporated into the conceptualization of the phenomenon. The memoing process helped integrate the resulting theory and positioned it amid the current discussion around the transition process out of the NFL.

## **Data Analysis**

Data production and data analysis are ongoing, dynamic processes in the CGT methodology. They began broadly to allow the main concern of those who have actually experienced the transition to emerge, and then were quickly delimited to the key concepts around that concern. The analysis, then, resulted in a theory around the main concern and its resultant solution for men who go through this transition process, and can be used by anyone seeking to engage with this population around this substantive area. In short, Glaserian GT does not follow a linear method of data collection, coding, and analysis. Rather, it requires researchers to engage in an ongoing process of collection, coding, and analysis, allowing the researcher to identify the core variable, delimit appropriately, identify the key concepts, and integrate the resulting concepts into a grounded, logical, concise theory around the core variable of the phenomenon being studied (Glaser, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Christiansen, 2011).

Due to location and availability of participants, one interview was conducted in person, nine interviews were conducted via Skype or FaceTime, and two of the last three interviews were conducted via telephone. Interviews lasted between 15:38 and 1:10:53. Ten of the twelve interviews were fully transcribed to identify the core variable, and analyzed for emergent categories and properties. As the interviews were delimited to the core variable and the resultant categories, detailed interview notes were also kept to help code toward theoretical saturation. As the interviews became more specific, they became more direct in inquiry and will varied in length based on how they contributed to the emergent theory. Two of the twelve interviews were not transcribed but were recorded and reviewed for specific theoretical saturation purposes. Finally, one participant was asked for a follow-up interview

for additional, specific information around his transition experience (Glaser, 2014). He was one of two participants who had only been out of the League for two years, the minimum inclusion criteria, and was not as far along through the transition process as other participants. Additional questions were posed around the elements of his story that originally seemed different than other participant. Further questioning actually revealed categorical saturation, however, and is explored further in *Chapter 3: Findings*.

**Constant comparative strategy for data analysis.** The technique of constant comparison between participants' interview data allowed conceptualization of the key concepts that intertwined to address the core variable. Glaser (1967) offered a four-stage strategy of the constant comparative method: (1) compare incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrate concepts and their properties, (3) delimit the theory, and (4) write the theory (p. 105). In summary, the researcher constantly compared interviews from participants to identify the emergent core variable, and delimited to narrow the focus of inquiry to this variable. Then, the researcher constantly compared the interview data around the core variable to identify the emergent key concepts (also referred to as categories, or codes). Then, the researcher constantly compared the interview data around the key concepts to identify properties within the categories. As theoretical saturation occurred, the researcher continued to delimit the investigation until the emergent information could be integrated into a theory that was understandable and usable to researchers and laymen alike (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2014).

### **Trustworthiness**

Creswell (2009) emphasized the importance of layering qualitative inquiry with mechanisms to ensure trustworthiness of research. Reliability and validity are two important

elements of trustworthiness. The following reviews how these two components were addressed in this CGT study.

### **Reliability**

Qualitative reliability helps ensure that a researcher's approach is consistent throughout the research process. To ascertain such reliability for this study, several strategies proposed by Creswell (2009) were utilized. First, initial interviews were transcribed word for word to ensure the core variable emerged authentically, and a thorough review of the transcripts for accuracy was employed. The researcher audio recorded each interview and videotaped selected interviews. The researcher then simultaneously listened, read, and watched (where applicable) the interviews to ensure accuracy in transcription, note moments of additional emotion, and make any needed adjustments.

Second, professional triangulation was used to help achieve intercoder agreement. As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, good qualitative reliability is attained if coding agreement occurs at a minimum rate of 80%. An advanced doctoral candidate in counseling Psychology with an emphasis in Sport Psychology from a Research I institution reviewed the transcripts and coded for patterns. These patterns were then assessed against the thematic codes of the principle researcher, accounting for a 95-100% rate of coding agreement. The only discrepancies were noted as difference in language between the two researchers, which upon deliberation were clarified and confirmed. One can and should expect such differences given the difference in positionality, paradigmatic perspectives, and lived experiences of the two researchers.

Third, memoing was employed throughout the entire process, including data analysis, to ensure there was no drift in the definition or application of the emergent categories. Upon

iterative review of the transcripts and audio files, the categories and properties were continually confirmed and solidified.

### **Validity**

Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that validity, or the accuracy of the findings, is inherent in CGT because of the constant comparative method employed. The data analysis technique of constant comparison helped ensure internal validity of the emerging theme, as theoretical saturation was met for each key concept to become integrated into the final theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This perpetual interrogation of the evidence with new evidence continually refined the emergent theory until all that was left was that which most accurately described the core variable of the substantive area. Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) summarized CGT validity criteria in the following manner, aspects readers may use to judge this aspect of trustworthiness:

1. **Fit:** how well concepts fit the incidents (interview data); fit also relies on how thorough a job the researcher did of constant comparison. Professional triangulation and memoing helped ensure that the emergent theory fit the data.
2. **Relevance:** the real concerns of participants based on what captures their attention, rather than just the attention of academics. Professional triangulation and participant feedback on the emergent theory helped ensure accurate codes were both conceptualized and applied.
3. **Workability:** the usefulness of the theory in explaining the phenomenon or incident being studied. Participant and sport professionals' feedback on the emergent theory was leveraged to ensure it would be useful to not only players but also those working within the athletics space.

4. Modifiability: the ability for the theory to be modified when new and relevant data are considered and compared (p. 190). Professionals from other fields have reviewed the emergent theory in relation to their own unique spaces, and have demonstrated promising elements of modifiability to be applied in various domains.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Protecting participants' confidentiality and ensuring their psycho-emotional safety throughout the research process is of critical concern in qualitative inquiry (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Participants were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary, and that they could remove themselves at any time with no ramifications. Because CGT does not emphasize the individual experience but rather seeks to generate a theory around a procedural phenomenon, participants were not given specific pseudonyms. However, their personal profiles were outlined above to demonstrate the diversity of experiences considered in the current study, and direct quotes were leveraged emphasize and contextualize nuanced aspects of the emergent theory.

Transcripts will be kept for the required amount of time following publication, and then destroyed. Additionally, all files maintained a double-layer of password protection on the researcher's computer and hard drive.

Transitioning out of the NFL has been described as having to "die twice" as a professional athlete (Pendergast, 2016). Although there was minimal risk perceived for the study and no strong emotional responses were elicited from participants, references for professional psychology services were available for participants.

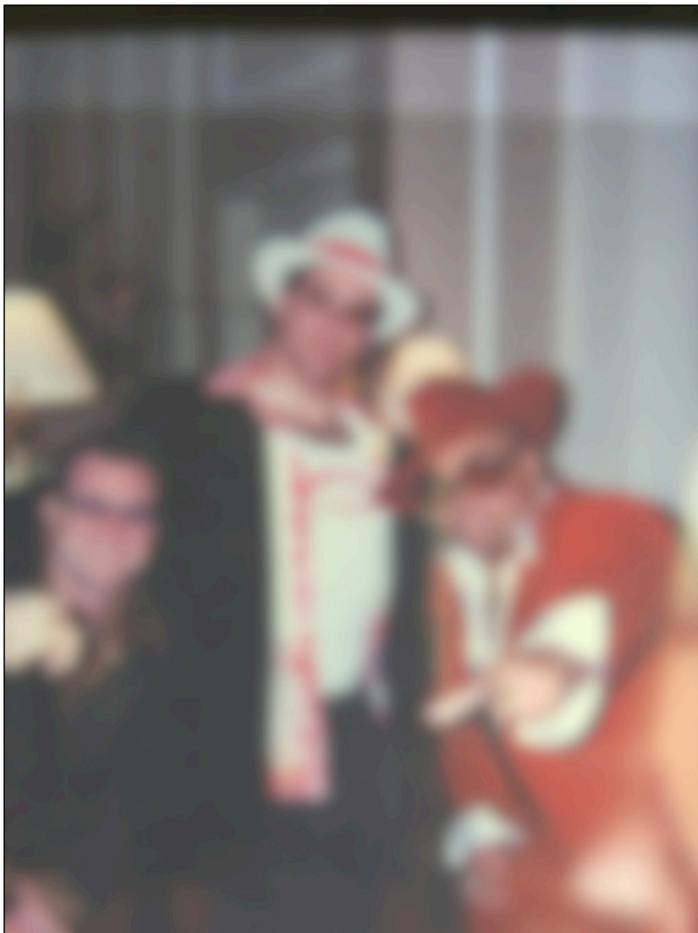
## Pilot Interview

Transitioning out of elite sport can be a traumatic experience (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavalley, 2004). To further investigate the legitimacy of this specific substantive area of elite athletic transition, I conducted an interview on the topic for a graduate-level course. The participant was a first round draft pick in the NFL Draft who played eight years in NFL, won a Super Bowl, and whose career ended unexpectedly due to a failed physical after several injuries. The single-subject design involved a semi-structured interview that lasted approximately 60 minutes. Several insights emerged from the interview on the transition experience out of the NFL, including a sense of isolation and insecurity, a loss of purpose and identity, a lack of trust with the services offered by the NFL, and a battle with substance abuse, marital issues, and disengagement with life.

At the conclusion of the interview, the participant implored me to continue researching this topic. He noted that he knew many other men who were suffering in silence and who he felt not only *would* speak with me about their experience but who *should* speak with me about their experience. These initial findings supported that more empirical evidence needed to be developed to better understand, and thus better support, these men as they transition out of the NFL and into life outside of professional sport. The purpose of this study was to do just that. The CGT method allowed us to do just that.

### CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. Science has confirmed that pictures are indeed more powerful than just words because they stimulate different regions in our brains during processing. As Grady, McIntosh, Rajah, and Craik (1998) indicated, pictures automatically engage various associations with other knowledge in the brain, leading to deeper coding and thus more extensive memory. Understanding the power within pictures and visual representations, then, participants were asked to share an image or artifact of something they felt represented their transition experience, and two to three sentences describing it. In alignment with the semi-disruptive nature of this study (Brown et al., 2014), these artifacts were interspersed throughout the paper to add layers of insight, depth, and indeed memory, of the relevant behavioral patterns and subsequently generated theory.



*Figure 3.1* Artifact from Participant 1 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “And it was sad, it was lonely, it was....(pause)....helpless. I was doing the best I could but the opposite of happy. The façade of happiness. And we were at my retirement party, but there was another story going on that the truth told in the morning.”

*Note: Picture has been distorted to protect anonymity of participant*

### **Emergent Grounded Theory on the Transition out of the NFL**

*\*July 20, 2016 - The stories are all the same. And yet, the stories are so incredibly different. The details vary like their age, their race, their draft status, etc., but conceptually, these details all fit into the same story line. To trust the emergent can be scary, but the enlightenment that comes with the consistency across diversity is more intoxicating than the fear...and so the sorting and integration continues.*

It mattered not where they came from, who raised them, how much money they had as a child, or how much money they have today. It mattered not how old they were, how many wives they have had, or how many children they have. It mattered not where they went to college, what their draft status was, or if they ever won a Super Bowl. It mattered not how many years they played in the NFL, and it mattered not how many years they have been out of the League. What mattered is that they played football in the National Football League. What mattered is that they got a taste of an experience and a lifestyle in which very few ever get to indulge. In fact, according to a 2016 publication by the NCAA, only 1.6% of NCAA-eligible football players got drafted in the 2015 NFL Draft ([www.ncaa.org](http://www.ncaa.org)), and statistically, less than 1% of the US population has played professional football.

The data from this study may have powerful implications for how the transition out of the NFL is conceptualized. Although there may be nuanced elements for men based on their personal experiences, the evidence is solidly grounded in that the overarching psycho-emotional process is consistent across demographic specificity. It is not a race thing, or an age thing, or a years-played thing or even a financial thing – it is a human thing. And this “thing” cuts to the very essence of what it means to be a human with physical and

psychological well-being: to have meaning and purpose in one's life, and a hope to fulfill that purpose (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987).

The emergent, grounded theory is described, beginning with a conceptualized overview of the three models that comprise the theory; and then a rigorous review of Model 3, which describes the main concern followed by the subsequent categories and their properties. Concurrent with CGT, higher order conceptualizations were favored over individual lived experiences as the theory emerged from recurrent, theoretically saturated trends in the data (Glaser, 2014). Excerpts from interviews were included to add flavor, depth, and validity to each element of the theory, along with additional scientific, literature support for each category and property.

### **Grounded NFL Transition Theory: A 3-Model Conceptualization**

Transitioning through any change is not just an event, but rather, a process (McPherson, 1980). But what is more is that a change does not necessitate a transition (Bridges, 2004); that is, a person may go through a change and never actually transition through that change. The collective results of this study revealed that for those who actually go through transition process of change, out of the NFL and into life beyond the game, it is best understood and situated amid three distinct yet integrated models (See Figure 3.2):

- Model 1: Former Player Life Timeline
- Model 2: Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence
- Model 3: Process of Purpose Post-NFL

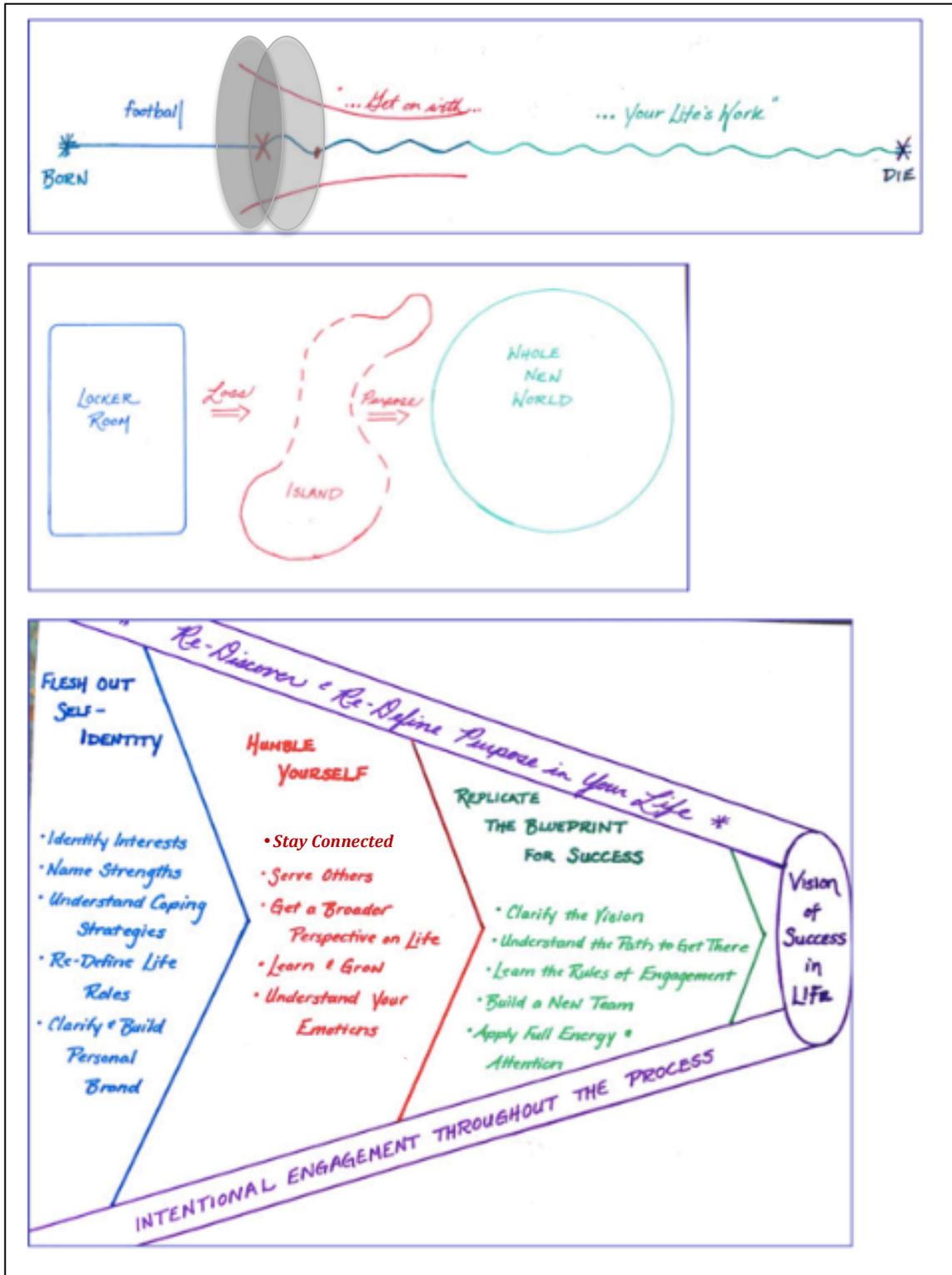


Figure 3.2 Grounded NFL Transition Theory. A three-model theory that describes the Transition Process out of the NFL, including Former Player Life Timeline (Model 1), the Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence (Model 2), and the Process of Purpose Post-NFL

(Model 3).

**Model 1: Former player life timeline.** Participant 10 shared a powerful account of how his former Steelers' coach, Chuck Noll, tried to convey how professional football fit into the overall life of his players:

And Coach Noll said, "Well, so and so, he has decided to get on with his life's work."

And at the moment I didn't really understand what he was talking about. But I've come to realize now that Chuck never thought that football was your life's work. He always thought it was just a gap filler in route to your life's work. So he would always say, "Don't put all your eggs in this basket, this is just a small portion of your life and afterwards you're going to get on with your life's work." So consequently, every time someone would be released, that would be his phrase, "Ok, so and so, is going on with his life's work." Or, "We've released him and he's going onto his life's work."

As Participant 10 noted in the preceding quote, football is just a part of an individual's life. It is helpful then, to situate the transition process amid the overall life of an individual, and Coach Noll's quote served as descriptors in Model 1. Despite variances in duration, intensity, and sequence, a stable pattern of life events emerged from the data, as described in Model 1 (See Figure 3.3).

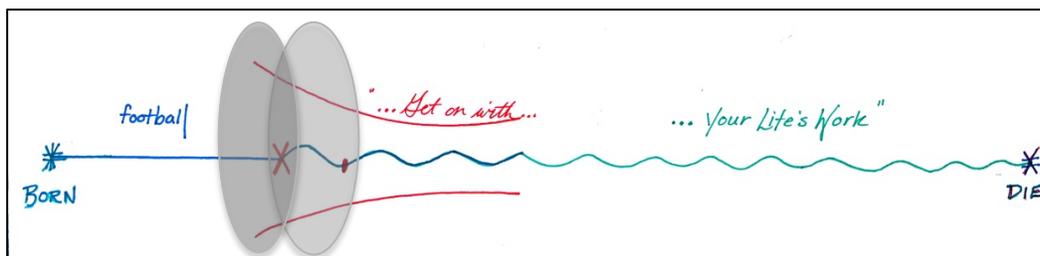


Figure 3.3. Model 1: Former player life timeline. This model shows the overall life timeline of a former NFL player, from the day he was born to the day he dies, his life playing football, the moment his career ends, the point he accepts his career is over, the process of transition,

and his life after football. The grey clouds represent physical and emotional pain experienced during the transition process.

*\*September 21, 2016 – Just like every thought is important because it is generating actual brain matter in our brains, so too does every detail in this theory for me. Even the colors I use, I want to have intention behind, just as intentionality emerged as a critical factor in the transition process. After doing some research on the ‘psychology of color,’ I learned that every color has both positive and negative affective representations. Throughout the three models, these colors represent fluidly either the positive or negative affective response, depending upon where it is placed. The relevant color schemes for Model 1 reflect the following:*

- *Blue = [positive] trust, efficiency, logic; [negative] coldness, aloofness...sort of how life is understood when football is present*
- *Red = [positive] strength, energy, survival, masculine; [negative] defiance, aggression, strain...sort of how the transition process is wrestled with and navigated*
- *Green = [positive] balance, restoration, peace; [negative] boredom, blandness...sort of how life beyond football can be experienced at different moments*
- *Grey = [negative] depression, lack of energy, fear of exposure...sort of how pain feels, urging withdrawal from others*

First and foremost, Model 1 is anchored by two life events consistent for every human being: the day one is “Born” and the day one “Dies.” Moving from left to right, the blue/green line is the individual’s life before he began playing football. The next segment, or blue line, depicts his playing career, from the time he began throughout his professional career. The red “X” denotes when his professional NFL career ended, and his life after football began. The red funnel indicates the transition process. It is important to note that some former players’ transition process began while they were still in the League. As Participant 2 described:

Realistically in my second to last year I knew it was winding down...So I was kind of getting into that grey area my second to last year, and I start feeling like life would be better if I was to just retire and do something else...You just realize that your value is not what you think it is...ever. Meaning you can be the best player off to 5 to 6

straight Pro Bowls, but they're in the business of decreasing your value and you're in the business of increasing it. The tug and pull of contract negotiations - owners and general managers and head coaches being at odds with each other cause each one of them want to keep a different guy. I noticed all of that when I was going through mine, and I was like I play for this organization, played for Dallas for so long and then when it got to the contract negotiations which I had heard about, it didn't catch me off guard, but until you personally go through how much they want to devalue you, as a football player, it kind of... and I got paid. You know what I'm saying? Like, I got paid but it's just that process like some guys, for me, I wouldn't say that I couldn't handle it, it just opened up another... it opened up Pandora's box for me to see behind the scenes. Cause before then it was just... I'm young, I'm playing football, I'm happy, I'm vibrant, I'm getting the check, I'm making money, and then you get to the contract negotiation and you finally are thrust into the business of it and you realize that agents have relationships with teams, and you know they cutting deals for each other so other players are willing to go sign. It's just a bunch of foolishness basically, so it turned me off and then that's when I started thinking about you know I need to really start thinking about something else and what would I want to do if I finished up.

For others, like Participant 11, the transition process was not initiated until their NFL career concluded due to injury, being released, or otherwise:

I felt after the second year with that I was the best football player that I had ever been. I was grown a little more, I was 25 years old, physically and mentally, and you know, from again that mindset, I felt that I was the best football player that I had ever been -

just a steady crescendo into becoming a really good football player. And injuries and everything else, you know...but that was the worst part of being finished, and not getting picked back up again. Like Amber, I was the best football player that I had ever been, and then, it was taken away, right? So that was the hardest part of not getting another chance, of not getting another tryout was just that part.

The red dot indicates a moment in time when the individual truly accepted the fact that his NFL career was over. This “moment” was confirmed by every participant, and ranged from occurring by choice while they were still playing to occurring by submission up to ten years post-retirement, as denoted by the following quotes. As Participant 8 said:

Because in my view of playing professional football, it was, this is a vehicle, this is not my identity. This is just a part of me and my journey... I didn't want to simplify myself, just as a professional athlete. So throughout playing I owned a couple of men's clothing stores in Florida, did a lot of community work out in California. So I stayed busy off the field with different things that that put in my mind on the other opportunities that were out there for me to do when I finished playing football, when that time is up.

Juxtaposed is the experience of Participant 10:

Yea, after that ten year period I, see you gotta understand, I was still going to...all these scout camps all across the country...spending money, getting timed, doing agility, doing all the testing, thinking that all of my information, and they probably did send the information to all the NFL teams as they say, but all the NFL teams are like, that's not our pipeline, we have our scouting departments. So I don't need to go to the Goodwill to see what they have when I can go through my regular means of

evaluating athletes. So I was still doing all of that. So for about ten years. And then I realized, 'You know what? I'm not gonna...it's not gonna...it's not gonna happen'... I was like, 'Ok, I have to uh do something else,' and I got a job and I started on my journey to building a career outside of football.

Again, it is important to note that this "moment" occurred at different points along the life timeline, but in all cases, it served as the impetus for the individual to begin the intentional effort of "getting on with" one's "life work." As Participant 4 stated, "I officially let go, had a big long cry, um, kind of I think as unmanly as that sounds talking with football guys, it's actually probably, um, the one thing that I've realized guys that have done a decent job letting go have actually done is basically like crying and letting go of that part of your life."

One recurring element to each man's story was the presence of physical pain and emotional pain as he initiated and progressed through the transition process. In Model 1, these two pain sources are depicted as grey clouds during the transition process. Again, it is important to note that the severity and longevity of these pain experiences varied for each individual and manifested themselves differently, as noted below, but were important, recurring elements to the overall transition process.

***Physical pain.*** Each participant noted the presence of physical pain and exhaustion during the end of his playing career, and this pain even served as buffer for some to the realization that his career may be over:

You know, so, but again, my body was beat up, I was hurting, I had multiple injuries, I had concussions, I had torn rotator cuff and banged up knees, so my body was really tried because I had played a year in Europe between the two years with the Giants, so

I had had three training camps in 18 months, which was a lot. That was a lot of football and my body was tired, and I was mentally just kinda beat up from the whole process of getting cut and being injured. I really just needed a break. I can remember driving back to OH from NY, and thinking, I'm tired and this is hurting, and you know, a few weeks went by and you see, then you get clarity again, and you know, that's when I really hit me, "What am I going to do now?"...So I was working out again, I was kind of considering arena football or something, I was just considering more football.

As Participant 11's quote highlights, once the physical pain subsided the desire and hope of re-entering the League returned for some. For others, however, like Participant 1, they accepted that their NFL career was over, and they decided to move forward, despite how rocky of a road that may have been. These accounts again reflect how the red dot "moment" varied for everyone:

I had a lot of pain toward the end of my career and it was just the law of diminishing returns based off some early injuries. I never missed a down in college, but when I got to the League, on Day 3, I blew out a patella tendon and then the next year, came back, played the whole season, the first round of playoffs, had the same injury on the other knee. So, I went from being mister everything in college to just a guy...But probably half way through that season, I had figured out that this was going to be my last season, so...I took the time in my last game to slowly unwrap my tape, and to smell the grass, and close my eyes and hear the people walking on the metal stairs in Mile High Stadium in Denver. It was a hell of a win. I think we rushed the ball for over 200 yards. A beautiful way to have my last moment on the field. My roommate

on the road knew I was going to be done after that, and I just got really, really emotional. I think the overwhelming feeling initially was relief that ‘Thank God I don’t have to do that anymore’...with the pills and the shots and the pain...and also the pressure, there was this underlying feeling of being exposed and not being good enough. The fears that I had about that, just in all areas of my life, really were coming true and manifesting in football because my body was just giving out, so...ummm...I was relieved to get done.

As noted above, this physical pain was often coupled with the heavy, repeated use of pain medication, which was administered by team physicians. As Participant 3 pointed out, the drugs allowed him to mask the pain he felt in order to work out to the degree necessary to continue playing:

I mean my last year it was bad. I was taking two Percocet and a 5-hour energy just to get through practice, and it still didn’t cut out the pain... Like I definitely violated the veteran code of practice tempo because I was going wildly just doing all I could to try and get my uniform back on game day. I used to because of the condition of my knee I would sit out Wednesdays but I just started taking more painkillers and said fuck it, I got to practice. So I just wanted to do everything I could to try and play in one of those playoff games.

The recognition of potential damage to their bodies from the drugs themselves served as driving force for some, like Participant 8, to accept that their careers were indeed ending:

And to be quite honest, my mind and my spirit was kinda outta football. Just cuz through that process of being an athlete, you take a lot of medication, a lot of drugs, a lot of pain pills. As you get older, you get wiser, ‘I’m taking this twice a game –

taking it twice a week, taking dose packs every week. Like if I - my kidneys - if I don't continue to get injured my damn body's going to shut down and I'm done forever. And I just didn't want to continue to do that.

***Emotional pain.*** Emotional pain was another consistent element of each individual's experience of NFL career termination. For some, it came after the physical pain subsided; for others it happened simultaneously. For some it lasted years as they struggled to understand why no team would pick them back up; for others it lasted a night in a lonely hotel room as they considered the years of blood, sweat, and tears they had invested into the game. Perhaps the most important aspect of this emotional pain experience is that it led to what Participant 1 described as suffering in silence. "You know, the worst thing you can do is be a bitch in the locker room. People smell blood in the water and vroom! So, I ended up suffering in silence, not really telling people how I was doing." In the macho game of football, everyone could understand pain if it included a broken leg, a torn ligament, or a cracked rib. But because no one can "see" the pain of rejection, the experience of failure, or the hurt of social isolation, the emotional pain proved even more difficult for the men to "deal with" than the physical state of their battered bodies.

However, as Lieberman (2013) describes, the human brain experiences physical and emotional pain in the exact same ways. That is, the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) is activated when one experiences physical pain in exactly the same ways as when one experiences social/emotional pain. Unfortunately, as American men are socialized to suppress many of their emotions, this emotional pain is not dealt with in a healthy manner (Ehrmann, 2011; Farrell, 1993), often leading to further psychological and physical disruption (Gross & Levenson, 1997).

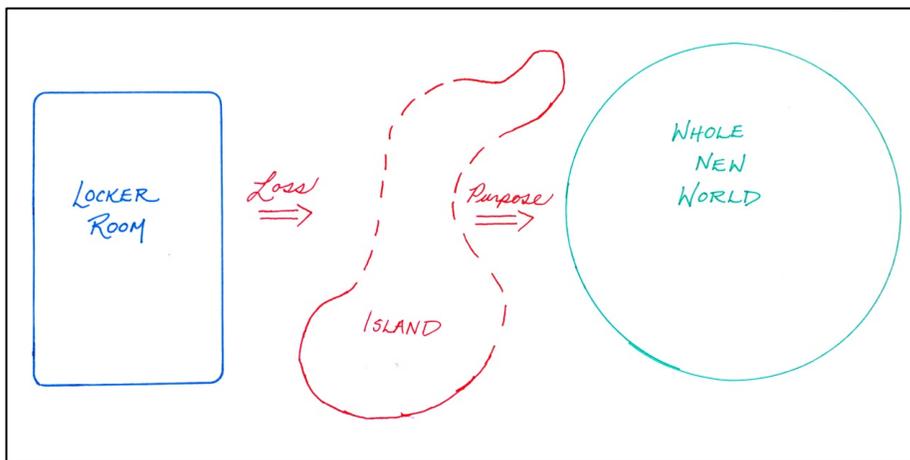
In this research, learning to process and “deal with” the emotional pain of loss experienced when one’s NFL career was over was an important driver in “getting on with” one’s “life’s work.” One participant learned this through the group intervention, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) ( $n=1$ ), others through individual therapy ( $n=3$ ), others through community service and volunteering ( $n=6$ ), others through advanced education with “like-minded” individuals ( $n=3$ ), and still others through their faith ( $n=7$ ). In later sections, this research suggests ways in which individuals can intentionally learn to process and leverage emotions and emotional pain to move through the transition funnel more effectively and efficiently.

As the remainder of the life timeline depicts, highlighted in green, one’s “life work” is intended to be, and hopefully is, much longer than one’s life with football. However, as Participant 10 noted in his review of Model 1, the unfortunate part is that some men, like Junior Seau, Adrian Robinson, Andre Waters, and others, never make it through the red transition funnel and commit suicide in desperation. Others, due to injury, financial crisis, or addiction have a very difficult time getting through the transition process. The intention of this theory and its models is to depict *how* to more successfully navigate this challenging experience through the insight of those who have traversed its path. Furthermore, it can and should be used in conjunction with other leading sport sciences such as neuroscience, brain training, chiropractic work, physical therapy, biomechanics, and massage therapy to offer a holistic approach to post-NFL healing and thriving.

**Model 2: Post-NFL macro transition sequence.** Model 2 depicts the macro transition sequence of former NFL players, as revealed through this Classic Grounded Theory study (See Figure 3.4). Accordingly with Model 1, the colors of Model 2 reflect the affective responses of each hue, thus intentionally constructed with the psychological

reflections of each component. The relevant color schemes for Model 2 reflect the following:

- Blue = [positive] trust, efficiency, logic; [negative] coldness, aloofness...sort of how life is understood within the football locker room
- Red = [positive] strength, energy, survival, masculine; [negative] defiance, aggression, strain...sort of how loss, the Island, and trying to rediscover purpose are experienced
- Green = [positive] balance, restoration, peace; [negative] boredom, blandness...sort of how one's Whole New World beyond football is perceived at various times



*Figure 3.4 Model 2: Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence.* This model represents the post-NFL macro transition sequence, where the player leaves the security, camaraderie, and understanding of the locker room, experiences loss and finds himself on an island of isolation, fear, and uncertainty, and then, through the process of re-discovering and re-defining purpose in his life is able to build a whole new world of renewed vision, purpose, relationships, and grit.

From left to right, the solid Blue rectangle represents the Locker Room (LR). Every participant ( $n=12$ ) mentioned the LR as one of the most influential aspects of their experience in the NFL. The LR was intricately described by every participant, and thus represents their lives and perceptions of their lives while they were playing: a place of clarity, a place where

they understood the process for success, and a place where they felt intimately connected to others in pursuit of a common goal. As Participant 4 intricately described:

I think the most unique thing about a locker room is I know everything about you from the fact that I, like I've seen you naked. I've seen everything, you literally have nothing to hide. Naked in every sense of the word, like physically, mentally, and emotionally. And I think that is a powerful experience to have with another human. When you know everything about them um, you can really share and be open with that person because you don't have anything to hide and in the locker room, there's like 53 guys. There are 52 other that are like that with you. You know exactly how much money they make, I know all your responsibilities, I know when you're good and when you're bad at it, it's said in front of everyone. There is a public opinion on your abilities as well as private opinion on your abilities. Um, we only do things really, there's very much a herd and tribal mentality of a locker room in that everyone has each other's backs and you're going to war and it's us vs. them. Just as much us vs. them as us vs. the other team, as in us vs. everyone else who thinks they know what is going on in a locker room because unless you are in those doors, it's a very sacred place. Even coaches don't really know what's going on or the eco system kind of, and the people that have power in a locker room um, and influence in a locker room, they have an idea but a lot of times they don't. They don't know that that's the 3<sup>rd</sup> string D-Lineman that actually rallies everyone before practice and before they get out there and the 1<sup>st</sup> string guy is the loudest, basically reiterates the same message that was said by the 3<sup>rd</sup> string guy. But the players all know that right?

Participant 6 extends the power of the locker room when he shared:

So it's just a mental breaking away from the locker room (too), from that camaraderie. Just having a place where you feel safe. So now you feel like you're not safe anymore. Not safe from danger but safe from - you have a place where you can voice your concerns. Because the locker room is a comedy club, it's a dance club, it's a place of worship, it's a place of... it's a psychiatrist office, it's a... you name it. It's your safe haven away from the world. It's a safe place away from fans, it's a safe place away from, not coaches all the time because they come in there but, for the most it's supposed to be where the players can come and get away from your own world, get away from the fans, get away from the media who may be on your side one week and then may not be on your side the next week. So it's supposed your place of solitude where you can go and be with your teammates and your family away from home. And once you're done playing, that place is gone, and now you have to find your new safe place. And if you don't know necessarily what you want to transition to and do in life, it can feel like you know, like you are kind of lost.

As the previous excerpts depict, the LR is both a technical and a symbolic representation of the transition experience. One day they are inside the walls of an NFL LR and the next day they are removed from it; one day they understand how the cadence of their lives' function and the next day they wonder how to even prepare for the coming day. The very structure and schedule of one's life has been clearly defined around football for years. From how a year is structured to how a day is structured, it has all revolved around their lives and roles as a football player. As Participant 6 described:

For me, it was the battle back and forth. You know you've done it for so long you know? I've played with pads on since my freshman year of high school so you know,

there's two parts of a year now. There is no summer, winter, fall, you know? There's offseason and in-season, and your life's tailored to that. And it's not anything sad it's just the way you see the calendar. And it may sound weird to people but there's a certain routine that happens...you know this time of year, this is what happens...it's just the way I see the calendar. And I think the hardest part is once you come out of that...you're not retired from life, and now you have to make your own schedule if you haven't been doing it. Obviously, you're used to a schedule. You show up or you get fined. You know you have to be at this workout, you know you have to be at this meeting, you know you have to be at this practice. Well now, you don't have that. Now no one's telling you what to do so you know you have to be very proactive and be very tenacious as far as finding out what are your next steps? And I think lot of it is, it can be overwhelming for a lot of people because you start thinking about the rest of your life instead of the next day like you've been thinking about for however long you've been playing or however long you've been in school. Everyday has just been one day at a time, you know you weren't thinking about the grand total until you die, but all of a sudden you start thinking about that, which is weird, but you know...and it doesn't matter how prepared you are, it's still a transition out of the game.

*\*June 30, 2016 - I can't help but hear the sounds of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) ringing through as these men discuss what it's like to have to leave the locker room. Technically, this "place" is powerful in what it means to feel like they know what's going on (competence), control over what they have to do to be successful (autonomy), and relationships that "no one ever understands unless they experience it" (relatedness). Symbolically, the LR seems to encompass everything they know about life, how it works, and who they turn to for help. When it's gone, their confidence in their abilities outside of football gets called into question (competence), their sense of control over how their lives work now is different (autonomy), and finally, as one guy said, "there's no body in the backfield with you now;" their sense of belonging and close relationships have also vanished (relatedness).*

The first red arrow represents the Loss that players experience as they leave the clarity and camaraderie of the LR. The structure that football offered was perceived as control by the former players, but when it dissipated, so too was their sense of control, and thus confidence, in how to manage the years, months, days, hours, and minutes of their existence. Participant 1 even likened the Loss to Kubler-Ross's (1969) model on death and dying where individuals must cycle through the phases of denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance with the death of a loved one. Although this model does offer insight into the process, its main limitation is that it was not developed from or for the athletic population and thus has limited contextual application.

As participants go through this period of physical, emotional, mental, relational, and structural Loss, they find themselves alone, on the Red Island. The Island represents a place of isolation, confusion, pain, & often times, humiliation. It seemed to support Kalish's (1985) social death model, which described one's loss of social functioning and resulting isolation. Again, this is a related framework but limited in its overall understanding of how that social death fits into the broader scope of one's life and athletic experience, particularly, life beyond the game. As Participant 3 stated:

And what I realized I missed was, there was no like build up in my life. Like in the NFL you're always building up to something whether you're going through an offseason, you're building up and trying to get your body in the best shape possible for training camp, and then training camp you're building up for the really long season, and then once the regular season starts there's always this build-up of a game. So Wednesday, Thursday, Friday you're balls deep in practice, it's a grind, how far can you push yourself, how good can you take care of your body so that come Sunday

you feel as good as you possibly can and every Sunday was a chance for you to have one of the best days of your life. If you had a good game, there was nothing like it. There's no drug on this earth, there's nothing like it feeling the energy of 80,000 people and a national television audience to see you perform athletically. Just the build-up of it, I miss that build-up the most but to answer your question more specifically if there's a specific moment... yeah so, (my team) had just won the AFC championship game, they're going to the Super Bowl, and I just went for a walk outside. It was like a really cold day and I just started sobbing. I was like, I was just...so sad to not be a part of what they were able to go through. I thought my life was never going to be as fulfilling or as exciting or as meaningful because I wasn't able to play pro football. And that was probably my lowest point.



*Figure 3.5* Artifact from Participant 3 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “An arrow is not as fast as a bullet, so to compare to the end of an NFL career it goes like this: Even though I could see it coming, it still hurt like hell upon impact. But that very same arrow that hurt me, can be used to fly again. The scar will remain, but those feelings of failure, disappointment, fear, anxiety, depression, are not permanent. Just like an arrow will always find its way to the ground, those feelings will not last forever when I started to work at them.”

It is important to note that everyone's Island “looked” and “felt” differently, and how long one stayed on the Island was determined by how quickly and efficiently one was able to re-discover and re-define purpose in his life. For some ( $n=3$ ), this island looked like a party

scene, with drugs, sex, and alcohol dominating the outside while pain, brokenness, and fear engulfed the inside (See Figure 3.1). For some ( $n=2$ ), this looked like years of isolation from the outside world, while depression began to overtake and suppress their ability to engage with life. For others ( $n=5$ ), this looked like general emotional detachment from other people, other places, and other job opportunities; they were physically present but emotionally struggled to find something that they cared as much as about as they once did football. And still for others ( $n=2$ ), the Island was a brief stop as they sat alone in a hotel room to cry, make an assessment of where they were and where they wanted to be, build a list of contacts, and then emerge with a game plan to move forward. The following quotes share the diversity and depth of the Island:

Participant 1: But very quickly, the things that football provided me that I was unaware of, I quickly started to try and supplement those. And that looked like going out and partying and running the streets and trying to recreate all the things that football gave me that I think I was unaware of at the time. So initially started out great, but was a slow and gradual decline to me hitting bottom... Luckily I was a high functioning alcoholic and drug user if you will, but, you can liken it to a movie, my life looked pretty fun but at the end of the day I was pretty empty and bankrupt inside. Because everywhere I went there I was. And the person (name) didn't have those things to mask what was going on with the feelings of (name).

Participant 4: There's no one there to help you because as many resources as there are, they're not universal, it's not a one size fits all for retirement. Um, people always talk about passion; find your passion, chase your passion, listen to fuckin' Tony Robbins videos and shit like that, and you're like alright passion, passion, where is

this passion going to come from.

Participant 7: I mean, I didn't barely leave the house for almost two years, Amber, just too embarrassed and didn't want people to see me and judge me for not playing anymore. The day I wouldn't even take my daughter to pre-school was really a sad day...I battled depression for almost a full year on my own.

Participant 8: And so when I got cut, literally sat in a hotel room that night and didn't call anybody. Just kinda thought about what's next? Where am I gonna put my time,, energy, career into? And woke up the next morning and still didn't have a plan so I guess I'm going to retire... So that night was just was really about me reflecting on decisions that I had made, business stuff that I had done, community stuff I had done, to identify where that low hanging fruit was if you will. What I'm really passionate about, and just kinda move into that as easily and as quick as possible.

The second red arrow represents the transition process to building the green Whole New World. This CGT study revealed that the transition process was really one of re-discovering and re-defining Purpose in their lives post-NFL. Once they went through this process, men were able to build, exist, and even thrive in their Whole New World - a place of renewed vision, purpose, passion, and grit. Given participants' different stages in the transition process, the reconstruction, definition, and engagement in their Whole New Worlds varied. However, this variation was correlated to the degree that Model 3, The Process of Purpose, had been navigated.

**Model 3: Process of purpose post-NFL.** In CGT, the role of the researcher is to identify the main concern, or problem, that participants are trying to solve throughout a particular phenomenon, and then how they go about actually "solving" that problem. In this

study, then, my role as the researcher was to build such rapport with participants that they were willing and able to share their story with me in a deep enough way that we could identify the biggest concern they faced through the process of transitioning out of the NFL, and how they went about solving that concern.

Models 1 and 2 emerged as the life timeline of former NFL players and the macro transition sequence that occurred, and allowed Model 3 to be understood and situated in the broader context of the individuals' lives. Model 3 dives more deeply, targeting the emergent main concern and supporting categories and properties that allowed participants to build their Whole New World. The model will be described in detail below (See Figure 3.6), beginning with the main concern, followed by the five categories and their supporting properties. Relevant, scientific literature support for each of the emergent themes is also included, demonstrating the component validity of this integrated model. Accordingly with the former models, the colors of Model 3 reflect the affective responses of each hue, thus intentionally constructed with the psychological reflections of each component. The relevant color schemes for Model 3 reflect the following:

- Purple = [positive] spiritual awareness, vision, truth, authenticity; [negative] introversion, suppression, inferiority...sort of how it is as one comes to understand and own his unique vision and purpose in life
- Blue = [positive] trust, efficiency, logic; [negative] coldness, aloofness...sort of how learning how new and old elements of selves are supposed to be integrated and understood
- Red = [positive] strength, energy, survival, masculine; [negative] defiance, aggression, strain...sort of how learning to die to self feels on a daily basis

- Green = [positive] balance, restoration, peace; [negative] boredom, blandness...sort of how the mundanity of excellence can feel day to day

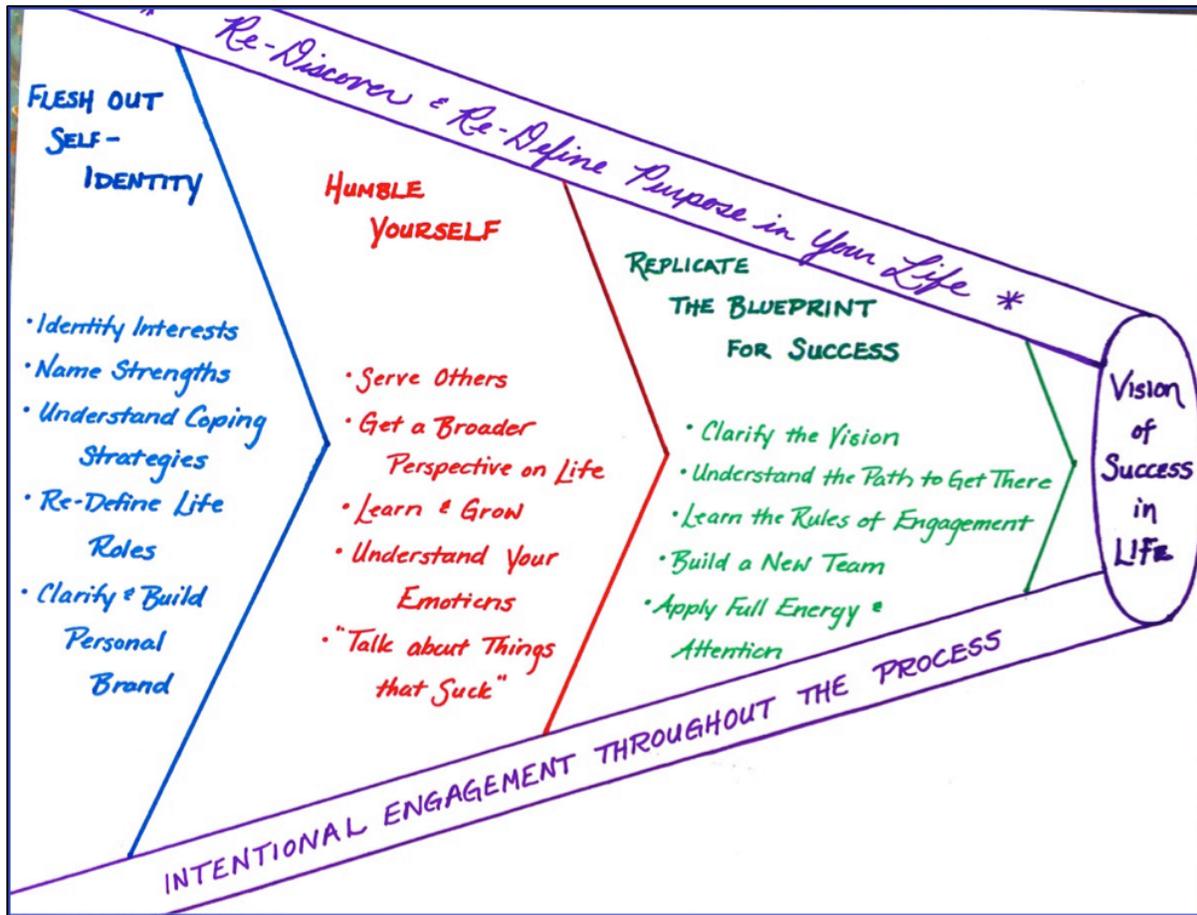


Figure 3.6 Model 3: Process of Purpose Post-NFL. This model demonstrates the process of rediscovering and redefining purpose in one’s life once he leaves the NFL. It is perpetually guided by the two categories “vision for success in life” and “intentional engagement throughout the process.” The three categories of “flesh out self-identity,” “humble yourself,” and “replicate the blueprint for success” are all supported by five properties within their respective segments of the model. Together, these five categories allow individuals to “solve” the main concern of “re-discovering and re-defining purpose” in one’s life post-NFL.

\*May 24, 2016 - Interview two was so different than one; not nearly as traumatic from a poor life decision standpoint, but awesome to see the overlaps in terms of missing the locker room, finding **purpose**, etc. etc.

\*June 3, 2016 - ...P3 is still struggling to find his **purpose**, and it extends to his sense of peace and confidence...

*\*June 24, 2016 - ...Intentionality is also a point I feel like each guy has touched upon, and **the need to have a purpose** for one's time, energy, and focus. Whether the **purpose** was there or not seems to be pretty indicative of how confident these men seem about themselves and their existence.*

*\*June 28, 2016 - ...This man was very psychologically sound, perhaps most notably in his strong belief about himself and his ability to be successful in this world. His career, since high school, was wrought with injury and challenge, so "being comfortable being uncomfortable" and having to have an "f-you mentality, watch me" is something he had developed over the years. Locker room, **purpose**, intentionality, and finding a new solid community were recurring topics he mentioned.*

*\*July 3, 2016 – Seriously, **purpose**?? This is the recurring theme these big men keep talking about and imploring that is the most critical nature of their transition? I seriously did not expect this, and yet, the Bible even tells us that, without vision people perish. And I know from my own experience it is like a death when you aren't driven by something greater. Just definitely did not expect my dissertation to be about discovering and defining purpose...*

*\*July 7, 2016 – So I "tried out" delimiting to "**purpose**," but not necessarily trusting the process, instead of asking, "tell me about trying to rediscover **purpose** in your life after NFL" I asked instead, "So what do you think is the biggest problem guys have to solve after playing?" His (mind you, a 10-year veteran who has struggled with depression, drinking, and divorce) response? "**PURPOSE**. No doubt, finding your **purpose** again." What!?!?! Well ok...**purpose** it is! Let's saturate this thing!*

**Main concern: Rediscovering and redefining purpose in life post-NFL.** Every story was different, and yet every story was the same. The main problem or concern that participants sought to solve during their transition process out of the NFL was to rediscover and to redefine purpose in their life now that football was over. As Participant 6 stated:

One of the major issues that guys were having (him and his friends upon leaving the NFL) was finding a purpose when you walk away from the game. Who am I? What defines me as a person? And I always used to say when I was playing: I can't let football define me, God defines me... And even I went through a tough time trying to identify who I was and - because you go through a divorce, and you have this going on at the same time - that's a lot. But fortunately enough for me, when I got into

coaching that kind of, I could let all that stuff go and be, and have the purpose of teaching kids and seeing the benefits of kids...I would say the purpose has to be first. And the reason being because if you have a purpose, or something you're aiming to achieve, whether it may be for selfish reasons or whatever it may be, then your identity comes back...You have to find a purpose in life again, whether it be religious, whether it be family, or whatever...

As noted above, how effectively and efficiently one moved from the Island to building a Whole New World was directly related to his ability to define and live a purpose driven life. Although there are models and programming surrounding other "transition issues" such as education, career planning, financial management, addiction prevention/recovery, etc., this study was delimited to the emergent main concern of purpose – an aspect of the more "human side of the transition" that each participant ( $n=12$ ) noted was lacking in the resources.

Notably, every participant had a different journey to redefining purpose in his life. For example, the two most recent retirees, Participant 2 and Participant 3, have both been out of the League for just two years, but have dramatically different stories and are in very different places within Models 1 and 2. Although Participant 3 could be juxtaposed to all other participants, comparing the experiences of Participant 3 with that of Participant 2 offers a more amplified and even obvious importance of the purpose process in the transition because they are the same age (33), were both drafted into the NFL (1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> round respectively), both played for nine seasons in the NFL, and both are happily married with children. However, whereas Participant 2 shared that he is "living more fully into his life's purpose than ever before," Participant 3 shared that he is still struggling with the transition

and that his “purpose is a moving target.” The very things that other participants noted as aiding in their purpose process were the very things he noted as stumbling blocks, were missing in his life, and/or he was still navigating. As a memo denoted:

*\*June 20, 2016 - Participant 3 was yet so different...and so the same...as 1 and 2. He is just out for two years and the “newness” of his transition is evident. Although P2 was also just out two years, his ability to manage positively and actively engage seems better than P3. P2 saw the writing on the wall before it was time, and thus was able to somehow prepare mentally and emotionally, and then dove into something he considers his life purpose. P3 is still struggling to find his purpose, and it extends to his sense of peace and confidence. He still seems to be in his season of isolation (which also appears to be a recurring theme). Although he hopes for a better future, he feels as if nothing could be as exhilarating as football. Which, it will never be exhilarating in the same way, and that is a fact he still appears to be grappling with.*

I did a follow-up interview with Participant 3 fifty days following his first interview to further investigate his story given his closeness to retirement and differences in his tone, stories, and conversation than other participants. The follow-up interview revealed that he had advanced to the “red dot” moment highlighted in Model 1, thus signifying his preparedness for intentionally engaging in the process of rediscovering and redefining purpose in his life post-NFL. This moment is the one of acceptance that one’s professional football career is actually over, and it is time to move on. Indeed, it was powerful to note the difference in even his tone – less frustration, more patience, more acceptance – and how that correlated with the emergent data.

Another powerful example of an “outlier” story, which is actually quite consistent, is one from Participant 8:

So, as you fight for that dream, and we all do as athletes - so I’ve only told few people this - this is why I think my story is a little bit different than most, because, honestly the day I got drafted, and I got off the phone with the Chargers, and they were like, ‘We’ll take you if you’re available with the next pick.’ As soon as they

called my name and I got drafted, I heard a voice as loud as day that spoke to me that said, ‘This is not supposed to be all you do; this is just a part of what you’re supposed to do.’ And I don’t know what the hell it was or where it came from, but I can hear it like I’m talking to you right now. And I’m not going to say it was a sad time, because it was a happy time, but I knew I was not just made for football, but it was a platform for me to do whatever the hell it was I was supposed to do.

As these two stories highlight, even the “outliers” in this study demonstrated consistent themes or “storylines” of the transition experience, thus contributing to its validity. Whether a greater sense of purpose beyond football is still yet to be found or was identified prior to even playing in the NFL, the process of rediscovering and redefining purpose in life post-NFL is the main challenge men faced upon leaving the League. The following sections describe the emergent categories that helped men through this process, and their supporting properties.

***Category 1: Vision for success in life.*** The clarity of one’s vision for success in life helped guide and direct the purpose process. As quantum physics teaches through the theory of entanglement, the neurophysical model of the mind-brain interaction, and the required progression of all information from the subconscious into the conscious, having an “intangible vision” begins planting the type of seed that one desires to grow in the future (Barad, 2007; Leaf, 2015b; Schwartz, Stapp, & Beaugard, 2005; Munroe, 2003). For example, just as an apple seed is planted with the understanding and belief that it will absorb the necessary nutrients, develop roots, and then manifest as an apple tree above ground, a clear vision is planted in the subconscious and begins absorbing the necessary components for growth with other energy and elements only measurable in the quantum-physical sphere.

As time goes on, those visions manifest in the physical world with the same elementary elements that the original vision contained. Hence, in this study, the clearer the vision was, the clearer the results were; the fuzzier the vision was, the fuzzier the results were. Although clarifying one's vision for life was not a pre-requisite for engaging in the overall purpose process, but it did help facilitate it. For example, Participant 5 shared a distinctive moment when his vision for success in life after football was clarified:

And I really did have a revelation right when I was on the Patriots when the owner, his name is Robert Kraft, he's the owner of the Patriots. He was speaking to the team one day and this is no lie, I remember sitting there, all the players were together, he was speaking to all the fans and stuff and I just had seen how everyone was just so captivated by him and I was like that's who I need to be. Like, this football stuff is great, it's cool, but the guy who pays the players. That was like when I knew like ok, I got to do go do more than this. I need to take another... I need to take what I'm doing to another level. And so you know, think about the whole business school thing. It's like ok, that's probably what I need to do because I need to learn in order to get to that level. You know there's... I got to fill in that gap. So that was kind of a huge moment for me and I still wanted to play but then I also had this other thing on the other side of my shoulder like, I need to take this to another level and be like this guy.

Furthermore, the vision often became clearer as one progressed through the purpose process, so addressing individualized vision for one's life could serve as a perpetual element of consideration throughout the transition process. As Participant 2

shared, he went from wanting to be on sport radio to being a sports television commentator, to truly fleshing out his “identity” on the screen:

So I was going to go into radio, and then my wife was like no, you’re going to do TV. This is your own knowing more about us than we know about our self. She was like, ‘You want to do TV,’ and um, and I was like, ‘Well radio is the easiest route for me.’ I was done pretty much, I was going to go work for ESPN Dallas and be, you know, not really worried about the money just having a good time...So, I went into television...Because, I think because she wanted people to see my personality instead of hearing it...she just saw the talent she thought television would be a better route...in order to maximize what she thought I could bring would be better served on television. I’ve always tried to make myself approachable, I never want people to feel like they are talking to a TV personality, it’s just (me), you know and I think that bodes well for me, everybody can’t do that. Some people have to play into that exclusivity to make themselves relevant and make other people feel like they’re more than they really are. For me, if we can’t talk or form some kind of dialogue, we’re wasting our time. I mean, that’s just how I feel about relationships with human beings and in general...[T]hey asked me like what would you like your identity to be in this job. I said I want every person to feel like I can sit on their front sofa in their living room, have a beer with them and watch the game and talk football. So, for me it’s just, my purpose has been to always try and influence whoever I could influence. And if I can leave and you take a nugget, or if I can leave and say something to you and something about your life is better, then I’ve fulfilled that purpose. And seeing that

happen more and materialize more now than I was able to, because people just like you as a football player when you're playing...

The properties of vision proved to be clarity and progressive in nature. That is, the clearer the vision for success in life, the clearer the results, and as one engaged in the process, the vision progressively became more clear and precise.

***Category 2: Intentional engagement in the process.*** One recurring element in every account was the critical importance of intentional engagement in the process. Every participant ( $n=12$ ) noted the personal responsibility that went into the transition process; some recognized the need immediately following their exit from the NFL and others took years to realize that they needed to actively engage in order to “get on with” their lives in productive ways. As Participant 4 noted, “You can't just think you're going to sit on the beach and smoke weed all day after you're done. Well, you can, but that will only last for about 3 months and then you realize you actually have to do something about you're life.”

Participant 5 summarized the critical nature of intentional engagement in the process, and owning one's choice to stay engaged in life and purpose:

Nothing unintentional about it, there's a lot of other guys I know, coaches, friends of mine who, you know they're still just sitting around and waiting and they're not trying to be intentional about it. So you know, you got to make a move. Your transition will be a lot better if you're intentional about it and aggressive about going out and finding what you want to do next instead of just waiting for it because I feel like if you waited for it then you're going to get things that you may not want. Like you're going to be pulled in directions you don't want to be pulled in. And some things that you don't want, but that's your fault because you're not making that

choice you know? If you give up the right to choose something, you're going to have to deal with some things that you don't want.

Early in the research process, this category emerged as an independent factor.

However, as the other categories emerged, it became evident that "intentional engagement in the process" was a critical driver in each of the other categories and their properties. As Figure 3.6 indicates by the purple section running along the entire base of the model, being intentionally engaged in fleshing out one's self-identity, in humbling one's self, and in replicating the blueprint for success was what allowed participants to indeed, rediscover and redefine purpose in their lives. Hence, the properties of this category include awareness of the importance of intentional engagement and consistency in the intentional engagement.

***Category 3: Flesh out self-identity.*** Understanding who he was outside of being a football player was something each man was forced to consider upon leaving the League. Again, this process unfolded differently for each participant as they explored their self-identity in different ways. As Participant 6 noted, you just have to do something to start figuring out who you are and what you like:

I think the first thing is you get out a pen and paper and begin to ask yourself: what do I love? What do I love in life? What makes me happy? And what am I good at? And those are really tough questions to ask yourself first of all, but you have to ask yourself. And then you need to ask family, friends, support system, former coworkers, which is not easy. It's can be embarrassing.



*Figure 3.7* Artifact from Participant 2 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “This let me know people had the utmost confidence and genuine true love {for me}. And I think more than anything, it reminded me of who I was doing it for. You know, first God and then my family so, and I had a responsibility to make sure that I got everything out of what I was doing at whatever period of time because people were counting on me.”

As Figure 3.7 describes, knowing who he was outside of just being a football player allowed Participant 2 to navigate the transition process with a sense of responsibility and purpose. Positive psychology abounds with research supporting the importance of living into one’s authentic self and its impact on physical and mental health, relationships, productivity, and more (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Compton & Hoffman, 2013; Orlick, 2008). Each property draws from this research to offer scientific backing to the emergent themes from the data.

*Identify interests.* One of the biggest challenges of leaving the NFL was finding something else for which one has as much – or any – interest as he did football to which he could dedicate his life. Like Participant 11 said, “Is it catching a pass from Eli Manning on a Cover 2 Slant? No, it’s not that; it’ll never be like that again. But I think finding the win in business, it’s a close...well it’s not really close...but it does make me feel successful I suppose.”

Intentionally engaging in the identification of what he liked and disliked and what energized him or drained him helped these men answer a first critical question of, “What do I like?”

Research suggests that lack of interest in a topic leads to less engagement and perseverance toward a goal. However, strong interest in an area can help lead not only to excellence but also to happier, healthier, and more motivated individuals (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Compton & Hoffman, 2013; Kashdan, 2009). This area of identifying interests is so important that AthLife uses the Strong Interest Inventory (SII) with its clients, which is a career interest survey that helps match individual interests to potential career opportunities. They know that if one does not even like what he is attempting to pursue after football, there is little hope of keeping him actively engaged in the transition process.

*Name strengths.* Operating out of one’s strengths (versus trying to improve weaknesses) repeatedly demonstrated greater work engagement, higher productivity, improved life satisfaction, increased levels of happiness, and lower rates of depression (Greenberg & Maymin, 2013; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Biswas-Diener, 2010). However, a large proportion of the population remains unaware of their strengths, and particularly how strengths in one domain can transfer to other domains (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Naming individual strengths has been shown to increase one’s utilization of those strengths, thus allowing for the aforementioned benefits to be realized.

Naming strengths allowed participants to answer the question, “What am I good at?” As Maxwell (2007) highlighted, sustainable, fulfilling success in life hinges on operating in a space where one enjoys what he does *and* is good at it. As Participant 10 shared, “Yea, my purpose is – actually I didn’t realize it before but – I’m a people person and I’m the person

that helps people. I guess that explains how I met so many people in this world just by training them. You know, I have a gift to train individual athletes. I don't like to call it a business, I like to call it a gift, but I'm able to take their potential, their skills and to improve it, and I've done it over and over and over again for years."

*Understand coping strategies.* Participants revealed the importance understanding how one used to cope with struggles, setbacks, and pain, and then how he would do so moving forward. As Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) depicted, there is problem-focused coping, (active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, seeking of instrumental social support); emotion-focused coping (seeking of emotional social support, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, turning to religion); and three coping responses that they highlighted were less useful (focus on and venting of emotions, behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement). Learning new coping strategies to replace ones that were no longer effective (i.e. tackling someone) were important when frequent, physical contact was no longer an optional outlet for stress. As Participant 4 said, "Like I work, I'm in a sports technology company, right? So I'm around like 80 engineers, like computer software engineering. And like, I want to just like lay one of them the fuck out and just like get physical and shit like that, stuff that I used to do. Like it just stays all up here though. It's just like, oh man I would love for you just to like raise your hands and pretend to catch a football so I could just like just blast your fucking head off...but it doesn't happen."

Furthermore, the administration of prescription drugs by team doctors to help men deal with pain as a coping mechanism was also noted by several players, and epitomized by Participant 8:

So it's a lot of pain there (in the transition). I would love for you to also talk about the prescription drugs part of it. People have touched on it but a lot of us become co-dependent on the prescription drugs that are prescribed by our doctors. Like it's like an open pharmacy, because whatever you feel that day, you can ask for and they'll give you something for it. I would be remiss if I did not state that that does have an impact too on how guys transition. It's like being medicated for everything and then that resource is not there. But also, it teaches you how to deal with things from that perspective. You know. The best or easiest thing is substance abuse of some sort: drinking, recreational drugs, it becomes that choice.

Recognizing coping patterns and analyzing which were and which were not effective was an important part of the transition process. Such coping assessments often happened in conjunction with the next property, as coping with the transition is something that affects one's entire family. The amount of resources available from the NFL, NFLPA, and other NFL support organizations (nfl.com; nflpa.com) that attempt to support significant others and children through the transition highlighted that the transition is indeed a family affair. Furthermore, Olson & Walsh (1993) discussed the influence of coping strategies on family health and functioning given the interconnected nature of the family system. Additionally, the quantum physical Law of Entanglement further supported the power that one person has on another, and how negative coping strategies (including negative thought patterns or actions toward or about someone) can negatively affect the functioning of those connected to him (Barad, 2007; Leaf, 2015b; Schwartz, Stapp, & Beauregard, 2005).

*Redefine life roles.* Koonce (2013) argued in his study on the role transition of former NFL players that these men experience a sociological and psychological phenomenon called

“role engulfment.” This concept was applied to college athletes by Adler & Adler (1991), and asserted that one’s human identity can be dominated by consciously adopting and living into one specific role (in this case, a football player), at the expense of any other life role.

Participants in this study demonstrated varying degrees of role engulfment, but the consistent thread as it related to solving their main concern of redefining and rediscovering purpose in their life was redefining all the roles in their lives that remained beyond the game. For these men, being a husband, father, friend, colleague, and/or now *former* player were roles that needed to be “updated” now that “football player” no longer engulfed their time, energy, and attention. Participant 4 put it this way:

And I think that’s the hardest thing about it, right? Like, my entire life up to that point I was (name) the football player. And that was no longer who I was, and I think one of the hardest things about that is from now on all the questions you answer are: ‘I used to play football,’ ‘I was a football player um, former football player um,’ instead of like ‘I AM a football player’ so, there’s this complete kind of like detachment of who you were and now who you are now, and I think that’s hard for a lot of guys to deal with. Especially because it’s one of the sexiest jobs in the world, except for being Leonardo DiCaprio, and um, all of the sudden it’s gone.

Role clarity has been found to offer significant positive return in the workplace as well, including higher levels of satisfaction, greater engagement, better retention rates, and lower job tension (Lyons, 1971; Beehr, 1976; Furlong, 2005). This indicated that role clarity in one’s new profession should offer similar returns in psycho-emotional engagement and fulfillment. Furthermore, research on familial role clarity posited that clear roles lead to better role enactment, and ultimately greater satisfaction within those roles among family

members (Klein & White, 1996). Participants 2 and 3 highlighted the need for familial role clarification by their following statements, respectively:

Participant 2: (F)rom a family standpoint, get to know your wife. Like me and my wife and this whole period where we had to figure out how do we move around the house in some home like, what are my expectations of you what are your expectations of me, we never had to deal with that. I left at 6:30 in the morning, and when I came home she already knew, have something to eat, I'm going to bed or I'm going to the theater room to watch film or movies, or I just want some pitch black, no kids, no noise, anything so she respected that and now, you know, we've created, we've developed like a type of system right? So she wakes them up in the morning and I take them to school. You know, I'm more involved with my sons practices now, more involved with my daughters practices... So it's just stuff like that, you need to get to know the person that you plan on building a life with. That's why it's so many divorces, that's why it's so many catastrophic events that happen to guys after they get done within their family structure and it's not because they don't want to be there, it's because they don't know their partner. You know, you don't know really what she feels like because her emotions have always had to come second to make sure you were good when you go do your job.

Participant 3: Yeah, so I was shuttling kids to and from school and I was perfectly okay with that, but there were times where I just wanted to like I said, I needed to get something done during the course of the day to feel like a productive human... but she thought I was available to help at all times and it was hard for me to tell her no because I didn't have a legitimate excuse. There was no like oh, I got to focus on

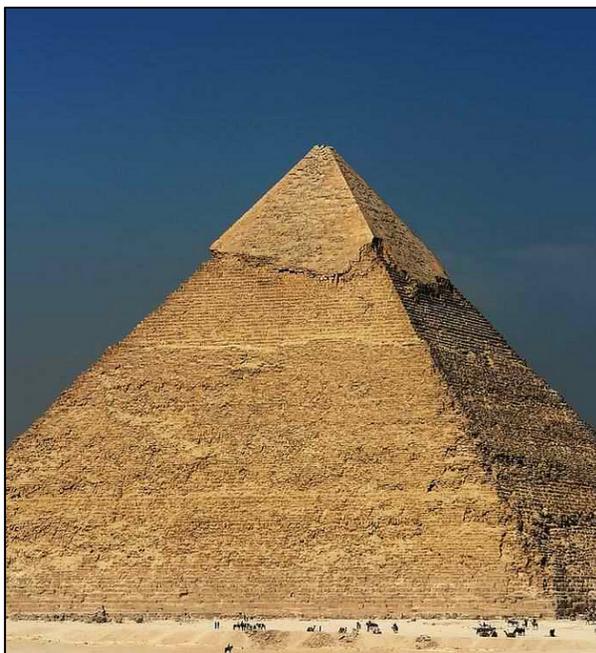
work, I got to do this, so that's been a moving target. Because...I'm doing all these jobs kind of all apart that there's not really a set schedule so, I'm kind of juggling her demands, or her expectations along with the stuff that I feel like I need to do to get fully prepared.

*Clarify and build personal brand.* As Rampersad (2008) posited, a personal brand is an important asset in today's society. He described the importance of taking control of one's personal brand and the message it sends in order to capitalize on the autonomy, consistency, and marketability that such branding offers (Rampersad, 2008; Rampersad, 2009; Montoya, Vandehey, & Viti, 2002). For many football players, there was little recognition around the power of the personal brand they possessed simply due to their status as athletes, let alone their potential to use it positively both while they were playing and after. As Participant 8 articulated:

Cuz that's how everyone that sees you, even though you don't wanna be identified as a football player, you know, that is your brand. In a lot of peoples' minds and eyes, that's who you are. So every day, every person, you gotta have that conversation with. And in some ways, it's a conversation of failure, you know what I'm saying? That you're having over and over and over again. And that's tough to do as men, and as elite athletes. It's tough to quote, unquote admit or accept. It feels like failure on a repeated basis, so I can see why guys hide, and not deal with people, and society in a lot of ways because even though you're not a failure, you feel like it. It's scary. It's scary time because you been told that your athleticism, your body, is your best asset. But now, you can't use that asset anymore. So that was scary for me, that's scary for a lot of people. Damn I gotta find another way to survive. I'm 33, 32, I'm young, you

know? And I'm not prepared; I saw the fear... You don't understand personal friendships and relationships, and how to develop them intentionally and on purpose. You have a brand, but you don't know how to manage that brand, what its worth, how to enhance it, capitalize on it, they don't even talk about your brand. So there's a lot of access that you have that you don't understand that you have and then you don't know how to use it... I think to me that's probably the biggest way to make that transition is just to start to use your brand and celebrity while you're playing for things that you are interested in.

Furthermore, the meaning making of one's transition experience by building one's personal brand could help mediate the negative affect that often occurs following the rejection and failure threats when one's football career ends (Besser & Priel, 2011). As Figure 3.8 depicts, clarifying ones brand – that is, the images, words, and emotional responses one desired to evoke with the mention of his name – became a powerful tool in fleshing out one's self-identity. This process became one of integrating interests, strengths, coping strategies, and roles, and laid a solid foundation for confident self-presentation.



*Figure 3.8* Artifact from Participant 8 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “This represents me because it is majestic. It has and will stand the test of time and endure all the different cultures surrounding it. When it is looked upon it inspires dreams in all people, from every walk of life, but most of all mystifies everyone and everything.”

**Category 4: Humble yourself.** In each and every story, until one got to a place of humility he was not able to truly “get on with” his life post-NFL. In essence, this humbling experience aligned with the “red dot” moment of truly letting go of the role he filled as an NFL player and recognizing that life would no longer be the same moving forward. Some individuals, like Participant 7 had very vivid reflections of when they felt themselves “die to self” and accept that there was something bigger in life to which they were called to submit:

One of my humblest experiences, and I had many but, we had communion, and we had to wash other men’s feet. The initial thought was no, it won’t happen. I won’t touch another man’s feet. And the day before it happened, I had a dream...and a man with the voice of TD Jakes spoke to me, and I knew what I had to do. And that was my first time of submission... That day changed me... When I let that ego go, I knew I was going to be happy again.

Richard Rohr (2010) highlighted the tremendous struggle that unfolds when one is confronted with letting go of one season of life and taking hold of what is next. His work was heavily influenced by thoughts and teachings of St. Francis of Assisi who posited that there are really two deaths in one’s life: death to self while one is still alive and then physical death which terminates one’s earthly existence. Furthermore, he believed that the most difficult and most important death was the death to self, or as he referred to it as, “The Great Death.” It is from this position that he believed individuals could be open to understanding and receiving the very reason they were on this earth – their purpose – and be able to live in what Rohr

(2010; 2015) described as the “naked now.” Devoid of all fears and frustrations of past and future, the naked now is living simply in here and now, living as a human “being” rather than a human “doing.”

It is in this phase of Model 3 where several of the participants ( $n=8$ ) referenced the importance and power of their Christian faith. It was a belief in a higher calling and a greater purpose that led these men to this place of humility, death to ego, and surrender. As Participant 12 said, “I was tired of the mental sickness overwhelming me, and I almost committed suicide; but something told me clear as day, ‘No, don’t...’ and that’s when I knew my faith was more important than anything on this earth, and I still had work to do.”

Being humbled is one thing; remaining humble is another. As Participant 1 highlighted, it is an “ongoing process of being humbled and allowing yourself to be open to coming to a place of serenity, even amid pain.” The struggle that emerged resembled the challenge often discussed on the topic of American masculinity, and that is, wrestling with non-dualistic issues from very dualistic perspectives. For example, “I was ‘the man,’ and now I am no longer ‘the man;’” “I was a success, and now I am a failure;” “I was in control, and now I am not;” “I was good, and now I am bad.” Unfortunately, many complex political and social issues in societies - issues like masculinity and what it means to “be a man” - get reduced to dualistic images for the sake of simplicity: either you are or you are not (Cuordileone, 2000). But these very simplistic constructions are not adequate in fully describing or grasping the spectrum of the human experience, and thus create a cognitive-emotional disconnect when the complex cannot be fully integrated simplistically. Participants inherently knew they were not a “failure,” but because they were no longer a “success” as a current player, they struggled to conceptualize the spectrum and non-dualism of their

accomplishments.

And so is the transition process. Participants noted that one of their biggest fears was answering the recurring question from others – “So, what are you doing now?” This question loomed as the ultimate judge, reiterating the inner voice that said, “I am no longer able to be a football player, so I am no longer a success.” As Participant 1 highlighted:

How do I make a difference in the world? It was every day I wake up and I have a very specific job, my job was to block a guy on this place, or cut someone off on the center on this play, or, or, or, - and I did my job. By definition, I had to do that job 95% of the time correctly or I wouldn't be there. So I got this constant validation – I call it circumferential validation - good job, good read, good block, good punch. And that ended up being, “Good boy, (name).” Which is how it translated I think looking back for me. But I think the big piece - and I think it's an underlying one - is the purpose piece. The significance was about how I make a difference, but the purpose piece was what am I here to do? What is my role in contributing to the bigger picture? Like what was I born to do? And the sport of football gave me all of those things... I think the overwhelming feelings (after leaving the League) were relief and sadness and depression of feeling like I fell short, not knowing what to do, no longer getting into the club and not having to wait in line. All that stuff, all those ego blows were, umm, were the opposite of ‘Good job. Good block. Good read. Good boy.’ Right?

But, as Participant 7 said, playing in the League was a success, regardless of how long. He overestimated how disappointed and judgmental people would be of his “short” career and this led him to seclude himself from the outside world. However, upon re-entering society through coaching, he learned that people viewed his NFL career – of any duration –

as a success, and then a continuing success as he returned to his home city to coach young men. This tendency to overestimate future emotional states is one that Biswas-Diener (2010) described as the impact bias, a bias that if former football players could better understand, perhaps they could better manage the exasperated negativity that often goes with having to reconcile a perceived “failure” of a career. Many of the participants viewed their NFL careers as a failure – those who played one season and those who played 10 seasons – all believing they may have had something more to contribute, and all wondering how society would perceive them upon leaving the League.

Rohr (2010; 2015) discussed in depth the fatal contractions of dualistically considering a non-dualistic world. Former players in this study struggled to recognize that career termination did not equate to failure, and that despite the pain of their circumstances, in the broader perspective there was more to life. Rohr posited that the “Great Death” is a critical step in letting go of the unrealistic constraints and hypotheses about how life works, and allows one to hold multiple emotions at one time. For example, one may be angry at football for “leaving” his life, while at the same time loving football for what the game brought into his existence. Broadening one’s perspective and understanding of what he was going through was a critical part in redefining and rediscovering purpose in his life, and learning to not just accept but also embrace that his football career had ended and had positioned him for getting on with his life’s work. The following five properties emerged as the methods and mechanisms that participants leveraged to humble themselves and adopt more non-dualistic perspectives on their situations, their lives, and their lives in relation to others.

*Stay connected.* The front portion of the human brain helps people think through multiple options, communicate, and emotionally regulate, and the back portion of the brain deals more with visuospatial movements and inside-type thinking/processing (C. Leaf, 2015c). In general, the male brain has a 38% larger back portion and has 6 times more grey matter than the female brain. Although both genders are active in both regions, there is more circuitry and action in the back portion of the male brain, leading them to speak more action-oriented language once it has been internally sorted. These biological variances cause many men in challenging situations to retreat and “solve” whatever dilemma lies in front of them. Despite - and perhaps even more so because of - these biological differences, men still must learn to process emotions effectively, in their own unique way, to avoid suffering from the negative psychological and physical effects of suppression. Although secluding one’s self for a limited amount of time may prove beneficial in self-processing, this study demonstrated how imperative it was to remain connected to others throughout the process of transition.

During a pilot interview for a graduate-level course, the participant adamantly articulated the importance of staying connected through the transition process. He highlighted “community” and staying connected as the core reason why his initial transition attempt was unsuccessful (it lasted for nearly seven years and resulted in rehabilitation for substance abuse, a divorce, and losing his faith) but why his most recent attempt has proven fruitful:

[Initially] I didn’t seek services through the NFL because...no one trusted them anyway, so I didn’t have any interest in asking them for help. I did therapy on my own and it didn’t work very well. Looking back at it, it’s because there was no community involved; it was just me, trying to fix my problems...I need to be part of

something where I share things with people, have common interests, be open about things, etc. Community. That is the key... Have a plan. And not have the plan to be 'take time off.' You need to stay in touch, and communicate.... don't isolate.

Human beings and the human brain were created to be connected with others (Lieberman, 2013). Although cortisol is a well-known part of the stress response, the body also releases the hormone oxytocin (also known as the "cuddle hormone"), which hones the brain's social instincts and primes it to engage with others. Oxytocin is released from the pituitary gland as part of the stress response, not only urging one to seek social support but also acting as a natural healing agent to the heart, mitigating the negative cardiovascular effects of stress (McGonigal, 2013). This effect is amplified through human connection, thereby helping one recover more quickly from stressful situations when one remains meaningfully connected to others.

For men socialized in the hyper-masculine culture of American football, remaining connected to others amid what was perceived a season of "utter failure" in their lives was a big challenge. As Participant 7 recounted:

That was the first time in my life I had ever really been rejected. I had never felt like that before, and I just went into hiding because I saw my career and myself as a failure. Being in the NFL is like being in a bubble, and when that bubble pops, you hit rock bottom. It's totally different, and no one understands it. I wouldn't even leave my house for like two years because I didn't want people to see me and judge me for not playing anymore, and that led me into a really deep depression for almost a year...But I had a buddy who called me damn near every day trying to get me to come help him coach basketball. Finally I went one day just to check it out, and I met

a kid – man, this kid – and I knew I had to try to help him. So that was huge in helping me get out of my depression, but the big thing really was my faith and being around like-minded men. I read the book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, with my wife at the time and it changed me. Then I joined a Bible study with like-minded men, and that’s really where I learned the value in relationships.

Human connection emerged as one of the most critical aspects to successfully transitioning out of the NFL. Whether it was AA, graduate school, a Bible study, or insight from others who had transitioned successfully before them, the important part of the selected community proved to be individuals who are “like-minded.” In near tears, Participant 1 emotionally conveyed this sentiment with regard to his AA group:

I was there Tuesday night, it’s my home group. The guy that runs that meeting is my sponsor. *And without those guys, I wouldn’t be married, I wouldn’t have my children. I wouldn’t be employed, I couldn’t have any of the things I have accomplished without the help and support of those men. (Italics added to define where Participant 1 teared up, and slightly choked up during this brief part of the interview)* ... Well, in that group, I feel that I’m a man amongst men. Like we’re, someone said once “We are the Aristocracy of crazy people.” We have this common bond and these are with crack heads and dudes that have prostituted themselves and have completely turned their lives around. Just living, walking miracles. That kinda became a part of my team that I longed for. Who I looked forward going and being in the locker room and being touchy feely, but then talking about dude stuff. That was ...you know. It’s funny I’m just putting this together for the first time, the role that that team played for me early on. And it was, almost to the day two years after I retired.

If one is unsure about where to even begin and with whom he should be seeking to connect, an exercise called “Roundtable” may serve as a good template for all former players to consider. This exercise was one that was conducted by the Pittsburgh Pirates professional baseball organization with their players. Men are asked to consider who would be the “knights” of their “Roundtable,” in the following eight categories:

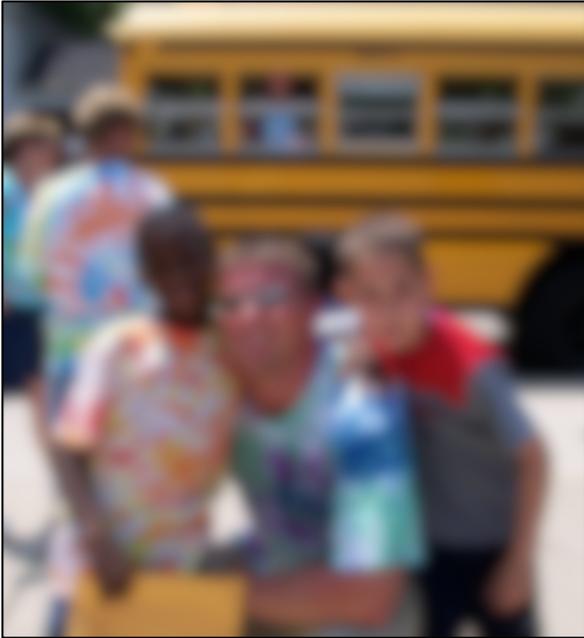
1. Who trains and mentors me?
2. Who stretches me mentally and physically?
3. Who listens to and encourages my dreams?
4. Who protects me?
5. Who corrects and disciplines me?
6. Who laughs and hangs out with me?
7. Who cries and heals with me?
8. Who seeks God with me?

Upon filling out the “Roundtable,” one can identify in which areas he has substantial and sufficient social support and in which areas he needs to invest in building additional relationships. As Pirates mental coach, Bernie Holliday said, “The phrase ‘I got myself into this, I can get myself out of it,’ is the most ridiculous thought ever” (B. Holliday, personal communication, March 20, 2014). Having the right people at one’s “Roundtable” is a mechanism to ensure that proper assistance is present when navigating through life’s highs and lows.

*Serve others.* Volunteering has been associated with better health and longevity (Post, 2005) and Lieberman (2013) posited that our brains have been evolutionarily wired to connect with others in altruistic ways, leading to such positive effects. Leaf (2015a)

described how thoughts actually “take up mental real estate,” building protein patterns at the neurocognitive level. She highlighted how our brains are designed to function properly in positive states, and that a healthy thought life leads to better overall mental and physical health. Service, then, allows an individual to direct his or her attention externally (versus an internal focus on self and situation), tap into the social nature of our brain, and thus build healthy neurological connections. As Participant 12, who struggled with (and is still managing) severe depression, including contemplating suicide twice, so profoundly stated, “I’m curing myself by doing good. I am resuscitating myself mentally and emotionally and spiritually by giving back and working with these kids.”

Caring about others actually creates resilience in our bodies, and can help mitigate the body’s natural stress response by releasing oxytocin into the system (McGonigal, 2013). At the hormonal level, then, service to others acts as a silent advocate for buffering the brain and body against the blows of life because greater levels of oxytocin appear to be associated with a greater willingness to trust others, increased relaxation, mental stability, and the ability to acquire a broader perspective on one’s situation (Kosfeld, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2005; Lieberman, 2013).



*Figure 3.9* Artifact from Participant 11 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “This is a picture of the last day of school the {one} year I was teaching... The end of the year for the students, much like the end of my NFL career, can be exciting and it can be fun – if you have the right mindset. While I wasn’t prepared for my career to end, I quickly learned from these students: It was never really about me and what I wanted, but what I could do for others that would be my legacy. Teaching was the lowest paying job of my adult career, and it was also the most meaningful. These kiddos taught me so much more than I taught them.” *Note: Picture blurred to protect anonymity.*

*Get a broader perspective on life.* Cognitive restructuring, or the process of identifying and disputing maladaptive thoughts, is one mechanism that can be used to help individuals cope with difficult situations by expanding potential attribution options (Seaward, 2015). However, when one is in the midst of crisis it is very easy to become overwhelmed with despair. In this state, one’s cortisol levels begin to increase, activating the stress response and further limiting the brain’s ability to identify solutions to problems (Schmidt & Wrisberg, 2008; Fredrickson, 2009). However, as McGonigal (2013) noted, when one changes his mind about stress - in this case the stress that comes from a life transition - one can change his body’s response to it. When one perceives stress as “bad,” his heart rate increases and blood vessels constrict. However, when one perceives stress and the bodily

responses of it (e.g. sweating, increased heart rate, urge to go to the bathroom, etc.) as mere preparation for rising to the occasion of a stressful experience, the blood vessels stay relaxed. Although heart rate is still increased, there is no vasal constriction, and this vasal imaging mirrors patterns of when one is experiencing joy or courage.

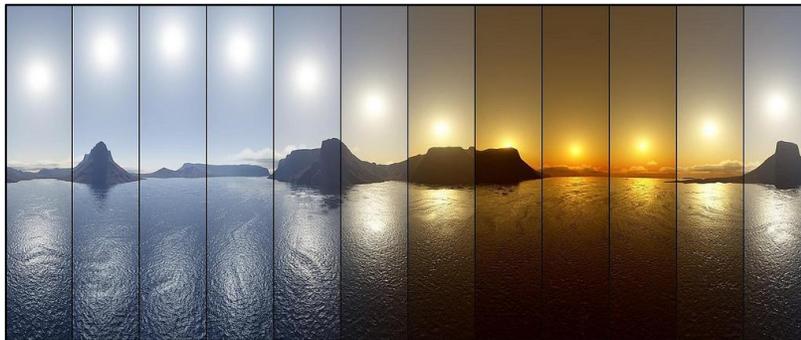
Adopting a broader perspective on life and one's current situation, then, becomes an opportunity to shift hormonal and vasal responses to more adaptive responses. Service (as noted above) is one way of garnering a look at others' challenging circumstances, offering a very personal and visual insight of the broader pain being experienced in this world.

Traveling and experiencing other cultures was a mechanism that participants used to see how their personal experience fit into the greater picture of life. Participant 1 emotionally shared a story of an experience in Sri Lanka that demonstrated the broadening of his worldview and its impact on him discovering his purpose:

And that's not why the breakdown happened, but I had that extra money and when I gave it to the head contractor, who was loyal and working hard and did the best he could to try to herd the cats I had gotten together. Again my 3,000 extra bucks, it was like 2-3 years worth of salary for him, and he started crying, and those are proud people, the Sri Lankans, they don't show emotion, and I just frickin' broke, and it was (long pause) ahhhhhh (*sort of skips through this to avoid stirring up emotion*)...and anyway, I got it done and in the chaos I'm able to somehow figure out a way to persevere was the lesson there. But us, we connected on our humanity. I mean he knew 4 words of English and I knew maybe 3 of Sinhalese. We were human beings, connected by our hearts and what we were doing, and he didn't give a shit, you know he didn't know anything about football. Those things really helped to kinda start to

frame who (I) was and what I was about. And there's always been this service component to the things I have done, you know?

As Figure 3.10 describes, participants shared the humbling experience of when they recognized that life was bigger than they were, and that just because they were in a difficult position did not mean that the rest of the world stopped to care.

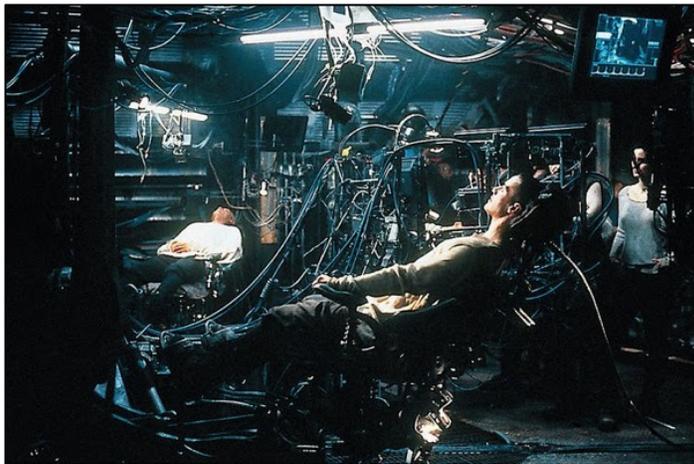


*Figure 3.10* Artifact from Participant 6 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “Sunrise and sunset: No matter the weather, clouds, temperature, or season, the sun rises every morning and sets every evening. It won’t wait for you.”

*Learn and grow.* Every time humans learn something new they ignite new neuronal pathways in the brain, stimulating excessive activity and, if activated long enough, actual brain growth (Leaf, 2014; Leaf 2015a). As Leaf, Louw, & Uys (1997) posited, “it is a natural neuropsychological law that the brain is designed to learn” (p. 69), and neuroplasticity confirmed that the human brain is malleable and can grow through repeated training and thought pattern development (Dayan & Cohen, 2011). Learning and growing was a critical aspect to recognizing that not only did the men not “know it all” but also that there was a lot more to life that they may find intriguing beyond football. Participants in this study ( $n=12$ ) noted the importance of continued learning once their NFL football career concluded. From reading books to pursuing advanced degrees to networking to learning new hobbies, the mental stimulation afforded through intentional pursuits of new knowledge served as a

stimulus to rediscovering and redefining purpose in life.

Perhaps even more powerful was an artifact contributed by Participant 5, describing what he referred to as being “rewired” through learning after his retirement from the National Football League (See Figure 3.11). He admitted that he never read an entire book before he left the NFL at the age of 31. Once he began to read, he noted feeling as if his entire being was being “rewired,” a concept that Leaf (2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c) would argue was actually happening at the psychoneurophysical level. She posited that our thoughts wire protein patterns together, and thus new learning fires new neurons together into knowledge.



*Figure 3.11* Artifact from Participant 5 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “I don’t talk about it that much but that was a huge part for me, just really starting to read and filling myself with new information...I always like to say it’s like getting rewired. That’s exactly what I felt like I was doing, I was rewiring myself. I always had this image of being hooked up to all these wires like Neo was in the Matrix...so you’re getting filled in with all this new information that’s going to help propel you to what you’re going to do next and help direct you towards what you want to do next. But that’s something you have to choose to do. Nothing unintentional about it...”

*Understand your emotions.* American football has been culturally perceived as one of the most aggressive and celebrated sports among U.S. men (Steinfeldt, Mungro, Folst, Wong, & Blumberg, 2011). When asked about emotions in football, coaches “provided answers that characterized emotions in terms of energy, adrenaline, or intensity rather than in

terms of affect” (Steinfeldt et al., 2011, p. 253-254). This implies that emotions are perhaps not well understood by the masculine culture that football embodies. Technically, an emotion is an affect or a feeling state that involves physiological arousal (muscle tension, narrowed focus), conscious experience (cognitive appraisal, a specific emotion experience), and overt behavior or expression (facial expressions, gestures) (A. Poczwardowski, personal communication, October 14, 2013). The findings of Steinfeldt et al. (2011) are also in alignment with tenets of normative male alexithymia (NMA) (Levant, 2001). NMA is a social constructivist concept which posits that men have difficulty identifying and articulating their emotions due to the socialization process that males go through, which often teaches them to suppress and deny feelings (Silva, n.d.).

The interaction between affective and cognitive processing systems in the brain is postulated by Ledoux (1989) to result in affect influencing cognition and vice versa. Understanding that cognition and emotion are inextricably linked helps guide one’s strategy of self-regulation and opens the possibility that he can use either cognition or affect to drive the regulation needed to facilitate a more positive transition experience. The challenge for these men, then, is to increase their understanding of the spectrum of emotions that exist (e.g. annoyance, anger, rage), learn to hold two (or more) emotions at one time, and then communicate those emotions with others who can help the individual process those emotions effectively. As Participant 4 stated, “We have to talk about things that suck if we expect to get through this.” But as Participant 11 clearly articulated, there is massive challenge within the actual verbal communication of these difficult and painful emotions: “And as a man, that’s the hardest thing- to ask for help. Because you’re a man, you’re athlete, and you should be able to handle it on your own. And yet, you know you can’t. It’s like a bad relationship –

you know you should get out but you stay and just let it linger. And it never gets better until you just actually deal with it. Why is that so hard, though?”

Tice, Baumeister, and Zhang (2004) stated that self-regulation operates like a limited resource; that is, as one exercises self-regulatory strategies, those resources are depleted. They go on to say that positive emotional states can strengthen one’s capacity to regulate himself in a variety of ways whereas emotional distress undermines self-regulation. The challenge in the transition process is that the individual is depleted in various ways, including physically (no longer training in the same ways), mentally (considering their situation and what to do next), emotionally (being removed from the locker room and the social connection it inherently created), and spiritually (loss of sense of purpose and contribution), and thus the challenge of self-regulation is compounded by multiple domains of depletion.

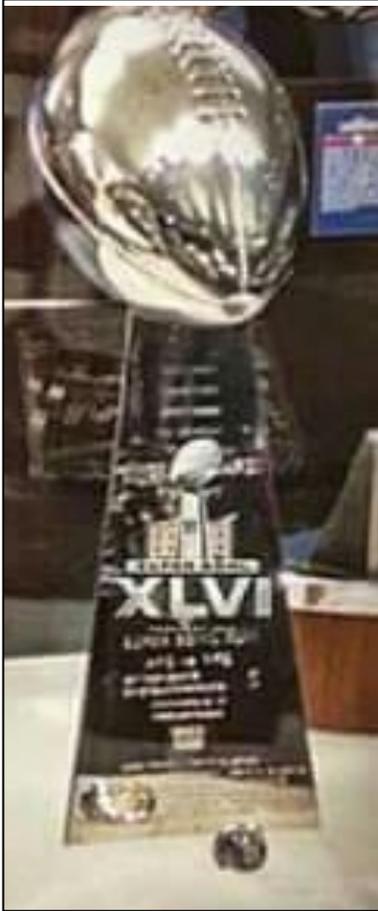
Learning to understand emotions and then actually “talk about things that suck” revealed itself to be intricately entwined with the previous four properties. Therefore, staying connected, serving others, getting a broader perspective, and continually learning and growing offered hope of mastering a social stereotype that pervades and constricts the full expression of many men in America. Indeed, humbling oneself became the “Great Death” that perhaps counter intuitively, frees one to more fully live.

***Category 5: Replicate the blueprint for success.*** A 2016 study by the NCAA reported that only 1.6% college football players got drafted in the 2015 NFL Draft ([www.ncaa.org](http://www.ncaa.org)). With only 53 active members on the 32 different NFL teams across the country, that means that less than 1% of the US population plays in the National Football League in a given year. This implies that playing football at the professional level is not only a specialized craft but

also one that is incredibly rare to achieve. In short, these men have been highly successful in one domain of their lives, and thus have a blueprint for what it takes to be successful:

1. Have a clear vision: Play in the NFL.
2. Understand the path to get there: Play youth football (in some cases), play high school football, play college football, play professional football; Train physically, technically, tactically, and mentally; Complete NFL combine(s) testing; Attempt to get drafted, or sign a free-agent agreement.
3. Learn the Rules of Engagement: Work hard; make best decisions possible; Be the biggest, fastest, strongest, and/or best at your position and receive an opportunity.
4. Have a team: Football is a team sport, and each position relies on the other to achieve the goal of winning the game.
5. Apply full energy and attention: Go “all in” to fulfill the dream of playing in the NFL, and maintain that dream for as long as possible.

However, once football ends, many football players do not understand that this blueprint could be replicated for success in other domains. The very same blueprint that worked for becoming an NFL player can also work for becoming a successful businessperson, or doctor, or husband, or father, or electrician, or teacher, or coach, or anything else that he desires to become! As Figure 3.12 denotes, the same blood, sweat, and tears that went into winning championships on the field can be applied to winning in life off the field.



*Figure 3.12* Artifact from Participant 12 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “This trophy symbolizes blood, sweat and tears. 23 weeks of pushing my mind, body & spirit to the max. It's symbolizes the struggle to compete at a high level for a extended amount of time, and if you stay focused, it...feel(s) so incredibly rewarding.”

The following sections highlight the properties that emerged on how individuals were able to successfully replicate the blueprint for success in other domains of life beyond football.

*Clarify the vision.* Although vision served as an emergent category in and of itself as it guided the entire purpose process, within the category of “replicate the blueprint for success,” vision emerged again as a critical driver for what exactly they were replicating the blueprint. Munroe (2003) declared that vision is the source of personal discipline; without

vision, there is no way to align and allocate one's energy and resources toward a specific destination. He positioned that clear and personal vision is the catalyst for driving and sustaining achievement and fulfillment in any domain. Munroe (2003) and Stanley (1999) both expounded upon the Biblical reference "without vision, people perish." Notably, this phrase does not mean a literal, physical death, but rather an emotional, mental, and spiritual death that occurs when one is not inspired by a clear picture of what drives his or her life.

As the experience of "Loss" occurred during the transition from the Locker Room to the Island, participants recounted this sense of perishing. But as vision was re-kindled in their hearts and minds as they moved from the Island toward building a Whole New World during the process of "Purpose," so too did their lives seem to come alive again. Participant 11 shared his account of loss to reengagement in this way:

But once I sort of regrouped (from physical and mental exhaustion), I was depressed, I was upset, I was upset that it didn't work, I was upset that I wasn't able to play football anymore. So I think that I just did nothing for a while. I was hiding out, I was kinda couch surfing with different friends, I wasn't ready to settle down and like live somewhere. Like signing a lease somewhere was fucking terrifying to me. Like, the thought of getting a job and having rent due on the first, I was not ready for that at all. So, I think, I mean I bounced at a bar for a while, dated a bartender, some sketchy behavior for sure, right? It was definitely a period of time where my wild side was there. So I think it was just kind of that – it was really just being wild, it was not wanting to say that "I'm not a football player." If I'm not getting a job, if I'm not being responsible, then, I can still be, you know, be a football player. And so I think that was really, yea. And so I did that, really I did that until I got to teaching kids.

And then I was like, well, I probably need to have some responsibility and go take care of some kids.

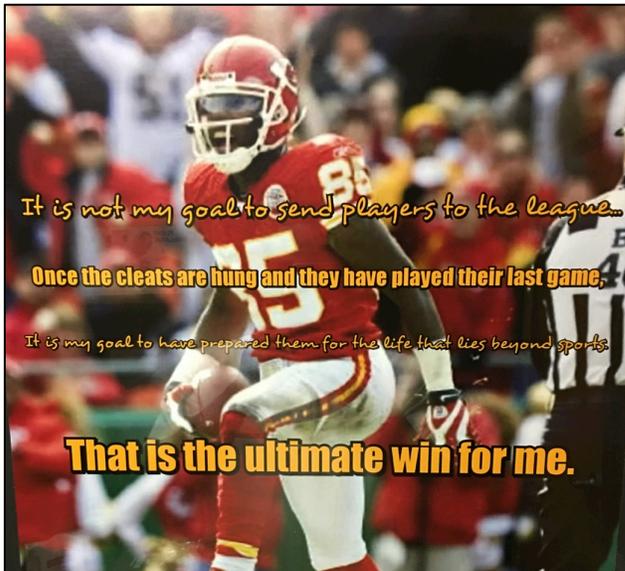
The preceding categories of “Flesh out Self-Identity” and “Humble Yourself” then, were mechanisms that helped participants clarify self and clarify self in relation to the rest of the world. The insights garnered through these categories were leveraged to help clarify one’s personal vision in life after football. After Participant 2 reached out to various people within his network, including his parents, a pastor, his wife, and other former NFL players who he perceived to have successfully navigated the transition to gain clarity on who he was and how to navigate the transition process, he shared the following account of how he proceeded to clarify his vision for life after football:

Well, I got my ass to work. So um, I went and did an internship for the Dallas Morning News Newspaper, one of those connections from when I was playing, for \$2.60 an hour, because I wanted to know what it felt like to go into a corporate building every day. I wanted to know um, what it felt like to actually work behind a desk, and have to get along with people that wore button ups and slacks to work every day. I wore flip-flops and shorts and a t-shirt for the last... forever. So, it was just one of those periods in life where you realize I have to, it’s almost like the Army and I hate making that comparison, but, I have to reintroduce myself to normal, every day life and that part of it was scary. And... it humbled me in a way that probably was the most valuable thing that happened to me because I realized that people are making \$30,000 dollars a year and are happy and taking care of their families and being able to enjoy life. So, it was all perspective for me. And, I think more than anything when I went and worked at the Dallas Morning News it helped me recognize that regardless

of what people's paycheck is, regardless of what their income is, regardless if they're able to wear the nicest clothes, nicest shoes, have the ability to book a plane ticket and go anywhere they want to go in the world, they were happy in what they were doing. So, in that time at the Dallas Morning News, it made me realize whatever I was doing after the NFL, I wanted to be happy, and be joyful. Not just happy but joyful, something I *wanted* to do, and something that I was invested in. So, then came radio for me, and then TV for my wife so; and I think all of it was just trying to find that purpose. Trying to find: how could I be the influence that I wanted to continue to be. Um, and also enjoying a little what I was doing.

Business and leadership literature further highlighted the importance and impact that vision can have, including increased motivation, focus, group cohesion, and effective communication (Katzenbach & Smith, 2006; Daniel, 2015). Hickman and Silva (1984) described the importance of vision by stating, "Vision is a mental journey from the known to the unknown, creating the future from a montage of current facts, hopes, dreams, dangers, and opportunities" (p. 51). As Participant 7 struggled through depression by coaching high school kids in basketball, he began to clarify his vision to become a coach, taking the unknown into the known as he engaged in the process of becoming. As he learned more about whom he was called to be as a man and a leader through his pursuit of Jesus Christ, he began to recognize that he was not just called to be a coach, but specifically, a coach who was intentional about teaching young men to "win" outside of sport, and to leverage sport as a vehicle to teach them about life. As he learned more about himself and who he was in relation to the rest of the world, his vision was continually clarified. Figure 3.13 is an artifact

that hangs in his coaching office today and reminds him of his unique vision, disciplining him to engage in the behaviors that facilitate the vision.



*Figure 3.13* Artifact from Participant 7 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “It is not my goal to send players to the League. Once the cleats are hung and they have played their last game, it is my goal to prepare them for the life that lies beyond sports. That is the ultimate win for me.”

*Understand the path to get there.* As clear as one’s vision may be, if he has no idea how to bring it to fruition, it remains a far-fetched dream with little hope to become reality. As legendary basketball coach John Wooden once said, “In life you need two things: a telescope and a microscope.” That is, a telescope to see the long-term vision and a microscope to attend to the day-to-day details that it takes to achieve the vision.

As Participant 8 clearly described, many former players have some idea of what they want their lives to look like or the type of lifestyle they would like to maintain, but they have little understanding of how to bring it to fruition or how to sustain it. That is, even if they tried out the telescope, there is often little understanding about how, when, and where to use the microscope:

When you playing professional sports, you are at the highest level of that profession. So it's hard to come out of that and say, ok go work...at an entry-level position. Well, that's the way things, that's the normal route and that's the way things happen in the business world...but you don't understand that's the way things are. Because you're at the highest level where everyone praises you, and then you get out, and they say, ok, now go make a living...and it's like, where am I supposed to start? At the entry level? So a lot of guys don't understand that process, and they stay out of it and they stay away from it, and their pride, or a lack of knowledge, both together, stops the transition. Cuz God forbid anyone see me working at an entry level or making 40k a year. I can't do that. So I'm just going to BS around until I figure out something. So guys try to start businesses, they try to do all these different things than to actually go in all the way on where they need to. So to me that's the biggest thing that I see that is the issue for professional athletes. It's the lack of understanding of how it means to move through different levels, and then the pride that's on top of that. It results in guys trying alternate routes or literally just sitting and spending whatever they made. So they may retire and not have another means of income for seven years, six years, because they don't know how to jump in, they don't know how to transition in...but when you go in and people say, well you can start here and we can start you at 35k and maybe two years you can work up. Guys will say, I'm not doing that. I'll try to find something else. And again, the lack of knowledge doesn't allow you to understand, there's nothing else. There's not magic way to do it. I have guys call me and talk about it and are looking for jobs or opportunities, and I say, well we have

this, and the overwhelming response is, “Well how much it pay?” Or, “I don’t know if I can do that, man.” Because they just don’t understand some of these things.

Furthermore, Participant 7 discussed the materialistic mindset of some within the Black community and how the desire for such possessions compounds the lack of understanding around alternative paths to make a good living. “Finances and material possessions are strong symbols in the Black community, and so that’s why when the League ends you see so many guys get wrapped up in selling drugs: because they know that life and they can make the type of money they after. They just don’t know what else is out there, or how to do it.” Therefore, understanding the path to achieve the type of lifestyle they desire may help minimize the engagement in delinquent professional pursuits.

*Learn the rules of engagement.* Ryan and Deci (2000) would classify understanding the path to achieve a goal as partial satisfaction of the basic psychological need of competence. Knowing how to get from point A to point B is only the first part: having the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to execute that path is the second part. However, once the vision is clarified and the path is outlined, then former players can set to work learning the rules of engagement for the new “game” they have chosen, and acquiring such competencies to achieve the vision. As Participant 8 put it, “That [ego; humbling oneself] is something we have to go through in some ways to understand, I’m trying to get here, so you know what, yea, if cleaning toilets is what I gotta do to jump that hurdle, or go back to school, or be a grad assistant – whatever it takes.”

As Participant 1 articulated, “When shit was fucked up when we were playing, (like when) Brett Favre’s dad died, people were like, “How can he play the next day?” You know, that was the place where we felt the safest. We knew what the rules were, right? And we

knew how to navigate within those rules.” Even emotional management rules were better understood within football than without, and new understandings had to occur post play.

Quite often in football, if you are the biggest, fastest, strongest, or most skilled at your position, you can earn the starting job. However, other careers are typically not as clear-cut. Often it comes down to basic qualification standards (such as a degree), who you know (having contacts and a network), network management (working your contacts and network effectively), and being in the right place at the right time (timing). Rarely will employers will be recruiting specific people or calling someone to offer him or her a high-paying job with a massive signing bonus. The rules are different, and so therefore, former players must learn how to navigate and play within these new and different rules of engagement if they desire to be successful.

*Build a new team.* Whereas as “stay connected” was more about the psycho-emotional importance of staying close with trusted people throughout stressful life events, this property emerged as a more professional component to support. Just as football was a team game, so too is life. And just as different players had different positions and areas of expertise to help accomplish the mission, so too is it important to surround oneself with competent, diversely qualified individuals to help accomplish the new vision in life (Collins, 2001; Covey, 2004; Maxwell, 2002).

Participants’ different visions required different personnel, so each individual’s new team looked a little bit different. Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001) integrated several social capital theories to assess social capital in relation to career success. They conceptualized social capital as one’s network structure and social resources, finding that the two were not only related, but also that “the effects of social resources on career success were fully

mediated by three network benefits: access to information, access to resource, and career sponsorship” (p. 219). Just as having a solid team on the football field can help facilitate success, building a solid team in life can help facilitate success as well. Participant 10 referenced several critical members of his new team as he integrated into the business world after his NFL career:

Chuck Noll was critical because that statement (“Get on with your life’s work.”) is still in my head, and I understand it more and more and more. So he was critical in my moving forward. Rod Mosset was (friend who “reconnected me with real life, with society post-football”), Jason Roberts and Phil Stanton (business leaders who hired him post-NFL; names changed to protect anonymity) were because they showed that that same work ethic that it took to perform at a high level is the same drive or work ethic that they were expecting in the business world to be successful there as well. So I watched how they worked and how we worked together and I was like, “Ohhhh.” So that was critical. Um, all of the experiences I had with teens and with individuals and the excellence that was expected, that really shaped who I am because I use that all day, every day at General Motors, and I’m trying to drive our team to specific goals and to attain, you know, certain numbers.

*Apply full energy and attention.* One marked trait of playing sport at the professional level is learning how to go “all in” to achieve success. For example, after not making the final 53-man roster during his first season out of college, Participant 11 increased his attention and focus during training and returned to reach his goal of playing in the NFL:

The first time I got cut was from the Panthers and I thought I was ready, but in reality it was a long ways from...D2 football. I was working out everyday, and after I got

cut, it was decision time: is this for me? Is this going to be what I try to do again? And so I went back to my university and worked out twice as long, twice as hard and then got another opportunity that winter. And so, when I reflect back on it, the first time I just wasn't good enough, plain and simple. At least, I didn't have the mindset to be in the NFL yet, I had more work to do...[The mindset] I think just what it takes to be a professional football player, the grind of the season, the speed of the game, the confidence in which you needed to play on a high level, day in and day out, competing against the best athletes in the country. You know, I think the playbook too. I mean that was very much a different game at the professional level. It's run like a business, more so, especially I think than D2 football. I mean, it's competitive of course, but just the business element of playing in the NFL was, was, I just wasn't ready. So you know, but I got ready. I went back my alma mater, worked out with some friends, was working out 6 hours a day instead of 3, 5 days a week instead of 4, I was watching what I was eating, I was bigger, faster stronger, more confident when I got to NY to play with the Giants. And then, opportunistically was able to play football for them.

Making the decision to go "all in" in pursuit of his dreams was a sentiment expressed by the other participants as well. Similarly, this mindset was critical in helping men fulfill their new vision in life beyond the game. Until participants were ready and willing to apply the type of energy and attention to building their Whole New World, a deep sense of fulfillment with their lives and purpose was not experienced. For some participants, they believed they found their ultimate purpose in life and are thriving now more than ever. For others, however, the thing to which they can truly apply the same intensity that they once did

football was still a moving target. Regardless of where participants were in their life's journey, however, the desire to replicate success and fulfillment was present in each one. Figure 3.14 expresses not only the desire for continued success but also the understanding that football laid a solid foundation upon which one could build the rest of his life.



*Figure 3.14* Artifact from Participant 4 that he believed symbolized his transition experience out of the NFL. “Ball security is job security – if I can combine my MBA with the NFL, I’ll be ok.”

### Summary

As participants continue to navigate this experience called life, they will invariably learn that although their lives will never be exactly the same as they once were with football, their lives can reflect a new version of greatness that is perhaps even more fulfilling than the game they love(d). This theory and its three models (See Figure 3.15) serve not only as a description of what occurred during the transition to life beyond the NFL but also as a guide for navigating the transition more effectively and efficiently.

As Participant 1 stated, “This is THE BEST visual representation of what my personal experience was.” Participant 12 extended these sentiments by stating, “I’m impressed because it’s going to help guys re-shape and re-focus, and it gives them a plan as well if they’re unsure of how to proceed.”

Clear understanding and applicability of research is the foundation of both

pragmatism and CGT. The findings from this study reflect conceptualized, integrated data that offers a theory around what happened during the transition out of the NFL, and how former players solved their main concern of rediscovering and redefining purpose in their lives post-NFL.

*\*October 3, 2016 - You know when you work really hard on something and it feels like you've nailed it...not only because you put a lot of time and thought into it, but also because it does in fact reflect what you feel like you've experienced and know...but then you get a bit nervous when you present it to others for their judgment, particularly when they were the subjects of your inquiry and you're really telling THEIR experience, not your own? Well, that's what it's been like putting my theory before my participants for their honest feedback. I walk through it, half holding my breath, half praying, that I have honored them and their experience with an authentic demonstration of their transition experience. Their feedback so far...has floored me and invigorated me. Apparently, it's "spot on," and I could not be more relieved that this "emergent design" has actually emerged with...truth! It blows my mind that not only are these emergent themes able to be integrated into a visual model but also that each component part is supported by the research in sport psychology and positive psychology.*

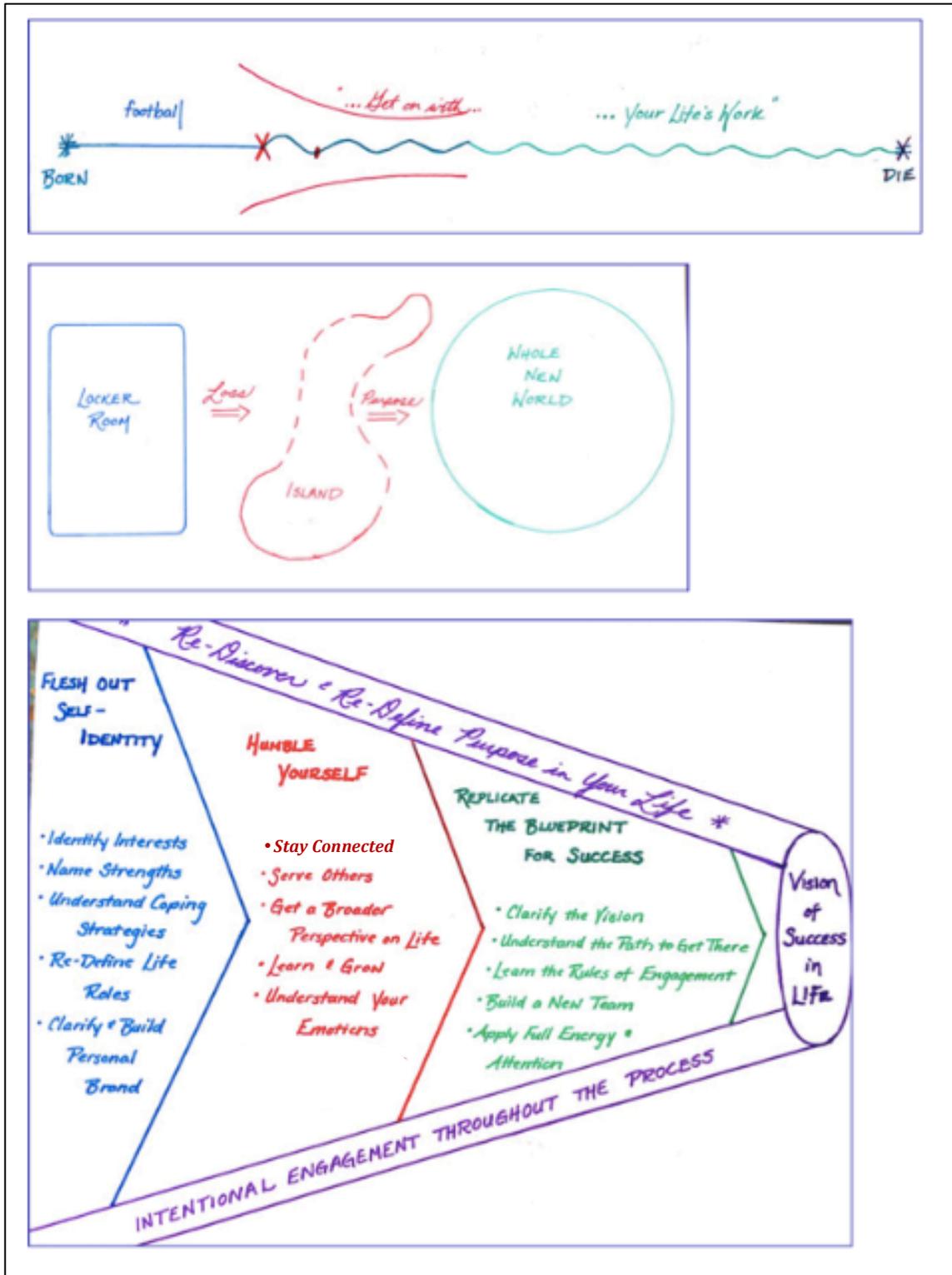


Figure 3.15 Grounded NFL Transition Theory. A three-model theory that describes the Transition Process out of the NFL, including Former Player Life Timeline (Model 1), the Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence (Model 2), and the Process of Purpose Post-NFL (Model 3).

## CHAPTER 4: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Consistent with Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology, this literature review is delimited to the emergent concepts from the generated theory (Christiansen, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). CGT research encouraged that a formal investigation of related literature did not occur until the theory was already generated to minimize confluent application of others' ideas and theories that were not specifically designed for the substantive area of interest. However, once the theory emerged, relevant literature became additional data for the understanding, interpretation, and integration of emergent and saturated concepts. Notably then, the relevant scientific literature that was referenced throughout *Chapter 3: Findings* should be understood as supporting literature for this CGT study on the transition out of the NFL. The studies, science, and applications aforementioned are an integrated aspect of this review of relevant literature.

The purpose of this chapter is to situate the emergent theory in literature that more broadly intellectualizes the emergent elements of this study, including transition models, self-determination theory (SDT), American masculinity, and grit. Whereas *Chapter 3: Findings* offered relevant literature to each emergent concern, concept, and property, *Chapter 4: Review of Relevant Literature* offers review of these four topics within current sport psychology, positive psychology, and sociological literature that is conceptually related to the emergent theory (Christiansen, 2011).

### Transition Models

Transitions and life changes are experiences that affect everyone. According to Schlossberg (1981) though, it was the perception of the change that an individual takes that mattered more than the change itself. Decision-making concurrent with one's values even

through life change is something he noted as a critical driver in the transition process. Schlossberg's model of human adaptation to transition was the cornerstone to transition experiences based on stages of life and current functioning. The model included the "4 S's" that influenced the success of a transition: Self, Situation, Support, and Strategies (Schlossberg, 1981) (See Appendix A, Figure A1). These four factors then worked with the actual transition model, which includes a cycle with the environment, the individual, and coping resources (See Appendix A, Figure A2). Pumell, Harwood, and Lavallee (2008) found support for these models from semi-structured interviews conducted with elite level equestrians and concluded that the models would prove useful for analyzing any athletic transition. The current study extends this general framework by demonstrating how former NFL players navigate the process from individual, environmental, and coping perspectives. Each of the four S's were found present in this study's emergent theory but the generated theory allows one to not only identify their presence but also understand how they interact and how one may move through the transition process.

Although athletic transitions have been found to relate to general transitions, there are common factors that relate to this specific domain. Some themes unique to sport that emerged consistently across the existing research include: the role of coaches, administrators, personal accountability, and cultural sensitivity (Sievers, 2008; Edwards, 2010; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009). When the lights go out on one's athletic career, it is often associated with one's very sense of self, and it can be traumatic to psychoemotional states, relationships, and self-identity (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). Other studies demonstrated the plethora of traumatic effects of career termination, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, identity crises, decrease in self-confidence, substance abuse, and

even suicide (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Ogilvie, 1987; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Wylleman et al., 2004). Although Stambulova et al. (2009) discussed differences between normative and non-normative transitions out of sport (planned versus unplanned, respectively), this research demonstrated that regardless of the normative nature of the transition out of the NFL, former players experienced the recurrent concern of rediscovering and redefining purpose in their lives post-NFL. Consistent with Stambulova et al. (2009) is that the transition out of NFL was indeed wrought with emotion, uncertainty, and disruption.

Extending specified thought and understanding around transition out of sport has been the focus of athletic retirement literature over the decades. Thanatological models viewed retirement as a social death (Rosenberg, 1982) whereas social gerontological models emphasized aging and life satisfaction based on sporting experiences (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985). However, Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee (1999) highlighted challenges with such frameworks being applied to the sporting space because of the limited applicability to the athletic population, the overtly negative perception on the transition out of sport experience, and the neglect to discuss life after sport. Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) attempted to offer a more detailed account of the transition out of sport experience, outlining the adaptation to athletic retirement in a five-step framework (See Appendix A, Figure A3): “(1) identify causal factors that initiate the retirement process; (2) specify the factors related to adaptation to retirement; (3) describe the available resources that will affect the response to retirement; (4) indicate the quality of adaptation to retirement; and (5) discuss the treatment issues for distressful reactions to retirement” (pp. 1).

Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) offered a more general developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes, which took into account general life stages including age, athletic level, psychological level, psychosocial level, and academic vocational level (See Appendix A, Figure A4). Contemporary literature around the transition out of sport reflected the recent trend in applied sport psychology literature that focuses more on holistic lifespan development versus solely performance enhancement (Stambulova, 2010; Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Wylleman et al., 2004), and Stambulova (2010) outlined a five-step career planning strategy, which included (See Appendix A, Figure A5):

- Step 1: Make a Framework
- Step 2: Structure Your Past
- Step 3: Structure Your Present
- Step 4: Structure Your Future
- Step 5: Bridge Your Past, Present, and Future

Early literature positioned the transition out of sport as a singular life event, but the current study confirmed McPherson's (1980) posit that the transition out of elite sport is in fact a process (Wylleman et al., 1999). Specifically, for former NFL players this process was situated amid an overall Former Player Life Timeline and a Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence (See Figure 3.2). Although Holton (2008) stated that contextualization of emergent theories in CGT studies was not necessary, she did argue that if it added clarity to the recurrent solution of the main concern then it should conceptually be included. As is the case in this "processing" of the transition out of the NFL, Models 1 and 2 (See Figures 3.2) offer not only contextualization but also critical elements of the recurrent solution, including

managing physical and emotional pain, actual career termination, moment of acceptance of the termination, and a funnel process of “getting on with one’s life work.”

Although Sinclair and Orlick (1993) found that athletes who retired after they achieved their goals in sport adjusted more smoothly than those who perceived to have fallen short, this study revealed that professional football players might have a different perception on career achievement than the retired elite athletes with international competitive experience ( $N=199$ ) in their study. Regardless of how one’s career unfolded, every participant ( $n=12$ ) noted a perception that their professional football career did not unfold as well as it could have, or as they intended. Additionally, whereas analysis of the Athlete Retirement Questionnaire, a 34-item instrument that Sinclair and Orlick (1993) specifically developed for their study, revealed that “keeping busy” was not an effective coping strategy, the current study demonstrated that immediate, intentional engagement in the process was a critical driver of effective and efficient transition to life beyond the NFL. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) also highlighted the feelings of incompetency outside of sport, which did align with the lack of understanding of how to transfer skills to life beyond football for current participants.

An intertwined issue related to career termination of elite athletes is that of athletic identity. Grove, Lavalley, and Gordon (1997) found that those who maintained a strong and singular athletic identity up to the point of leaving sport were more prone to experiencing the negative effects of transition out of sport. Koonce (2013) extended this notion through his modified grounded theory study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). He leveraged the theoretical framework of role engulfment to posit that the role of “football player” became the dominating force in former football player’s identity, and when they were stripped of that, the transitional depravities of substance abuse, marital issues, bankruptcy, and mental health

issues ensued. Park, Lavalley, and Tod (2013) offered a literature review of athletes' transition out of sport from 1968 to 2010, evaluating 126 articles of qualitative, quantitative, and mix-method design that assessed transitions out of sport of different competitive levels, both genders, and various sports. Variables relating to the transition were organized into two categories, factors relating to career transition (e.g., identity) and resources available to the individual during the transition (e.g., social support). As the study highlighted, further investigation of context-specific transitions were needed as limited knowledge existed around sport-specific career changes, and the process one goes through as they navigated transition back into life beyond the game. The current study addresses both of these concerns, and extends insight into the process for men leaving the NFL.

Several factors have been proposed to influence one's adjustment into life beyond elite sport, including identity, coping processes, support systems, and career planning (Grove et al., 1997; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). The current study extends these distinct insights by integrating them into one theoretical framework that serves as both an explanatory model and a template/tool for those attempting to navigate the transitional process. For example, as Lavalley et al. (1997) demonstrated, account making of one's career termination was found to impact both present affect and overall coping success of the transition. Extending the descriptive nature of the micronarrative study, this study not only highlights the importance of each of the aforementioned variables but also offers a guide to how one may "solve" or address each of the variables during the transition process. The conceptual nature of this theory and its models extends the current, more descriptive transition models that are referenced (See Appendix A).

*\*October 20, 2016- What strikes me is how much more helpful this emergent theory and its models are than other transition frameworks I have read about. My own transitional struggles were what got me into this research topic to begin with, and since I began my master's program in Denver, "transition out of sport" was an area that I read and wrote about a lot. I would read articles and frameworks and think, "Yes! That's true...but so what? Yes, it does suck, it does hurt, it is emotional, support is important...but how do I integrate all the disparate, general thoughts into how I can actually navigate this transition better?" This is what separates our model (the guys' and mine as I feel like it was developed together) from others: it not only helps us see what the hell we went through/are going through, but also offers a game plan of how to attack it, think about it right, and move forward in a productive way...despite the pain that invariably will exist.*

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Frameworks and models in any domain are effective only if one is motivated to engage in self-application and management through them. Similarly, transitioning out of elite sport requires a type of internal motivation to move on, move through, and hopefully move "up" toward one's greater purpose beyond sport. Whereas athletic transition literature offered various lenses through which to understand the importance of transition beyond sport, self-determination theory (SDT) offers a macrotheory of human motivation that "addresses such basic issues as personality development, self-regulation, universal psychological needs, life goals and aspirations, energy and vitality, nonconscious processes, the relations of culture to motivation, and the impact of social environments on motivation, affect, behavior, and well-being" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). SDT is a theoretical framework by which one can understand how self-motivation is developed and internalized through autonomous motivation, or thwarted and externalized through more controlled motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Foundationally, the theory posits that there are three basic human psychological needs (BPN), including competence, autonomy, and relatedness, that when met drive healthy, volitional motivation. Extensive empirical studies have been conducted that support SDT's claim that conditions or environments that support or meet these three needs facilitate

integrated and internalized self-motivation, optimal functioning, well-being, and more (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2014; Compton & Hoffman, 2013). As Deci and Ryan (2008) positioned, “the type or quality of a person’s motivation would be more important than the total amount of motivation for predicting many important outcomes such as psychological health and well-being, effective performance, creative problem solving, and deep or conceptual learning. Indeed, an abundance of research has now confirmed that the initial idea was sound” (p. 182).

In the field of sport psychology, SDT serves as a critical theory for understanding motivation. The two main influences it has had on the field include (1) how to optimize self-motivation in individuals; and (2) how coaches and organizations can create environments that help facilitate autonomous behaviors that lead to increased self-motivation. In relation to understanding positive motivation during life transitions, the current study extends the conversation around the importance of supporting the three basic psychological needs to assist in positive engagement throughout the process and successful transition to life beyond football.

SDT is a theory of human motivation that positions motivation on a complex continuum (See Appendix B, Figure B1) ranging on the far left from Amotivation - or the lack of desire to engage in a behavior – to the far right, Intrinsic Motivation - or the engagement in a behavior due to its inherent satisfaction. Spanning between these two types of motivations are varying degrees of Extrinsic Motivation, which build from right to left from least to most autonomously regulated behaviors (external, introjected, identified, and integrated; Ryan & Deci, 2000a). The heart of SDT revolves around whether behavior is autonomous or controlled, and how autonomous regulation can lead to the three types of self-

regulated motivations: intrinsic motivation, or identified or integrated extrinsic motivation (Deci & Flaste, 1995).

The main difference between SDT and other motivation theories is that SDT maintains that the three BPN are indeed basic and universal, not learned and gauged on strength of the need. Individual motivational differences then are not based on the strength of the different needs but rather to the degree the BPNs are satisfied versus thwarted (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The following sections will assess the three BPNs and how the experience of these needs through the lens of American masculinity affect the transition out of the NFL.

### **Competence**

Competence is one's level of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in executing a task or effectively dealing with a situation. It relates to one's understanding and mastery of the environment. Individuals have a need to feel that they can act competently in personal and social situations in order to facilitate autonomous behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Schunk et al., 2014). Particularly amongst men, this sense of competence is critical for one's self-esteem, confidence, and engagement in life (Kimmel, 2011; Jakes, 2004).

The current study demonstrated that a perceived lack of competence existed for participants as they left the Locker Room and found themselves on an Island (See Figure 3.4). Each participant noted ( $n=12$ ) an initial sense of fear related to the perceived loss of understanding about how to manage their lives within a structure that they no longer knew or felt adept. However, Model 3 offers an outline for how to develop the baseline competencies necessary to rediscover and redefine purpose in life post-NFL, and construct one's Whole New World.

## **Autonomy**

Autonomy is acting in accord with one's will, and being self-governing (Deci & Flaste, 1995). McGuire (2012) described autonomy as making decisions by one's self, for one's self, and about one's self. When individuals have the opportunity to make informed decisions that impact their lives and experience the consequences of those decisions – both positive and negative – they develop a sense of control. This control fuels their belief that they can influence their lives, and thus motivates them to take more control, on and off the sphere of play (McGuire, 2005).

The current study demonstrated that when men concluded football there was a perceived loss of control over their lives. However, as Participant 9 highlighted, “You are never really in control. You think you are, but you aren't.” I would argue that players felt “in control” while they were playing simply because they had a clear understanding of what they needed to do to be successful, i.e. competence. They actually confused autonomy with competence. Those who had a stronger sense of competence outside of the sport maintained a greater sense of control about their lives upon leaving the League, and thus they were able to move through the transition process more effectively and efficiently.

## **Relatedness**

Relatedness refers to a sense of belonging that one feels to a person and/or a group. As Ryan & Deci's (2000a) continuum of motivation suggested, an identified or integrated regulatory style of extrinsic motivation is still considered internally influenced and can facilitate optimal performance and well-being. As Ryan and Deci (2000a) stated, relatedness becomes one of the most influential components of the self-determination process, and this supports the importance of “Stay Connected” and “Build a New Team” in Model 3.

Only autonomous supporting environments can ensure the presence of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and therefore lead to autonomous behavioral regulation, or self-regulated behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Thus, during the transition process, ensuring that these three BPNs are present and supported could be an important element in helping men execute Category 2, “Intentional Engagement throughout the Process.” Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thogersen-Ntoumani (2011) offered critical extension of the BPN theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). They stated that competence, autonomy, and relatedness could be either satisfied or thwarted, and that one should parcel out if these needs were being met, not being supported, or being overtly thwarted. Perception of the latter could lead to negative mental health implications, not simply the lack of optimal functioning. Thus, during the transition process, not only is it important that individuals create autonomous supportive environments but they should also assess if there are any elements they perceive as overtly thwarting their ability to satisfy the needs of competence, autonomy, or relatedness.

### **American Masculinity**

If SDT is a critical driver in the autonomous motivation it may take to help one productively engage in the transition process out of the League, then it is important to look more specifically at how this motivation may be affected by the population of interest: American men. The definition of masculinity has fluxed throughout the United State’s history in response to the economic, political, social, cultural, and religious conditions of the country (Foster, 2011). Therefore, perceptions of one’s competence to “be a man” amid such dynamic demands could be called into question. When the American man of today is forced to uphold an image of manhood that is constantly defined by seemingly polar opposite demands (i.e., “be strong” yet “share your emotions”) amid such drastic life changes such as

leaving the NFL, this “ideal script of masculinity” may lead to a downward spiral of negative emotions, resulting in despair, frustration, fear, anxiety, and decreased mental and physical health (Fredrickson, 2009; O’Neil, 1981; Sussman, 2012).

Sussman (2012) discussed a social perspective of masculinity known as “Manliness as Performance,” in that men are constantly performing accepted scripts in every domain with which they interact. From the locker room to the boardroom to the bedroom, men are socialized with specific scripts that they must continuously play out in order to be considered “manly.” Should they deviate from the script, they expose themselves to ridicule, potentially being labeled as womanly or even gay. This type of pressure to perform and play out a role flawlessly is a profound force on men, thrust upon them at very young ages. In the sporting world, little boys learn early on that “crying is for babies or girls,” to “suck it up,” and that being “tough” and hurting others makes him a “better boy” than other little boys (Ehrmann, 2011). As one could see through *Chapter 3: Findings*, the constructed nature of American masculinity – perhaps even hyper-masculinity that is often associated with the sport of football – was unanimously associated with either the bondage and/or liberation of the participants as they moved from the Locker Room to the Island to a Whole New World, and “got on with their life’s work.”

Wrapped up in these scripts is an intriguing insight into not only masculinity but also how men throughout centuries have defined their actual identities. If manliness is a social construct based in the continuous performance of different scripts, then a man’s personal identity becomes more than just who he is as an individual; his identity becomes inextricably linked to the greater role, or script, with which he most frequently interacts or desires to embody. Men, then, are more concerned with upholding their “identity” as it relates to other

men and the values and structures of the subculture to which he belongs than any particularly unique trait or set of characteristics of his own (Sussman, 2012). Perhaps this is why the athletic transition literature offers such a deep review of identity and role engulfment as it relates to being able to move into a new phase of life (Grove et al., 1997; Lavallee et al., 1997; etc.).

Although Sussman (2012) outlined several of these gendered scripts, the script of “Man as Warrior” is explored because it highlights the role that American athletes, and football players in particular, most often assume. From the ancient Homeric world to modern America, from Vikings to samurai to medieval knights, the warrior code has guided the lifestyle and subsequent identity of men as warriors. Espoused in this warrior code is, according to Sussman (2012), “the quest for honor, for reputation, for glory, for renown in the eyes of his fellow warriors” (p. 16). Football has even adopted terminology that reflects this type of warrior identity, thus perpetuating the script with phrases like, “The quarterback threw a bomb;” “The team battled today;” “He’s a real fighter;” etc. However, when one leaves the relatedness of the Locker Room and his fellow warriors, so too does the battle to which he feels most competent to fight: the one on the gridiron. A sense of control is further relinquished because there is little conception about how the world outside of football actually works. The strong warrior is left feeling like a lonely, incompetent, helpless little boy standing on the sideline. This imagery helps convey how challenging it is, then, for men to remain autonomously motivated through the transition process, and just how difficult it may be for them to remain “intentionally engaged” with “getting on with their life’s work” when their entire self perception feels fraudulent.

Sussman (2012) further identified that performing the warrior script and living by this unwritten code is best upheld in a shame culture, where negative opinions of others can lead to expulsion from the in-group of other men. Ironically, during her research on shame in women, Brené Brown (2012) stumbled across the realization that men actually experienced similar but different manifestations of living in shame on a daily basis. What she thought was a uniquely feminine experience, one that could be liberated by being vulnerable within close, trusted relationships, was also found to be the constricting force in a lot of men's life experiences (Brown, 2012). In attempt to uphold this script of masculinity to their wives, children, and colleagues, they lived in constant fear of being "found out" as not good enough, not strong enough, and ultimately, not worthy of the unconditional love they deeply sought. Leaving the NFL, regardless of how they "left" either through injury, release, or choice, becomes the ultimate, overt, public statement that, "You are not good enough." This taps into the very heart of insecurity that nearly every man is socialized to possess. To be vulnerable, and thus gain strength through security and trusting relationships, is often seen as "weak" for the American man of today, and so he naturally avoids the very thing that could ultimately liberate him. Human connection, as noted for its neurological, hormonal, and mental and physical well-being effects, is the basic psychological need that can most encourage further pursuit of other autonomously regulated behaviors. As Ryan and Deci (2000a) noted, it is the culturally endorsed values that drive internal desire for adherence to different behaviors, and understanding these values and identifying if and how they support self-determined motivation may be critical in helping men navigate the transition out of the NFL.

## Grit

Grit has recently been defined as sustained effort toward a long-term goal, emphasizing long-term stamina over short-term intensity (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Its two component factors include perseverance of effort toward a goal and consistency of interest over time. Those with higher levels of both, then, are said to be grittier than those with lower levels. Grit has been demonstrated as an achievement predictor in academics, vocations, and avocations (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009), thus evident why it has acquired recent interest across multiple domains, notably in sport and positive psychology.

The current study proves interesting as it relates to the construct of grit because no one can argue that to become a professional athlete, one must be gritty; that is the ultimate long-term pursuit despite pain. Upon retirement, however, the enactment of “grit” appears to decline, at least momentarily. Duckworth et al. (2007) argued that grit can only be assessed in relation to objective performance indicators, and herein lies the challenge for former NFL players: There is often nothing objective by which they can be measured upon retirement (or anything that they deem “important” or “worthy” or “tangible.”) What once dominated their lives (football), now leaves them in an empty abyss. The very trait with which perhaps they most identified in the hyper-masculine culture of football – grit - is no longer exercised on a daily basis.

Von Culin, Tsukayama, and Duckworth (2014) attempted to unpack the motivational correlates of grit by assessing perseverance and passion toward long-term goals. Two cross-sectional studies were conducted to assess how one’s approach to the pursuit of happiness explained individual differences in grit. The pursuit of happiness was defined by three

approaches, “*pleasure* in immediately hedonically positive activities, *meaning* in activities that serve a higher, altruistic purpose, and *engagement* in attention-absorbing activities” (Von Culin et al., 2014, pp. 1; Seligman, 2002). They concluded that grittier people were more orientated toward engagement (medium-sized effect) and an inverse relationship existed between grit and pleasure orientated pursuits. A small-medium effect was also noted between grit and meaning.

Traits are relatively stable characteristics that people tend to display across diverse settings and situations. This study was interested in the intersection of personality traits – the way people tend to think, act, and feel - and motivation traits – the differences in what people want and need (Von Culin et al., 2014). Extending the conversation on the intersection between personality and motivation traits, Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, and ter Weel (2008) introduced a “general model of personality that locates the antecedents of personality traits in motivation” (Von Culin et al., 2014, p. 1), thus proposing that the way people think, feel, and act is not only driven by what they want but also in their ability, their beliefs, and the situation at hand. The models thus predict that grit will be determined by one’s motivations. Coupling this notion with the BPNs of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000a), one could argue that the satisfaction of BPNs could be an underlying correlate of grit being optimized in an individual, regardless of the models presented, and thus requires additional investigation.

Orientations to happiness were proposed by Seligman (2002) to align around the pursuit of pleasure, meaning, and/or engagement, and varied in its combinations by individual. Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) extended this conversation by designing a questionnaire that found that people could pursue each of the orientations simultaneously,

and that each led to life satisfaction. The first route to happiness, pleasure, has been found to increase positive affect, thus leading to better physical health and job performance (Cohen & Pressman, 2006; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). The second route, meaning, is more about cultivating virtue and emphasizes positive influence on others. Meaning has been linked to better mental and physical well-being and greater sense of life fulfillment (Adams, 2000; Peterson et al., 2005; Waterman, 1993). And finally, engagement, or full attention to a task at hand to achieve mastery was linked to Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) discussion around flow, or full absorption into an activity.

The hypothesis from Von Culin et al. (2014) that the greatest antecedent to grit would be engagement proved accurate. Because a determinant of achieving flow states (full engagement) is deep capability, one must be willing to invest the type of time, energy, and attention that deliberate practice necessitates to build such capability (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Furthermore, because novelty produces instantaneous pleasure, the hypothesis that pleasure orientations would have an inverse relationship to grit also proved accurate; those who constantly seek novelty necessarily then do not sustain interest over time. And finally, because developing strong virtue, the foundation of the pursuit meaning in life, requires sustained effort of positive behaviors, it was correctly hypothesized that such orientations would predict more gritty individuals. In conclusion, grittier people were more likely to seek happiness through engagement (medium-sized effect) and meaning (small-to-medium effect), and those who sought pleasure (medium-to-small effect) were found to be less gritty (Von Culin et al., 2014).

The current study aligns with such pursuits of happiness, demonstrating that one's current route of finding happiness (i.e. football) is deconstructed through retirement and thus

must be reconstructed by building a Whole New World. The Process of Purpose Post-NFL offers an opportunity for former players to explore this construction in a positive way (meaning and engagement), and hopefully, help mitigate the negative effects of pleasure seeking fulfillment at the expense of all others.

Duckworth and Eskreis-Winkler (2013) demonstrated that people tend to increase in grit as life goes on. Because grit is persistence and passion in pursuit of a long-term goal, this discovery may be obvious, because people usually develop their interests and abilities later in life, and are thus applying those toward more specified objectives. However, just as professional athletes' income curve peaks earlier than the rest of the population's (Pendergast, 2016), so too does it appear their grit does. Whereas grit tends to increase throughout life in normal populations because specialization often occurs later, grit appears to "peak" relatively early in professional football players' life timeline due to the early specialization that it takes to be an elite football player. Once this area of expertise is removed from their lives, the modern economic valuation of specialization negatively favors the existence of former players on the grit scale – unless of course another long-term objective is developed.

Researchers are just beginning to explore the psychological antecedents of grit in an attempt to better understand how it is built within individuals (Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2013). It occurs to me that gritty individuals are those who are in pursuit of a goal that deeply matters to them. However, not referenced in the grit literature is the impact that vision and purpose have on activating grit within an individual, or even a team for that matter. As Ivey (2013) found, a driving purpose at the moment of execution for elite football players was the name on the back of each man's jersey: his NFL career was more than just a

paycheck or team contribution, it was for the very name he bore. Family heritage is a powerful internal motivator. In the current study, the vision of playing in the NFL and the purpose that this vision stimulated within participants was the single strongest driver in the pursuit of that goal. Team goals – all men fighting for a W on the field, and a Championship in the season – were also major contributing factors to the powerful effect and affect noted by participants within the football Locker Room. Again, a very clear vision, which resulted in a very clear purpose: each man must do his job consistently to demonstrate the proper execution of his “man as warrior” script and achieve the goal of winning. In essence, former NFL players were gritty, sustaining undetermined amounts physical, emotional, and mental pain in order to achieve their long-term goals. Athletes are gritty while they are competing because it is in service to engagement toward a long-term goal. Once they move out of sport, however, the very essence of their existence is gone, and that engagement is sometimes directed toward pleasure, fruitlessly trying to maintain a sense of “happiness” that football once offered them. When it is, it deters the enactment of their gritty selves until they find a new purpose to which apply their time, energy, and attention.

Additionally, it appears that “long-term goal” minimizes - and perhaps even misses - the crux of what it means to be gritty. The word grit itself evokes emotion; the word goal does not. When the words of vision and driving purpose are discussed, however, a new depth of emotion is elicited, and indeed, becomes evident of how and why someone could endure such pain in attempted pursuit: because it personally matters to him...deeply. The current study extends the conversation on grit, and may perhaps even begin dialogue around how grit may be evoked, demonstrated, and grown even when objective performance indicators are not present.

## Summary

Given the consolidated nature of literature reviews in CGT studies, the topics of athletic transitions, self-determination theory, American masculinity, and grit were specifically explored to reflect the emergent topics within the current study on the transition experience out of the NFL. Transition models to date have been more descriptive in nature, and thus the current study offers a more conceptualized theory around the substantive topic of transitioning out of the NFL and into life beyond. Although the proposed theory is descriptive in that it describes what is happening through the transition process, it does so in a very personal and grounded manner that helps individuals conceptualize their experience in a more integrated manner. Additionally, this athletic transition model does more than simply describe what happens; it also outlines how one may strategically navigate the emotionally-wrought experience into life beyond, and can be leveraged as both a preventative, educational framework, or a crisis management framework (Stambulova et al., 2009).

Assessing SDT, particularly in relation to constructed masculinity in American society and the hyper-masculine culture of American football, provides a macrotheory of human motivation for how and why someone may or may not be intentionally engaged throughout the transition process. The current study demonstrates mechanisms that one may be able to leverage to support the three basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, even through the transition season, and particularly in light of, the constricting nature of the various scripts of masculinity.

Finally, the popular topic of grit, which is shedding empirical light on achievement in various domains, was assessed to attempt to understand the subtle differences between participants' navigation of the transition process. Perhaps an unrevealed element of the grit

research is the addition of the current study, in that vision and purpose may be antecedents for sustainable and personally fulfilling grit. This may imply that grit is real and present not only toward objective indicators of success, but also toward subjective indicators of fulfillment and purpose-driven living.

Collectively, this literature review offers a solid foundation upon which the current study both rests and extends. Uniquely, it integrates procedural frameworks and human drive theories, helping one to clearly see not only how he fits into the bigger picture but also how he may successfully engage in the very picture of his own life beyond the gridiron.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this pragmatic, Classic Grounded Theory study was to develop a theory around the transition process out of the National Football League. As interviews with former players were conducted, and then the interviews were re-watched, the transcripts were re-read, and the artifacts that participants submitted were re-considered, the perpetual question of, “What is the biggest problem this individual is trying to solve, and how is he going about solving it?” helped guide the development of the emergent theory. Through perpetual interrogation of the data, the main concern, its categories, and their properties emerged through saturation. These component parts were then integrated to create a grounded theory (See Figure 5.1) of not simply “*What* happens during the transition out of the NFL,” but rather, “*How* do these men transition out of the NFL and into life beyond the game?” In short, this theory is not simply about when the lights go out; it is also about how to turn them back on. It is not only about moving out of football; it is also about moving on with life after football. And quite frankly, it is not just about moving on with life beyond the gridiron; it is about finding one’s purpose and learning how to leverage football to “get on with your life’s work.”

*\*October 11, 2016 – When I started this project, my first “working” title was, “When the Lights Go Out, How Do They Turn Back On?” I dropped the latter part of it realizing that such a statement was presumptuous...maybe they don’t turn back on, maybe that’s too broad of a challenge to try to tackle through this dissertation, maybe that’s not the most important part, Amber. Months later, I realize that not only is that THE most important part of the experience, but it’s the process of turning the lights back on their hearts and minds that is most baffling to former players. No, not everyone does get them turned back on – but that’s the point of this study. To help give guys a framework of how to do that, because deep down, that’s what we all want as human beings: to be “lit up,” to have purpose, to have our lives matter in some capacity...*

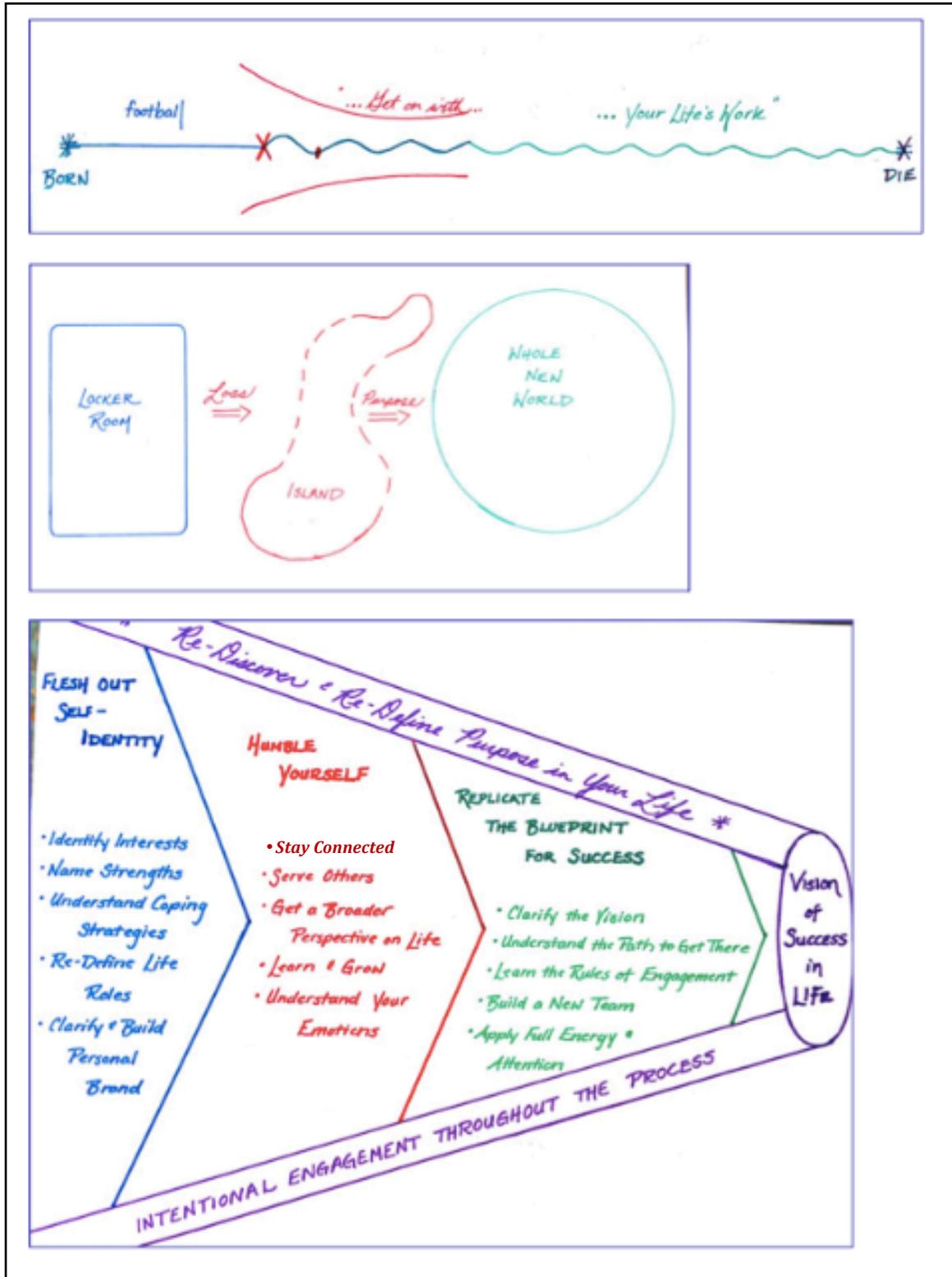


Figure 5.1. Grounded NFL Transition Theory. A three-model theory that describes the Transition Process out of the NFL, including Former Player Life Timeline (Model 1), the Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence (Model 2), and the Process of Purpose Post-NFL (Model 3).

This chapter offers justification for the selected research method(ology), discusses the implications of the study and its findings, highlights its contribution to the Academy, acknowledges limitations, and offers both future research suggestions and practical applications. It further explains the significance of the emergent theory that Participant 1, who now works in the transition space and helps other men “deal with” leaving the NFL, describes as, “The best visual representation of what my personal experience was.”

### **Grounded in Classic Grounded Theory**

Pragmatically speaking, the purpose of research is to be practically applied for positive transformation. The beauty of the CGT methodology is that it is totally grounded in the lived experiences of those going through different phenomena, and yet allows those lived experiences to guide us to a broader understanding and conceptualization of the matter at hand. As Stambulova et al. (2009) noted, more specific understanding of athletic transitions are needed to better inform on the nuanced experiences of different populations. The liberating nature of CGT allows for the pertinent components of the transition out of the NFL to emerge without forcing a comprehension of the experience through the lens of an existing theory or framework. What is important to the participants becomes important to the researcher, the research, and ultimately, the product (or theory).

Access to former professional football players has been a barrier to much formal investigation around the sport and those within it, and yet, the topic of transition has garnered much interest and need over the years (G. Koonce, personal communication, May 2016). A CGT approach to this topic with this population allowed the research to extract very personal life experiences while simultaneously integrating those experiences into a broader, more

general framework, resulting in a theory that offers both breadth and depth to the transition process for this population.

By being firmly grounded in both the rigors of qualitative research standards and the insights from those who have traversed the phenomenon in question, CGT studies are relevant not only to those within the Academy but also to the individuals around whom the theory was generated. Grounded in their individual “truths” of life, behavioral patterns emerge into a collective “truth” that is recognizable to both participants and observers of the phenomenon, if CGT is done well. What emerged from this study was that former players’ biggest concern was rediscovering and redefining purpose in their lives after their professional football careers were over. Finding meaning in life is part of what it means to be human (Biswas-Diener, 2013), and emergent from the data, this “truth” arose, a truth that resonates deeply with many humans even despite their NFL participation status. The grounded nature of the study allowed this topic to emerge without forcing the “typical” dialogues around NFL transitions such as finances, relationships, substance abuse, education, jobs, and identity. None of these topics began as the sole focus of the study, and although they all were brought up in some capacity or another, the core issue of individual purpose was given the space to make itself known: over and over and over again. Only with CGT could such a profound conversation be elicited, and only with CGT could such a pragmatic “product” be produced through the data that could help transform the hearts and minds of those who are experiencing the transition, who have experienced the transition, who will experience the transition, who will observe the transition, or who may assist others through the transition. By being grounded in the CGT methodology, a solid foundation has emerged for future research and application to occur in this substantive area.

## Implications

There are three main, broad implications of this study and its emergent theory:

1. It deeply resonates with former players
2. It deeply resonates with former players from all backgrounds
3. It offers a framework to help former players develop positive, powerful, and productive mindsets around the transition process.

First and foremost, this theory resonates deeply with former players. It speaks to the very heart and essence of what their experience was leaving the National Football League, and trying to reorganize and reintegrate their lives beyond the game. As previously noted, one of the validating aspects of a CGT study is its “fit” and comprehension by “lay” people, or those for whom/with whom the theory was developed. The fact that every single participant expressed deeply positive, and at times even emotional, reactions to the theory and its models speaks volumes to its relevancy to their experience. Participant 3 stated, “What makes the transition so hard is that there are so many moving parts, and this theory/model brings them all together, but still offers you space to ‘move’ within the framework. It’s so good... Thank you so much for including me in this entire thing. You helped me understand my transition better.”

Secondly, this theory resonates deeply with former players from all backgrounds. The resonance extended beyond age, race, upbringing, education, socioeconomic status, college, position, years in the League, years out of the League, and accomplishments while playing. It resonated with them as humans, as men who shared a life experience, regardless of where they came from, where they are, or where they are going. Prior to the start of the study, there were several preconceived ideas from popular media, academicians, former players

themselves, and lay people alike about how former players experience the transition process. Examples of such preconceptions include: (a) The longer they played, the harder the transition would be because their identity is more wrapped up in football; (b) The longer they played the easier the transition would be because they would have more money to mitigate the financial transition; (c) The shorter they played, the better the transition would be because they could acquire new skills sooner; (d) The shorter they played, the harder the transition would be because they would not have as much money to help them acquire the needed skills to be successful in another endeavor; and (e) How a man was raised will affect how positively or negatively he navigates the transition.

As evidenced in the examples above, one could attempt to “make a case” for how “good” or “bad” the transition may be based on various factors. A major implication of this study is that none of those factors matter for the biggest concern they were trying to address! Participants’ stories were as different as their backgrounds, and yet, similar patterns emerged from every account. At one juncture and in some capacity, the greatest challenge these men attempted to solve in their lives was to rediscover and redefine purpose in their lives once the NFL was over. When the lights went out, they wanted and needed to know how to turn them back on. When dealing with human beings, this study supports the notion that there is a consistent thread of connection and need within the human spirit, despite external differences that may exist. What this theory offers is a framework that allows people to realize they are not alone in the transition struggle, while simultaneously navigating the process in very individualized ways, which leads them into their unique purpose in life.

Finally, Leaf (2015b) posited that 75-98 percent of all mental and physical health issues are due to one’s thought life. For the 78 percent of retired NFL players that filed for

bankruptcy, divorced, struggled with chemical dependency, or experienced a combination of the three within two seasons of retiring (Pendergast, 2016; Torre, 2009), the importance of developing right thinking around the transition process is critical. Particularly amid the conversation of traumatic brain injury in the sport of football and how that may impact one's life functioning, learning to build positive, powerful, and productive mindsets around the transition process and its challenges are critical in the overall success of one navigating the transition effectively and efficiently.

A mindset is defined as a patterned way of thinking about a particular situation. As noted in *Chapter 3: Findings*, thoughts become physical matter in one's brain. This implies, then, that right thinking leads to healthy mindset patterns whereas wrong thinking leads to unhealthy mindset patterns. As Ellis (1955) posited, thoughts affect emotions, which affect physiological responses, thus impacting our behavior. How one thinks about different situations, then, impacts his emotional and physiological responses to that situation. How one thinks about his transition process, then, will impact his emotional and physiological responses to it and throughout it. This theory offers a framework for individuals to positively conceive the rather ambiguous experience in which he finds himself during a transition.

The following sections discuss other implications from each of the three models within the theory, and should be understood as basic guides for how former players may positively conceptualize the transition experience, and build the right mindsets around the challenges he experiences. Additionally, quotes from participants on their reaction to the models are included to highlight fit and validity.

## Model 1: Former Player Life Timeline

You are born, and eventually, you die. Model 1 (See Figure 5.2) captures other important life events throughout the course of a former players' existence that proved present in each participant's life. As Participant 10 said, "You nailed it. You clearly and succinctly put together exactly the experience of what we go through...but to see it in front of me like this...wow."

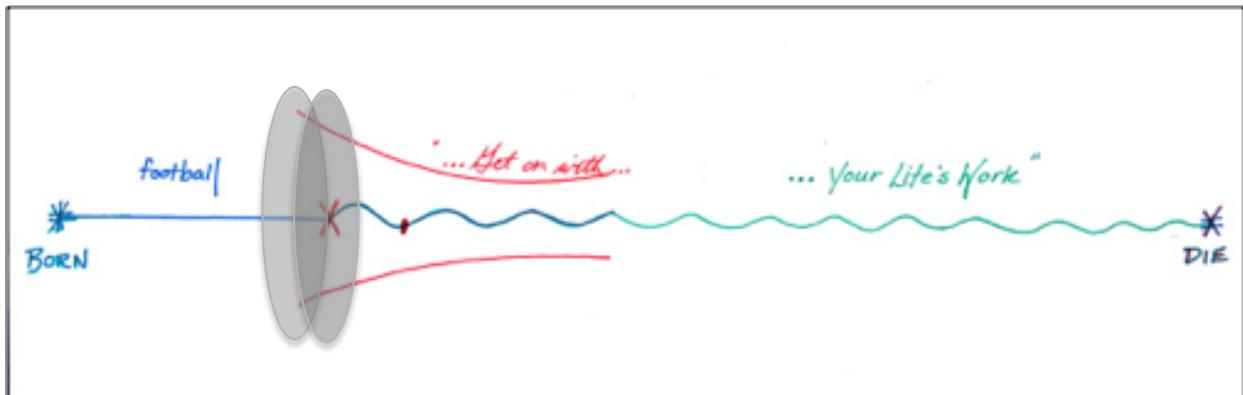


Figure 5.2. Model 1: Former Player Life Timeline. This model shows the overall life timeline of a former NFL player, from the day he was born to the day he dies, his life playing football, the moment his career ends, the point he accepts his career is over, the process of transition, and his life after football. The grey clouds represent physical and emotional pain experienced during the transition process.

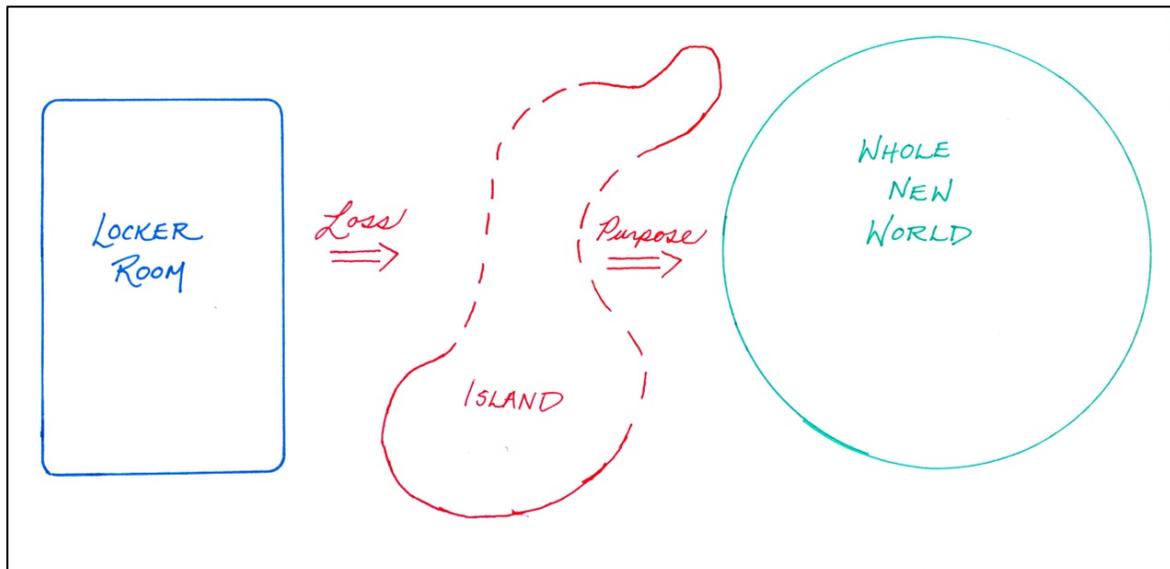
What is important to note is that these elements were present in every account. As Stambulova et al. (2009) highlighted, there is a difference between how athletes process and handle normative career transitions and non-normative career transitions. Normative transitions are those that are foreseen by the individual, i.e. advancing to the next level or planned career retirement, whereas non-normative transitions are those that are unforeseen by an individual, i.e. a coaching change or injury. Although both are typically associated with stress and uncertainty, normative, or anticipated, transitions give athletes the opportunity to prepare for the change and thus increase their probability of coping effectively (Stambulova et al., 2009).

Although all athletes conceptually “know” that their sport will eventually end, it is rarely something that they stop to consider, much less prepare for (J. Harris, personal communication, October 6, 2016). When football ended, as denoted by the red “X” in this model, participants noted that it felt like a very non-normative, or unforeseen, transition regardless of how much they may have attempted to prepare for it. The stress that Stambulova et al. (2009) noted appears to be amplified by all the ambiguity around leaving the Locker Room (See Figure 5.3), and makes navigating the entire transition out of sport even more challenging. What this model may offer is an opportunity to make the less obvious, micro transitions that are embedded within the overall transition not only more obvious but perhaps even normative.

If former players become aware of the different elements within Model 1 (i.e. the red X, the red dot, the grey clouds, the transition funnel, and life beyond the funnel), it may offer them the opportunity to prepare in advance for managing them more effectively and efficiently. This advanced preparation of future events and how one may navigate the scenario is an executive function that Schmidt and Wrisberg (2008) described as feedforward. Whereas feedback allows one to take information from a completed action and use that information to make adjustments to future performances, feedforward allows one to schematically build a plan to navigate a future performance, preemptively managing the potentially challenging psychoemotional scenario. For example, if former players are able to see that physical and emotional pain will be a part of their transition process, it will not surprise them when such states occur. Furthermore, it will help normalize the novel psychoemotional states they are experiencing and perhaps even build internal resources to better navigate the process.

## Model 2: Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence

Leaving the NFL is more than just walking away from one season of life and into another. It is more like being ripped out of your very home and placed somewhere far away in the middle of the ocean...alone...and then being asked to construct a whole new world based on whatever resources you have at your disposal. Model 2 “cleanly” represents the macro transition sequence that former players experienced as they were removed from the Locker Room, found themselves on an Island, and then constructed a Whole New World (See Figure 5.3).



*Figure 5.3* Model 2: Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence. This model represents the post-NFL macro transition sequence, where the player leaves the security, camaraderie, and understanding of the locker room, experiences loss and finds himself on an island of isolation, fear, and uncertainty, and then, through the process of re-discovering and re-defining purpose in his life is able to build a whole new world of renewed vision, purpose, relationships, and grit.

Model 2 emotionally resonated with participants in this study for a variety of reasons. As Participant 7 stated, “It’s almost like...Wow...That’s exactly what it’s like to have to leave the locker room.” Participant 11 extended his thought by saying, “I am Model 2. It

really resonates with me, and it is amorphous [the Island]. It's like, all of the unknown coming together into something that I can recognize [an island]. The island: this is an issue, and it doesn't have to be this way. The model can really help people understand it. It's really refreshing to hear this and hear you talk about it like this."

It is an issue, *and it does not have to be this way!* This model offers simplified, visual representation to what these men experience through their transition process. It allows former players to inject their own unique experiences of each of these components with the very real and raw emotions that they experience through them. The model normalizes their feelings of loss and isolation as they are forced out of the Locker Room and onto the Island, while simultaneously offers them hope that they may be able to construct a Whole New World if they are able to discover their purpose.

The Island is an issue...and it does not have to be this way. The Island is where we lose guys to suicide or to simply vanishing from public contact. The Island is where so much human potential is left wasting away on the shoreline; where men stand, looking back into the Locker Room longing for what used to be; or where men hide, refusing to face the pain, humiliation, or anxiety about an unknown future. This is why this Model matters: because it shows former players that the Island is real, but it is only temporary. Additionally, it helps them recognize that there IS a Whole New World to be enjoyed one day, if they continue persevering through the process and tap into the grit that made them great.

### **Model 3: Process of Purpose Post-NFL**

Although Model 2 is descriptive of the macro transition process that former players experience, the begging question becomes, "So then, how do I rediscover and redefine my life's purpose so I can construct a whole new world?" Model 3 (See Figure 5.4) offers a

framework for men to navigate the Process of Purpose Post-NFL based on other players' lived experiences. As Participant 12 stated, "I'm impressed because it's going to help guys re-shape and re-focus, and it gives them a plan as well if they're unsure of how to proceed."

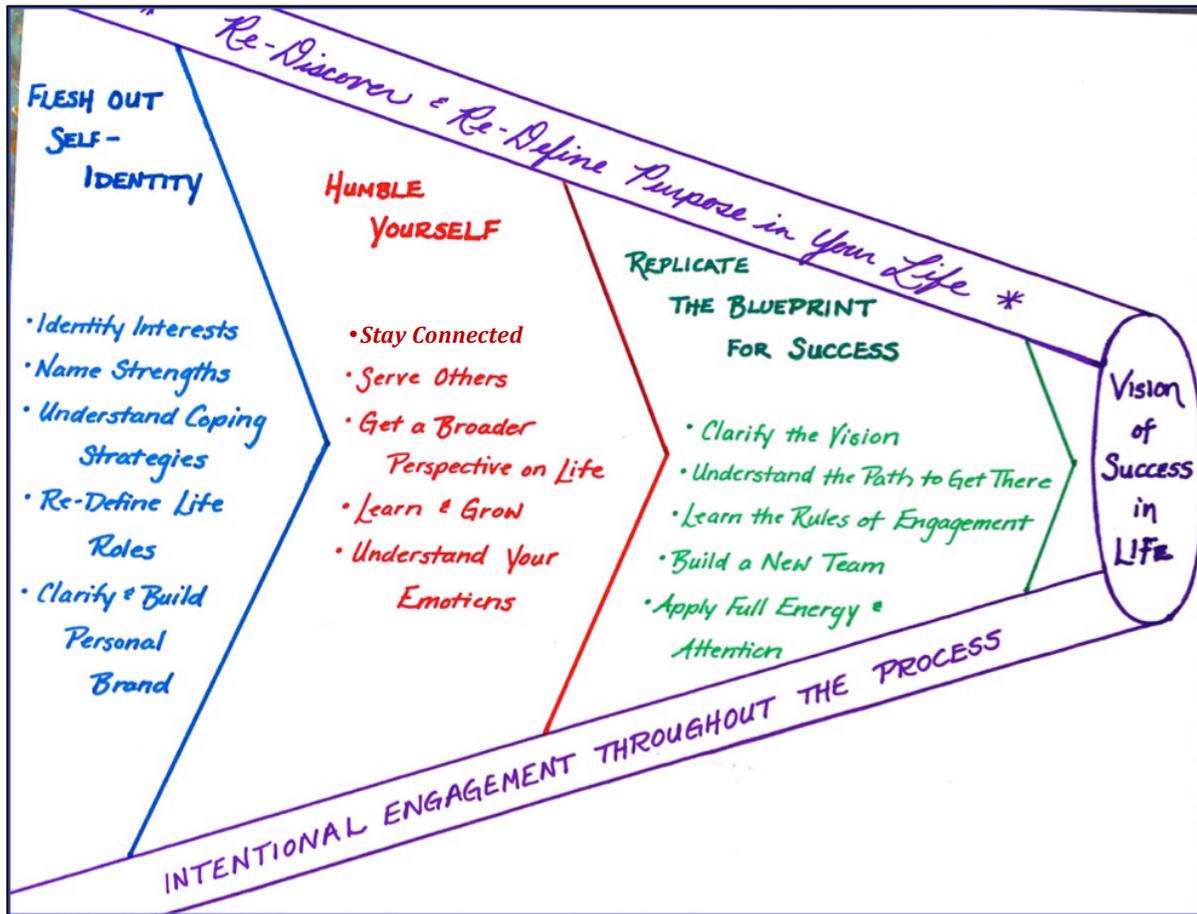


Figure 5.4 Model 3: Process of Purpose Post-NFL. This model demonstrates the process of rediscovering and redefining purpose in one's life once he leaves the NFL. It is perpetually guided by the two categories "vision for success in life" and "intentional engagement throughout the process." The three categories of "flesh out self-identity," "humble yourself," and "replicate the blueprint for success" are all supported by five properties within their respective segments of the model. Together, these five categories allow individuals to "solve" the main concern of "re-discovering and re-defining purpose" in one's life post-NFL.

Discovering one's life purpose is hard enough, let alone amid the emotional experience of being removed from the Locker Room. This Model offers a broad enough framework that it can be adapted for each individual yet a structured enough approach to give

sequential guidance. Additionally, it helps men organize the transition in a more sequential, logical way that they may positively engage with the process and build the right mindsets, or patterned ways of thinking, about the transition.

When broadly contemplating purpose, consider a quote by Albert Einstein: “If we were to measure intelligence by being able to climb a tree, a fish would spend its entire life feeling stupid.” Fish were not meant to climb trees; they were created to swim. As clear of a goal as they may set to climb a tree by the end of the year, it will never happen. In fact, if they do not die first, they will most certainly be quickly deterred! So does this imply then that the fish is not gritty? I would argue, no. It is merely not pursuing its intended purpose, and thus has no legitimate driver – or reason – to persist over time toward the objective. I believe this gets at the core of what grit (Duckworth et al., 2007) truly demonstrates: gritty people are those who have a clear vision and a driving purpose for which they are willing to sacrifice for ambiguous amounts of time in order to manifest it into reality. It is bigger and argumentatively more important than “long-term goals.” It is about unique, individualized purpose that manifests itself in prolonged effort toward something of individual value. Model 3 offers hope of rediscovering and redefining a purpose as big enough and as important enough as football once was that men are able to physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually engage in the gritty pursuit of something of they value. Granted, the application of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual attributes will look differently than they once did in football, but how to approach cultivating such drive is outlined.

Furthermore, as Duckworth and Eskreis-Winkler (2013) posited, the reason people tend to display more grit later in life is because they have developed their interests and abilities, and are thus applying them toward a more specified objective. It would be

interesting to inquire if the individuals in their study who rate higher on the grit scale later in life believe they are in fact living out their purpose. Clearly they possess grit; but does that grit result in the deeply satisfying existence that those who believe they are living into and out of their purpose purport possessing, or is it merely a result of being an “adult” and fulfilling cultural norms of “climbing the ladder”?

Perhaps the precarious situation that many former NFL players find themselves after their sport is over is in fact a hidden blessing. The formidable question of, “What the hell am I doing with my life?” is pressed fiercely into the faces of most former players between the ages of 20 and 30. However, the delayed specialization that occurs within the large majority of the rest of the population may never be exposed to such a deeply personal inquisition because their normal existence forces a type of acceptance that does not stir their souls. For others in that population, it may manifest as a mid-life crisis: “What am I doing with my life?!” And yet for others in the rest of the population, it may linger in the back of their minds, “Is this really what I am supposed to be doing with my life?” But again, for these men, it is thrust upon them, aching to be addressed and solved, or taunting reasons why they should just disappear from this earth.

The beauty of pain, however, is that it often forces a type of introspection that cannot be fabricated elsewhere. If one is courageous enough to go into the depths of that pain, explore it, recognize its temporal nature, and catch a glimpse of a new vision, he is positioned to emerge with a renewed sense of purpose in this life. As Roosevelt once said there are, “those poor and timid souls that know neither victory nor defeat.” What strikes me is that former NFL players know intimately both “the triumph of high achievement” and the devastation of loss. Few people in this world ever “dare greatly” enough to taste both the

sweetness and the bitterness that expending one's full self entails. And thus, it uniquely positions them to beg the question sooner in life than most people: "What the hell am I doing with my life?"

As this study found and posits, should one be courageous enough to truly ask such a question, and humbly pursue the path of rediscovering and redefining purpose in his life, he has the opportunity to emerge again as a victor, living a deeply fulfilling and invigorating life beyond the game. To live gritty once more, fully committed to not just a long-term goal, but also a clear vision and a driving purpose.

**Flesh out self-identity.** With the time, energy, and attention demands of elite sport, few athletes have the capacity to truly flesh out their self-identity beyond sport while they are still playing (Koonce, 2015). Some athletes, like Participant 8, are intentional about developing their identities outside of being an athlete, whereas others like Participant 10, are not. Although understanding who you are outside of just being an athlete is helpful in the transition process, it does not eliminate the pain that exists when it is over. As Participant 9 shared, even though he repeatedly told himself throughout his football career, "I can't let football define me," when it was over he still struggled mentally, emotionally, relationally, and with substance abuse. He said, "As much as you try to prepare you can never fully be ready for that [football being over]."

This section offers an outline for athletes and former athletes to begin understanding their interests, strengths, coping strategies, roles they fill in life, and their personal brand. Sequentially, this outline walks people into a deeper understanding of self and how they can optimize their unique talents, passions, and capital (financial, psychological, social) to position them to be successful beyond the game. Collectively, the insights garnered from this

section can be transferred to building a successful life after leaving the NFL. It is important to note, however, that a lot of times one does not recognize his own strengths because by definition, strengths are things that come relatively naturally (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Their value is often lost in the very frequency of their presence. Therefore, it is imperative that teaching for transfer of these skills and their application to other domains occurs to ensure a deep understanding of how, when, and where certain KSAs apply (Perkins, 1998).

**Humble yourself.** One piece of feedback garnered from Participant 5 on Model 3 was, “Perhaps consider changing the heading of ‘Humble Yourself,’ to something less abrasive such as, ‘Ego is the Enemy.’ As a dude, that just sounds harsh.” I agree. However, the lynchpin in this entire process seemed to be the willingness to die to self. And these accounts were anything but “clean” or “proper” or “gentle.” They were abrasive. These vivid moments accounted by participants where they consciously chose to surrender control and stand humbly in acceptance of what could be next in their lives were powerful. And they were not about “fighting” any sort of enemy; they were about letting go and submission and vulnerability and trust. For men, this is counter-cultural to the masculine, “man as warrior” script they have been trained to assume (Sussman, 2012), and thus proved to be incredibly challenging. As Participant 7 noted, some men refuse to ever submit, or allow themselves to be humbled, and thus never fully find themselves or live into their best selves.

The “Humble Yourself” section seems to align with the “Red Dot” moment from Model 1, where the individual truly accepts the fact that his playing days are over and it is indeed, time to move on intentionally. It is at this moment that he is ready and able to intentionally engage in “getting on with” his life beyond the game. Saint Thomas Aquinas would argue that it is this “Great Death,” or death to self that truly allows one to live fully in

this life, and it is powerful to see this notion confirmed through this study. Abrasive as it may be or seem to former athletes, intentionally engaging in submission and the humbling properties noted within this category may be the most pivotal component of the entire theory.

**Replicate the blueprint for success.** “I do have the tools. I’ve done this before.” As Participant 3 said these words while perusing Model 3, a hopeful sound of confidence lingered in this tone. As Hunter (1995) posited, it is difficult for individuals to transfer knowledge from one domain to another unless one is taught how specific KSAs apply and can be leveraged for success. Even though former NFL players recognize that they were successful in one domain, few are able to recognize how that same blueprint that led to extreme success in the NFL can be leveraged to achieve similar success in another domain. This category and its supporting properties offer a framework for former NFL players to understand the blueprint through the lens of football and then intentionally replicate that blueprint in another chosen domain that aligns with the interests, strengths, and brand they developed through the previous categories.

As former players work through Model 3, the discovery and definition of their purpose is continually honed and clarified. Collectively, it offers a positive, powerful, and productive way to view the transition process, specifically as it relates to their life’s purpose. Although finances, physical health, mental health, relationships, etc. are all also important factors in the transition process, it was this process of purpose after leaving the League that emerged as the most important issue for men to address – despite, and even in light of, all of these other issues.

## Contribution to the Academy

Classic Grounded Theory offers in-depth, personal, and highly applicable insights to different phenomena, which can be leveraged as solid foundations upon which further inquiry may occur. Its specificity allows further inquiry to be situated around areas of true interest and concern for the participating parties, thus allowing the research to add great value to those intimately connected in the space. This study helped peel back another layer to a world that is often closed off to outsiders, and specifically around a topic (transition out of the NFL) that has had only one prior, formal research study conducted (Koonce, 2013).

Whereas the prior study took a modified grounded theory approach (Savign-Baden & Howell Major, 2013) by leveraging the theory of role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991) to analyze the transition out of the NFL, this study proliferates our insight on the phenomenon, and allows a very broad look at what is happening as men leave the League and traverse to life beyond football. It is within this proliferation that the heart of and power in CGT is realized: what may appear to be very disparate elements are conceptualized into an integrated theory. Within one theory we see elements ranging from physical and emotional pain to self-identity to relationships to humility to vision to service to coping to communication and beyond. As Rohr (2010; 2011) postulated, we must learn to break from the social norm of dualistic thinking. Attempting to consider non-dualistic situations from a dualistic stance is more than just limiting, it is dehumanizing. Life changes are physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually laborious. And to constrict the conversation around the life change of leaving the NFL is to ensure that an actual *transition* to life beyond (Bridges, 2004) will not occur.

This study non-dualistically considers a profound life event through the lenses of former NFL players themselves. It contributes to the Academy by further demonstrating not

only the importance of the intricate, dynamic, and complex essence of the human experience but also how disparate elements of the scientific field and its supporting literature are interconnected and can be integrated for positive human optimization.

### **Limitations**

One of the strengths of this study is the diversity that exists among participants, and it is this diversity that may allow us to generalize the emergent transition theory to the broader population of former NFL players. However, one potential limitation of the study is number of participants. In CGT, theoretical saturation drives number of participants needed, and saturation around the emergent main concern, categories, and properties was achieved. However, by increasing the number of participants the study could have proved even more generalizable than based solely on the diversity within the sample.

Another limitation may be the type of participants that such a study attracted. Although the diversity of life experiences and transition experiences varied greatly, these were still men who were willing and able to speak about their transition out of the League. This necessarily omits those who may still be stuck in the transition process, somewhere on their Island.

Finally, the cross-sectional design of the study may also be a limitation to the depth of the generated theory. A longitudinal design was outside the scope for this study, however, could add layers of insight to how each current category is experienced and leveraged to help redefine and rediscover purpose in their lives post-NFL.

### **Future Directions**

Given the topical expanse of the emergent theory and the pragmatic nature of this study, several future directions for both research and application are offered in this section.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) discussed the importance that substantive grounded theories have in the generation of more formal theories. That being said, it is recommended that this theory be tested, applied, and modified toward other professional sports to generate a substantive theory around transition out of professional sport. Furthermore, testing, applying, and modifying to different domains to develop a formal theory around transition in general is also recommended.

Currently, professionals in different spaces are vetting this theory to “test” its applicability beyond professional football. It is receiving positive feedback from those going through the transitions of business retirement, professorial retirement, career transition discernment, leaving the athletic coaching profession, exiting the non-profit space and re-integrating into the for-profit sector, graduating college seniors, graduating collegiate-athletes, and even divorce. Each individual from these distinct spaces who has engaged with the theory have “found themselves” within the theory, and shared its resonance with not only the struggle of where they are but also the hope of where this theory could help lead them. In short, this substantive theory is demonstrating strong indicators that it may also be valid as a formal transition theory.

Aside from replicating the study in different fields or testing its validity elsewhere, there are also future research opportunities within each category by “thinking with theory.” As Jackson & Mazzei (2012) stated, this is a process that results in knowledge that is “opened up and proliferated rather than foreclosed and simplified” (p. vii). Each category offers opportunity for future research to “think with theory,” thereby offering “proliferated” insight into the component pieces of the overall theory specific to pertinent grand theories. For example, analyzing the process of rediscovering and redefining purpose in life during the

transition experience through the lens of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000a) could offer extensive insights into how to optimize autonomously regulated motivation, thereby increasing one's ability to intentionally engage in the transition process. It may also reveal recurrent factors that thwart intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000b) during the transition process, helping individuals anticipate and avoid attacks on healthy volition.

The field applications of this theory and its models are extensive. First and foremost, unlike other transition programs offered by the NFL, NFLPA, AthLife, etc., this theory tackles the more human side of transition process, while still offering a systematic framework and approach to navigating it. Thus, building a comprehensive training program around each Model, and specifically around each category and supporting property within Model 3, is a critical next step. It will be important to identify relevant assessments, activities, and “training” for each category and property, and put together a comprehensive training program on rediscovering and redefining purpose in life post-NFL.

The sooner such programming could occur in the developmental process for athletes, the better. It would never be “too soon” to begin sharing this theory and its models with individuals because it would begin planting the seeds necessary to hopefully mitigate the negative effects of transitions and more smoothly help individuals navigate the impending transitions that life entails. In essence, the “red funnel” of Model 1, which highlights the transition funnel, could technically begin at the very start of every new season of life. Life is indeed a series of transitions, and viewing each new season as an immediate opportunity to begin planning of the next transition may increase the capital available to individuals as they navigate future changes.

Additionally, this theory could be leveraged to consult with organizations on their current transition programming. This study highlights the importance of considering the underlying human factor of “purpose” amid all the other dynamic elements of the transition out of football, such as finances, mental and physical health, jobs, etc. To address all other concerns without integrating this purpose piece may hinder the degree of engagement and ultimate satisfaction with the transition to life beyond the NFL.

One of the biggest challenges that participants noted in trying to navigate their transition was that, “No one really understands” what they were going through. This model connected with former players in a very real way that may serve as a powerful framework to address the psycho-social-emotional challenges they are trying to manage. Even if those trying to help or support individuals navigating the transition never played professional football, this model may speak to players and former players in a way that allows them to be open to others assistance. This assistance could help positively engage former players in important discussions around the emergent categories and properties.

### **Conclusion**

When the lights go out on the professional football careers of former NFL players, the question left begging is, “How do I turn them back on?” In quiet desperation, men often suffer in silence through a grueling transition from the NFL to life beyond the gridiron. Torn from the life they once knew inside the walls of a Locker Room, they find themselves alone on an Island – longing for connection but engulfed with the fear of the unknown that keeps them in a place of solitude. By courageously deciding to engage in the process of rediscovering and redefining purpose in their lives post-NFL, these men have the opportunity to construct a Whole New World in which they grow, thrive, and give back to the greater

good. It is this human desire for purpose that these men long to address when their former identity in football is stripped from them.

Situated within several critical life moments on the Former Player Life Timeline (Model 1) and the Post-NFL Macro Transition Sequence (Model 2), this study revealed a process for solving the biggest concern men faced upon retirement from the NFL: rediscovering and redefining purpose in life post-NFL (Model 3). This research tackles the non-dualistic, raw, human element to sport and transition within sport. It integrates disparate literature into a concise, visual model that can be leveraged by researchers, practitioners, and the men who are navigating the transition out of the NFL alike.

The reality is, this study was not just research – it was *mesearch* (Douglas, 2012). Having experienced the pain and struggle of transitioning out of elite sport, I knew there was something more to my own experience that was not yet solidified or conceptualized. I rigorously wrote memos and checked my biases with colleagues to attempt to garner insight from others on a personal account I deeply believed was important. What ensued was a total engulfment into their lives, their stories, their challenges, their triumphs, their longings, and their main concern during the transition: purpose. What resulted as I reviewed the emergent theory and the pages of interviews and the scribbles of notes was a total clarification of my life, my story, my challenges, my triumphs, my longings, and my main concern during the transition: purpose.

Interestingly enough, it started with me, it ended with me, and it extended beyond me... *just like one's purpose must also do*. Discovering and defining one's purpose must start with the individual as he or she engages in deep self-exploration and understanding. Living into one's purpose must end with the individual as she chooses to lead a purpose-driven life

day in and day out. And finally, living out of one's purpose must extend beyond the individual as he positively impacts those around him.

When the lights go out, there is hope of finding the switch that turns them back on. This CGT study revealed that the switch may be the rediscovery and the redefinition of purpose in life as men leave the NFL. Although amorphous at best and incredibly dark at worst, the vision of a Whole New World beyond the Locker Room and through the Island offers hope to believe that there is more than just life after football – there is an opportunity to get on with your life's work.

## References

- Adams, T. B. B. (2000). Conceptualization and measurement of the spiritual and psychological dimensions of wellness in a college population. *Journal of American College Health, 48*, 165–173.
- Adler, P. A. & Adler, P. (1991). *Backboards and blackboards: College athletes and role engulfment*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Alfermann, D., & Stambulova, N. (2007). Career transitions and career termination. In G. Tenenbaum and R. C. Eklund (Eds.), *Handbook of sport psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 712–736). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Arthur, R. (2016, February 29). *The shrinking shelf life of NFL players*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-shrinking-shelf-life-of-nfl-players-1456694959>
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bartholomew, K. J., Ntoumanis, N., Ryan, R. M., & Thogersen-Ntoumani, C. (2011). Psychological need-thwarting in the sport context: Assessing the darker side of athletic experience. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 33*, 75-102.
- Beehr, T. A. (1976). Perceived situational moderators of the relationship between subjective role ambiguity and role strain. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 61*(1), 35-40.
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219-234.
- Besser, A. & Priel, B. (2011). Dependency, self-criticism and negative affective responses following imaginary rejection and failure threats: Meaning-making processes as moderators or mediators. *Psychiatry, 74*(1), 31-40.

- Bien, L. (2016, March 9). *Retiring from the NFL is terrifying, especially if you're not ready to leave*. Retrieved from <http://www.sbnation.com/2016/3/9/11185970/retired-nfl-players-adjusting-society-regrets-free-agency?curator=SportsREDEF>
- Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). *Practicing positive psychology coaching: Assessment, activities, and strategies for success*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Blinde, E., & Stratta, T. (1992). The “sport career death” of college athletes: Involuntary and unanticipated sports exits. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 15, 3-20.
- Borghans, L., Duckworth, A. L., Heckman, J. J., & ter Weel, B. (2008). The economics and psychology of personality traits. *Journal of Human Resources*, 43, 972–1059.
- Bridges, W. (2004). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Brown, B. (2012, March). Brené Brown: Listening to shame. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame)
- Brown, R. N., Carducci, R., & Kubly, C. R. (Eds.). (2014). *Disrupting qualitative inquiry: Possibilities and tensions in educational research* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Lang Publishing, Inc.
- C. Leaf. (2015a, August 20). Build a new way of thinking [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjAWYg3yFlw>
- C. Leaf. (2015b, November 11). Sower and the seed [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14EQK6YE9Ro>
- C. Leaf. (2015c, September 17). Brain science and marriage [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-NmNEban9o>
- C. Leaf. (2014, December 23). Switch on your brain [Video file]. Retrieved from

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM\\_28xKB4aw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM_28xKB4aw)

- Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., Weintraub, J. K. (1969). Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(2), 267-283.
- Christiansen, O. (2011). The literature review in classic grounded theory studies: A methodological note. *Grounded Theory Review*, 3(10).
- Christiansen, O. (2014). *Main differences between "classic" or "glaserian" GT*. Retrieved from <http://www.groundedtheory.com/what-is-gt.aspx>
- Cohen, S., & Pressman, S. D. (2006). Positive affect and health. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15, 122–125.
- Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap...and others don't*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Comeaux, E. (2010). Racial differences in faculty perceptions of collegiate student-athletes' academic and post-undergraduate achievements. *Sociology of Sport*, 27, 390-412.
- Compton, W. C. & Hoffman, E. (2013). *Positive psychology: The science of happiness and flourishing* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Crook, J. M., & Robertson, S. E. (1991). Transitions out of elite sport. *International Journal Of Sport Psychology*, 22(2), 115-127.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the*

- research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). *Flow*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Cuordileone, K. A. (2000). Politics in an age of anxiety: Cold war political culture and the crisis in American masculinity. *The Journal of American History*, 87(2), 515-545.
- Daniel, T. A. (2015). Developing and sustaining high-performance work teams. *Society for Human Resource Management Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/developingandsustaininghigh-performanceworkteams.aspx>
- Dayan, E. & Cohen, L. G. (2011). Neuroplasticity subserving motor skill learning. *Neuron*, 72(3), 443-454.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York, NY: Plenum Publishing Co.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macrotheory of human motivation, development, and health. *Canadian Psychology*, 49(3), 182-185.
- Douglas, T. M. O. (2012). Border crossing brothas?: A study of Black Bermudian masculinity, success, and the role of community-based pedagogical spaces. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, North Carolina*.
- Ellis, A. (1955).
- Duckworth, A. L. & Eskreis-Winkler, L. (2013). *The Observer*, 26(4), 1-3.
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 1087–1101.
- Duckworth, A. L., & Quinn, P. D. (2009). Development and validation of the Short Grit

- Scale (Grit-S). *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 91, 166–174.
- Duckworth, A. L., Quinn, P. D., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2009). Positive predictors of teacher effectiveness. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4, 540–547.
- Edwards, S. H. (2010). *A case study of the transition experiences of freshman student athletes*. Capella University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 120. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/305243110?accountid=14608>
- Ehrmann, J. (2011). *InSideOut coaching: How sports can transform lives*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T., & Tesch-Römer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review*, 100, 363–406.
- Farrell, W. (1993). Farrell, W. (1993). *The myth of male power: Why men are the disposable sex*. New York, NY: Berkley Books.
- Fredrickson, B. (2009). *Positivity*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Furlong, G. T. *The conflict resolution toolbox: Models and maps for analyzing, diagnosing, and resolving conflict*. Mississauga, Ontario: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd.
- Glaser, B. G. (2009). *Jargonizing: The use of the grounded theory vocabulary*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2014). *Choosing classic grounded theory: A grounded theory reader of expert advice*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction.

- Grady, C. L., McIntosh, A. R., Rajah, M. N., & Craik, F. A. I. (1998). Neural correlates of the episodic encoding of pictures and words. *National Academy of Sciences, Psychology, 95*, 2703-2708.
- Gray, A. (2003). *Research practice for cultural studies*. London: Sage.
- Greenberg, M. & Maymin, S. (2013). *Profit from the positive*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill Education.
- Gross, J. J., & Levenson, R. W. (1997). Hiding feelings: The acute effects of inhibiting negative and positive emotion. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 106*(1), 95-103.
- Grove, J. R., Lavalley, D., & Gordon, S. (1997). Coping with retirement from sport: The influence of athletic identity. *Journal of applied sport psychology, 9*(2), 191-203.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Harper, S. R., Williams, C. D., & Blackman, H. W. (2013). *Black male student-athletes and racial inequities in NCAA Division I college sports*.
- Heppner, P. P., & Heppner, M. J. (2004). *Writing and publishing your thesis, dissertation and research: A guide for students in the helping professions*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole-Thomson Learning.
- Holton, J. A. (2008). Grounded theory as a general research methodology. *The Grounded Theory Review, 7*(2), 67-93.
- Hunter, M. (1995). *Teach for Transfer*. Corwin Press.
- Ivey, P. A. (2013). Exploring the lived psychological experiences of elite National Football League (NFL) players. *Unpublished dissertation*.

- Jakes, T. D. (2004). *He-motions: Even strong men struggle*. New York, NY: Putnam.
- Jackson, A. Y. & Mazzei, L. A. (2012). *Thinking with theory in qualitative research: Viewing data across multiple perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Josselson, R., & Lieblich, A. (2003). A framework for narrative research proposals in psychology. In R. Josselson, A. Lieblich, & D. P. McAdams (Eds.), *Up close and personal: The teaching and learning of narrative research* (pp. 259-274). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- K. McGonigal. (2013, September 4). How to make stress your friend [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcGyVTAoXEU>
- Kalish, R. A. (1985). *Death, grief and caring relations*, 2nd ed. Monterey: Brooks/Cole.
- Kashdan, T. B. (2009). *Curious? Discovering the missing ingredient to a fulfilling life*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Katzenbach, J. R., & Smith, D. K. (2006). *The wisdom of teams: Creating the high-performance organization*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kimmel, M. (2011). *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, D. M., & White, J. M. (1996). *Family theories: An introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.
- Koonce, G. E. (2013). Role transition of national football league retired athletes: A grounded theory approach. *Marquette Sports Law Review*, 23(10), 249-338.
- Koonce, G. E. (2015). *Is there life after football?: Surviving the NFL*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Kosfeld, M., Heinrichs, M, Zak, P. J., Fischbacher, U., & Fehr, E. Oxytocin increases trust in

- humans. *Nature*, 435, 673-676.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lattner, A. R. (2013, Fall). When the lights go out. *The Center Line News*, 1(1), 6.
- Lattner, A. R. & Portenga, S. (2015). Sports as a means of developing leaders. In M. Dodds & J. Reese (Eds.), *Sports leadership: A concise reference guide* (233-234). Santa Barbara, CA: Mission Bell Media.
- Lavallee, D., Gordon, S., & Grove, J. R. (1997). Retirement from sport and the loss of athletic identity. *Journal of Personal & Interpersonal Loss*, 2(2), 129-147.
- Leaf, C. M., Louw, B., & Uys, I. (1997). The development of a model for geodesic learning: The geodesic information processing model. *The South African Journal of Communication Disorders*, 44, 53-70.
- Ledoux, J. E. (1989). Cognitive-emotional interactions in the brain. *Cognition & Emotion*, 3(4), 267-289. doi: 10.1080/02699938908412709
- Levant, R. F. (2001). Desperately seeking language: Understanding, assessing, and treating normative male alexithymia. In G.R. Brooks & G.E. Good (Eds.), *The new handbook of psychotherapy and counseling for men: A comprehensive guide to settings, problems, and treatment approaches* (Ch.21, pp. 424-443). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lieberman, M. D. (2013). *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.
- Lyons, T. F. (1971). Role clarity, need for clarity, satisfaction, tension, and withdrawal. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 6, 99-110.
- Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect:

- Does happiness lead to success? *Psychological Bulletin*, 13, 803–855.
- Majors, R. & Billson, J. M. (1992). *Cool pose: The dilemmas of Black manhood in America*. New York, NY: Lexington Books, Inc.
- Maxwell, J. C. (2007). *The 21 irrefutable laws of leadership: Follow them and people will follow you*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- McGuire, R. T. (2016). *The power of positive coaching*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Printing.
- McPherson, B. D. (1980). Retirement from professional sport: The process and problems of occupational and psychological adjustment. *Sociological Symposium*, 30, 126-143.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, W. R. & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Montoya, P., Vandehey, T., & Viti, P. (2002). *The personal branding phenomenon*. Santa Ana, CA: Peter Montoya.
- Munroe, M. (2003). *The principles and power of vision: Keys to achieving personal and corporate destiny*. New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House.
- Njororai, W. W. S. (2012). Challenges of being a Black student athlete on U.S. college campuses. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 5, 40-63.
- Ogilvie, B.C. (1987). Counseling for sports career termination. In J.R. May & M.J. Asken (Eds.), *Sport psychology: The psychological health of the athlete* (pp. 213-230). New York: PMA.
- Ogilvie, B.C., & Howe, M. (1982). Career crisis in sport. In T. Orlick, J.T. Partington, & J.H.

- Salmela (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Sport Psychology* (pp. 176-183). Ottawa: Coaching Association of Canada.
- Ogilvie, B. C., & Taylor, J. (1993). Career termination issues among elite athletes. In R. N. Singer, M. Murphey, & L. K. Tennant (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (pp. 761-775). New York: Macmillan.
- O'Neil, J. M. (1981). Patterns of gender role conflict and strain: Sexism and fear of femininity in men's lives. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 60, 203-210.
- Orlick, T. (2008). *In pursuit of excellence: How to win in sport and life through mental training* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Park, S., Lavalley, D., & Tod, D. (2013). Athletes' career transition out of sport: A systematic review. *International Review of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 6(1), 22-53.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pearson, R. E., & Petitpas, A. J. (1990). Transitions of athletes: Developmental and preventive perspectives. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 69(1), 7-10.
- Pendergast, S. (2016, March 1). *Life as an NFL player can be glorious until the ever-after part hits*. Retrieved from <http://www.houstonpress.com/news/life-as-an-nfl-player-can-be-a-glorious-ride-until-the-ever-after-part-hits-8204269>
- Perkins, D. (1998). What is understanding. *Teaching for understanding: Linking research with practice*, 39-57.
- Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: The full life versus the empty life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6, 25-41.

- Petitpas, A., Brewer, B.W., & Van Raalte, J.L. (1996). Transitions of the student- athlete: Theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives. In E.F. Etzel, A.P. Ferrante, & J.W. Pinkney (Eds.), *Counseling college student-athletes: Issues and interventions* (pp. 137-156). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Petitpas, A. J., Champagne, D., Chartrand, J., Danish, S., & Murphy, S. (1997). *Athlete's guide to career planning. Keys to success from the playing field to professional life*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Petitpas, A., Cornelius, A.E., & Brewer, B.W. (2001). Identifying and using transferable skills. In A. Papaioannou, M. Goudas, & Y. Theodorakis (Eds.), *Proceedings 10<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Sport Psychology* (Vols. 3) (pp. 15). Thessaloniki, Greece: Christodoulidi Publ.
- Post, S. (2005). Altruism, happiness, and health: It's good to be good. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12(2), 66-77.
- Pummell, B., Harwood, C., & Lavallee, D. (2008). Jumping to the next level: A qualitative examination of within-career transition in adolescent event riders. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 9, 427-447.
- Rampersad, H. K. (2008). A new blueprint for powerful and authentic personal branding. *Performance Improvement*, 47(6), 34-37.
- Rampersad, H. K. (2009). *Authentic personal branding: A new blueprint for building and aligning a powerful leadership brand*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Reker, G. T., Peacock, E. J., & Wong, P. T. P. (1987). Meaning and purpose in life and well-being: A life-span perspective. *Journal of Gerontology*, 42(1), 44-49.

- Rohr, R. (2011). *A lever and a place to stand: The contemplative stance, the active prayer*. Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring.
- Rohr, R. (2010). *The art of letting go: Living the wisdom of St. Francis*. Available from <https://www.amazon.com/Art-Letting-Go-Living-Francis/dp/B003H8EQWK>
- Rohr, R. (2015). *The art of letting go: Living the wisdom of St. Francis study guide*. Retrieved from [www.nowyouknowmedia.com](http://www.nowyouknowmedia.com)
- Rudestam, K. E. & Newton, R. R. (2015). *Surviving you dissertation: A comprehensive guide to content and process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000a). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*, 68-78.
- Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000b). The darker and brighter sides of human existence: Basic psychological needs as a unifying concept. *Psychological Inquiry*, *11*, 319–338.
- Savin-Baden, M., Howell Major, C. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Schunk, D. H., Meece, J. L., & Pintrich, P. R. (2014). *Motivation in education: Theory, research, and applications*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *9*, 2.
- Schmidt, R. A., & Wrisberg, C. A. (2008). *Motor learning and performance: A situation-based learning approach* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Schwartz, J. M., Stapp, H. P., & Beauregard, M. (2005). Quantum physics in neuroscience and psychology: A neurophysical model of mind–brain interaction. *A Philosophical*

- Transaction of the Royal Society*, 360(1458), DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2004.1598
- Seibert, S. E., Kraimer, M. L., & Liden, R. C. (2001). A social capital theory on career success. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(2), 219-237.
- Seligman, M. E. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Seligman, M., Steen, T., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60, 410-421.
- Sievers, J. A. (2008). *Student-athletes' perceptions of academic support programs at division I institutions*. Washington State University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, , 119-n/a. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304449390?accountid=14608>. (304449390)
- Silva, C. (n.d.). *Normative male alexithymia and attachment difficulties in men: Exclusions through language* [PDF]. Retrieved from [http://www.communityvoices.org/uploads/silva\\_00108\\_00117.pdf](http://www.communityvoices.org/uploads/silva_00108_00117.pdf)
- Sinclair, D. A., & Orlick, T. (1993). Positive transitions from high-performance sport. *Sport Psychologist*, 7, 138-138.
- Stambulova, N., (2010). Counseling athletes in career transitions: The five-step career planning strategy. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 1, 95-105.
- Stambulova, N., Alfermann, D., Statler, T., & Cote, J. (2009). ISSP position stand: Career development and transitions of athletes.
- Stanley, A. (1999). *Visioneering: God's blueprint for developing and maintain vision*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books.
- Strauss, A. L. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Steinfeldt, J. A., Foltz, B. D., Mungro, J., Speight, Q. L., Wong, Y. J., & Blumberg, J. (2011). Masculinity socialization in sports: Influence of college football coaches. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 12*(3), 247-259. doi:10.1037/a0020170
- Sussman, H. (2012). *Masculine identities: The history and meanings of manliness*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- Svoboda, B., & Vanek, M. (1982). Retirement from high level competition. In *Proceedings of the 5th World Congress of Sport Psychology* (pp. 166-175). Ottawa, ON: Coaching Association of Canada.
- Taylor, J., & Ogilvie, B. C. (1994). A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 6*, 1-20.
- Tice, D. M., Baumeister, R. F., & Zhang, L., (2004). The role of emotion in self-regulation: Differing roles of positive and negative emotion. In P. Philippot & R. S. Feldman (Eds.), *The regulation of emotion* (213-226). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Torre, P. S. (2009, March 23). *How (and why) athletes go broke*. Retrieved from <http://www.si.com/vault/2009/03/23/105789480/how-and-why-athletes-go-broke>
- Von Culin, K. R. Tsukayama, E. and A. L. Duckworth (2014). Unpacking grit: Motivational correlates of perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 1-7*.
- Waterman, A. S. (1993). Two conceptions of happiness: Contrasts of personal expressiveness (eudaimonia) and hedonic enjoyment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64*, 678–691.
- Wylleman, P., Alfermann, D., & Lavallee, D. (2004). Career transitions in sport: European

perspectives. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5(1), 7-20.

Wylleman, P., & Lavallee, D. (2004). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes. *Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A lifespan perspective*, 507-527.

Wylleman, P., Lavallee, D., & Alfermann, D. (Eds.) (1999). *FEPSAC Monograph Series. Career transitions in competitive sports*. Lund, Sweden: European Federation of Sport Psychology FEPSAC.

## Appendix A

### Athletic Transition Models

Situation	Self	Support	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of transition is it?</li> <li>• Is it a positive, negative, expected, unexpected, desired, or dreaded transition?</li> <li>• Did the transition come at the worst or best time possible?</li> <li>• Is it “on time” of “off schedule”?</li> <li>• Is it voluntary or imposed?</li> <li>• Is the individual at the beginning, middle or end of the transition (moving in, through, or out)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of strengths and weaknesses does the individual bring to the situation?</li> <li>• Does he or she believe there are options?</li> <li>• Is he or she optimistic?</li> <li>• Personal and demographics characteristics (gender, age, health socio-economic status, race, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the person have support from family, friends, co-workers, and supervisors?</li> <li>• In what ways do people give support?</li> <li>• In what way do they hinder the person’s efforts to change?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the person use several coping strategies or just one?</li> <li>• Can the person creatively cope by changing the situation, changing the meaning of the situation or managing reactions to stress?</li> </ul>

*Figure A1. 4 S’s of transitions (Schlossberg, 1981).*

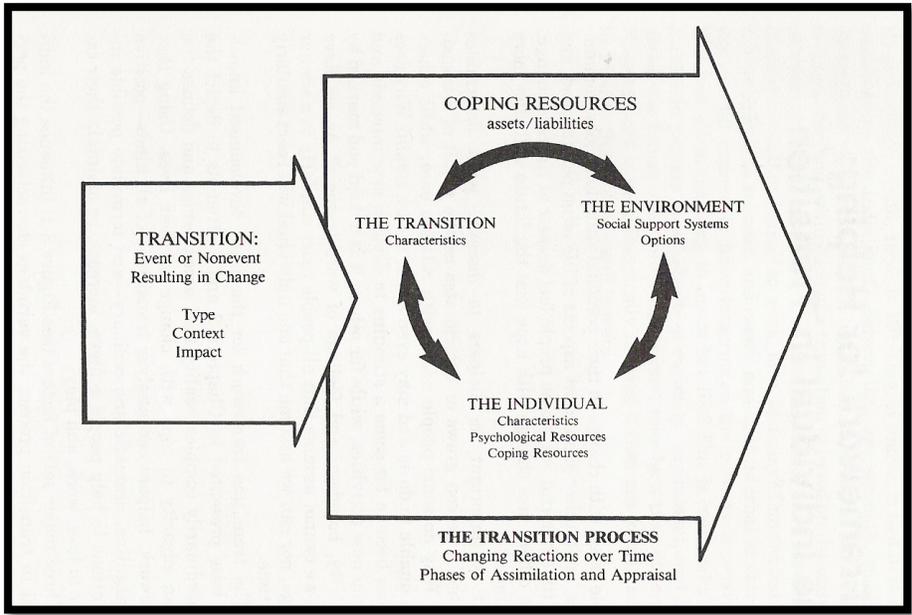


Figure A2. A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

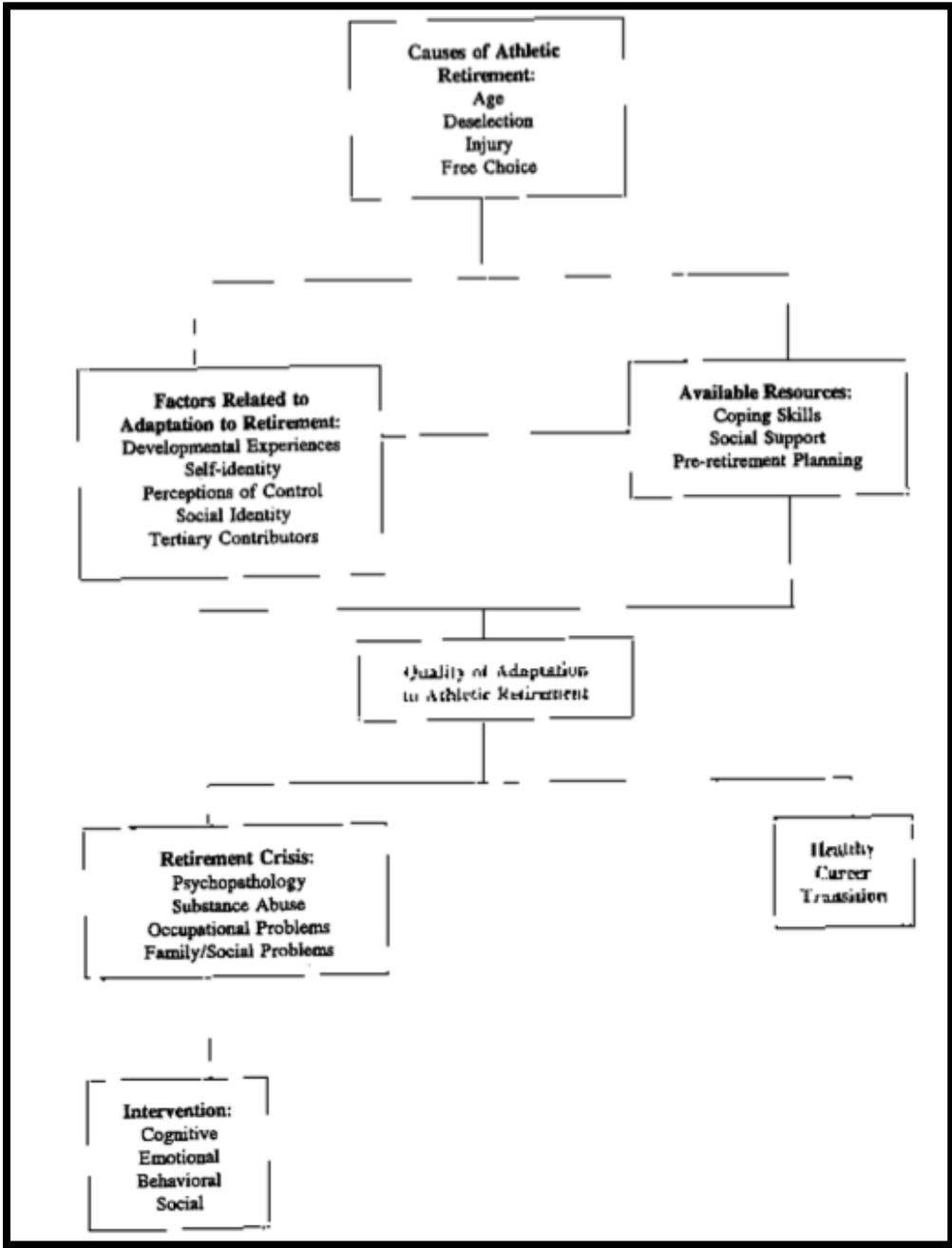


Figure A3. A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

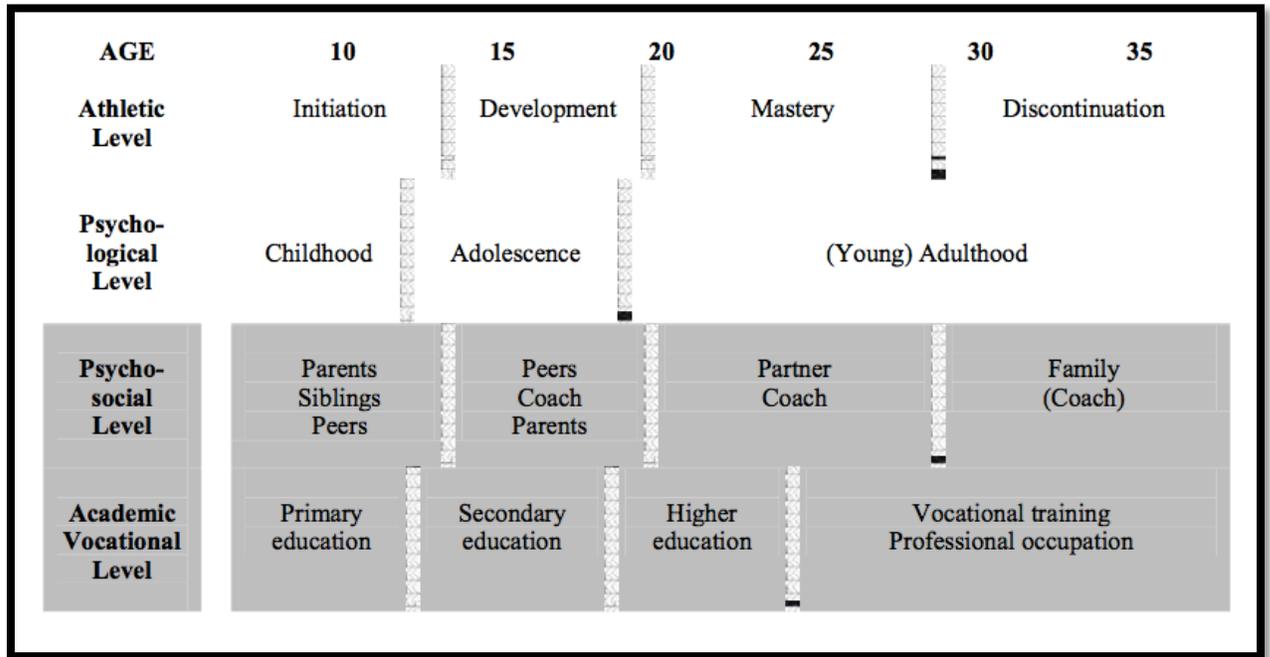


Figure A4. A developmental model on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial, and academic/vocational level (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Note: dotted lines indicate that the age at which the transition occurs is an approximation.

### **Step 1: Make a Framework**

- Draw a life/timeline and mark your birth (e.g., the year) as an initial point on the left.
- Mark your current age (or year) as the second point on the line. Now you have a framework: the past, the present, and the future.

### **Step 2: Structure Your Past**

- Please take some time to think and then tell about the most important events in your life before now. When did these events happen? Mark their time points on the lifeline.

### **Step 3: Structure Your Present**

- What are the most important parts of your life right now? Write them down as a column.
- Please rank these parts of life on three different scales (Use 1 as the greatest importance/time/level):
  - (a) personal importance
  - (b) time spent
  - (c) stress level

- Analyse your ranking: Do you devote enough time to your priorities (i.e., the most important areas)? How stressful are your priority areas? Why?

*Note: It is possible to use “pie-charts” here if the client finds it more comfortable than ranking.*

### **Step 4: Structure Your Future**

- Think and then tell about the most important events you wish for/expect in the future?
  - During your whole life. Mark them on the lifeline
  - During the next 10 years (a bit more detail)
  - During the next 5 years
  - During the next 3 years

- c. Analyse your internal/external barriers (interfering conditions/factors) to reaching your goals. Think about how to overcome them.
- d. Make an action plan to reach your goals. Think about how to best use the lessons you learned from your past experiences.
- C. From the future to the present (balancing present and future priorities):
  - a. Come back to your plans (wished for/expected events) for the next 3–5 years. Can you do anything today to prepare for the coming events/demands/challenges?
  - b. Do you still think that you have the right priorities right now? If not, try to adjust them to your future plans.

*Optional: Determine the date (year/milestone) of updating your career plan:*

Figure A5. The 5-step career planning strategy (Stambulova, 2010).

## Appendix B

### Self-Determination Theory

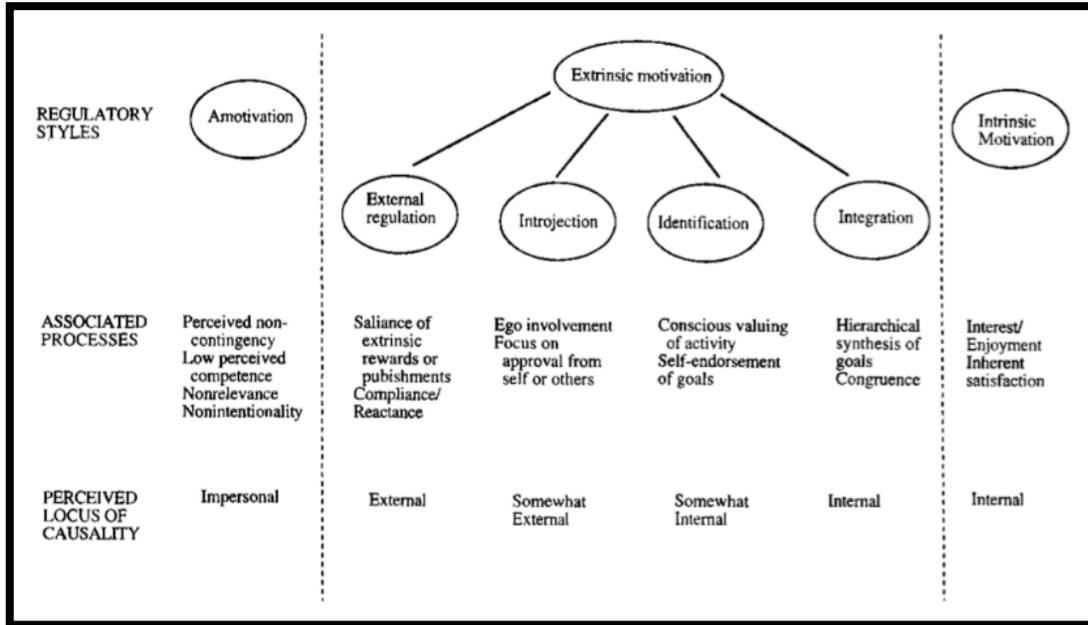


Figure B1. Self-determination continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

## VITA

Amber Renee was born in the Upper Ohio Valley where hard work, discipline, and family were core values that were ingrained in the area. Her mom and dad, Cindy and Doug, raised her, her younger sister, AshLee, and older brother, Kyle, in northeastern, Pennsylvania in the small town of Montrose. There, she grew up developing her faith, investing in her academics, raising and showing livestock across the northeast, playing soccer around the world, and helping out in the family McDonald's franchise business whenever possible. It is this diversity of life experiences that occurred before the age of 18 that Amber attributes her desire to connect with, positively impact, and "bridge the gap" between not only diverse groups but also between where one is today and where he or she desires to go.

Amber's hard work and commitment to good decisions during high school helped her achieve her goals of becoming Valedictorian and committing to a Division I college soccer program. She committed to the United States Naval Academy to play soccer during her senior year, but a torn ACL one month prior to Plebe Summer led her to play for the Notre Dame Fighting Irish. Her freshmen year, the team went undefeated in the regular season and were named National Champion runner-ups. Amber was eventually released due to her failure to recover properly from her previous injuries, and she struggled deeply with the transition out of elite sport. This struggle prompted her to invest tremendous amounts of time, energy, and attention to the development of Notre Dame Christian Athletes within the ND Athletic Department, an organization that still serves student-athletes today.

Amber graduated magna cum laude with her undergraduate degree from Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, the number 1 ranked business school in the country, where she also received honors for the number 1 business student in her graduating class as a

Management Consulting major. She also received a certificate in International Business and holds a minor in European Studies. Amber's undergraduate thesis was entitled, "El Camino de Santiago de Compostela: La peregrinación como un microcosmos de la vida (The Walk of St. James: Pilgrimage as a Microcosm of Life)," which was written on her experiences on the Camino de Santiago, which she completed following her study abroad experience in Toledo, Spain.

Upon graduating from Notre Dame, Amber worked for SPX Corporation, a Fortune 500 global manufacturing company where she served as a Human Resource Analyst. She worked in two of their corporate offices and three of their manufacturing plants across the country, and through her work in talent development, human resource management, and leadership development, she developed a desire to learn more about optimal human performance through the lens of sport and performance psychology.

Her master's degree is from the University of Denver in Sport and Performance Psychology, where her master's thesis was entitled, "Mental Toughness, Leadership, and American Football: Correlations in Division I College Football Players." In Denver, she worked as a mental performance consultant in an inner-city Denver public school where she built a comprehensive, integrated sport psychology and leadership development program within the athletic department and helped take the boys' varsity basketball program to their first state Championship in over 30 years. Her work served to break barriers of race, gender, and socioeconomic status, as sports and brain science became a mediator in her work with minority young men.

Amber worked on the world-class Mental Conditioning team at IMG Academy in Bradenton, FL, where youth to professional-level athletes, coaches, military, and business

people are trained in the high performance mindset. While there, Amber and the team trained over 16,000 athletes from ages 8-18 in mental conditioning, mental toughness, and vision training. Her work there inspired a deeper pursuit of human optimization and led her to pursue her PhD in Applied Sport Psychology at the University of Missouri under world-renowned sport psychology coach, Dr. Rick McGuire. She has an emphasis in positive psychology and the effect of brain functioning on performance. Her research and applied work revolve around human performance including leadership, mindset development, transitions, masculinity, and mental toughness. At Mizzou, Amber partnered with Dr. McGuire and Dr. Pat Ivey to develop the “McGuire-Ivey-Lattner Model of Mental Toughness,” which has been published in *Training and Conditioning Magazine* and presented at the annual Association for Applied Sport Psychology conference. Amber served as a graduate assistant under Dr. McGuire for the Missouri Institute for Positive Coaching, and today, still partners with him through Positive Coaching, Inc. where they train coaches in the Power of Positive Coaching and how to “Win Kids With Sport!”

Amber launched her own consulting company in 2012 where the entire mission is “Building Championship Mindsets.” She works to emphasize the power of Mindset and Leadership to drive lasting change on athletic teams, in businesses, and in individual lives. Amber’s dynamic and personalized approach to enhancing performance helps clarify vision, create championship team cultures, and achieve sustainable results. With her athletic, corporate, and academic training, Amber understands the mental toughness it takes to be successful in sport, in work, and in life. With an expertise in human performance and sport psychology, Amber challenges others’ current ways of thinking and helps unlock their personal potential for achievement. From the locker room to the boardroom, Amber provides

keynote speaking, group training, and consulting. Working with *the Lattner Performance Group* is all about “Building Championship Mindsets” in order to synergize people, purpose, and systems to drive performance excellence.

Amber currently resides in South Bend, IN where she serves on the South Bend Community School Corporation Athletic Advisory Board and as a mental performance consultant to Beacon Medical Group Sports Medicine and Sports Performance Center.