IOC Postgraduate Research Grant 2011

FINAL RESEARCH REPORT

Preparing Olympic Athletes for Lives Outside of Elite Sport:

Towards Best Practice

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30 December 2011

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the IOC Postgraduate Research Grant 2011 for supporting this project. We are further grateful to the participants of this study. Without their willingness to participate and openness to talk about their experiences as Olympic athletes and as persons after high-performance sport, this study could not have been conducted.

ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that Olympic performance requires an exceptional range of physical and psycho-social characteristics. Athletes must be determined, persistent, patient, and of course, develop extraordinary physical competencies. While one would assume that such characteristics would guarantee success in 'normal lives' beyond sport, research suggests that this is not always the case. While some athletes transit into other fields with few problems, others encounter difficulties adapting to different lives. Many experience forms of disorientation, depression and self-doubt.

While athletes train to become Olympians, they learn ways of valuing, understanding and doing. Socio-pedagogical research suggests that this learning is embodied and thus includes the construction of identity. Such *becoming* and *being* has implications beyond competition, as athletes will bring their embodied selves to the settings they enter after retirement. This study examines the tacit and unintentional learning that takes place in elite sporting contexts and how these kinds of learning become relevant outside of sport. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with recently retired Olympic athletes.

A reading of the participants' data based on socio-cultural learning theory reveals the dispositions the athletes developed and how these proved persistent or underwent reconstruction after sport. Key findings are: a) transitions require substantial learning and therefore effort; b) learning should be understood in terms of contextual productivity; c) unintentional learning inheres in sporting environments; and d) some aspects of sporting identities conflict, while some are consistent, with lives outside of sport. Sport pedagogues should thus reflect on learning in sport settings and consider how it relates to lives beyond sport.

Keywords: Olympic athletes, learning, embodiment, communities, retirement, transitions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The cases of the eight former Olympic athletes demonstrate diverse sporting worlds. Characteristics specific to the sporting communities shaped the athletes' learning. Athletes adapted to the environments in order to function *productively* (e.g., efficiently and successfully) within them. This adaptation meant the development of certain dispositions, which involved more than the acquisition of competencies and was a deep process that affected who the individuals became. Despite variation within and across sporting cultures, some features proved enduring. Cultural features that emerged in all cases included: competition and competitiveness; organization and discipline; sacrifice and submissiveness; independence; and perfection. The athletes did not always entirely agree with practices that were based on these features, nor did they always simply 'absorb' ideas that inhered in their sporting communities. Rather, they described processes of negotiation, where they invested in and resisted community values.

With respect to new lives, the data suggest that values embedded in sporting practices can be productive beyond sport. Two such useful dispositions included organization and persistence. At the same time, however, other ways of being proved less useful and all athletes identified elements of their dispositions that needed to be un-learnt or adjusted once they had left sport. Submissiveness and a perfection orientation, as well as competitiveness, were identified as particularly problematic. The nature of transition appeared to depend not only on the new sphere of activity the athletes entered after retirement, but also on how being and doing were practiced and experienced within the sporting communities they had been part of. Continued learning (and un-learning) was apparent and points to the pedagogic nature of elite sporting involvement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that elite sporting performance requires an exceptional range of physical and psycho-social characteristics. Athletes must be determined, persistent, patient, and of course, develop extraordinary physical talent. While one would assume that such characteristics would practically guarantee success in 'normal lives' beyond sport, research suggests that this is not always the case. While some athletes transit into other fields with few problems, others encounter difficulties adapting to different lives and many experience forms of disorientation, depression and self-doubt.

Learning and transitioning has received substantial attention from sport psychologists (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003). Recently, theorists have started to examine how transitions can be eased by furnishing athletes with non-sport-specific knowledge and skills (sometimes referred to as 'life skills') during their careers, as well as how these knowledge(s)/skills can be transferred to areas beyond sport (Andreu-Cabrera, 2010; Baker, Cobley & Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Bodey, Schaumleffel, Zakrajsek & Joseph, 2009; Gould, Collins, Lauer & Chung, 2007; Waldron, 2009). Such research suggests that elite sports involvement has relevance to activities outside of sport. Some theorists have for example, claimed that there is high potential for skill exchange between sport and business (Weinberg & McDermott, 2002; Westerbeek & Smith, 2005), with one commentator suggesting that, "the principles of elite performance in sport are easily transferrable to the business context" (Jones, 2002, p. 268).

It is worth thinking about why life skills and the ideas of acquisition and transfer in and through sport have proven persuasive. Transferrable life skills fit comfortably within traditional understandings of sport for a variety of reasons. First, the idea that sport prepares participants for life has a long history (Barker & Rossi, 2012; Theodoulides & Armour, 2001). Second, a focus on life skills corresponds with contemporary ways of understanding sport, whereby athletes acquire tools (Pawlucki, 2006; Reid, 2006). Within this perspective, psychological skills are conceptually analogous to physical ones and athletes may procure both as they progress through their careers (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). Third, the idea of life skill development is consistent with a transactional perspective where individuals invest in sport for a return. Again, this is a relatively typical view that is reflected in the ways that elite sport is organised (often professional where time and resources are traded for symbolic and material commodities), as well as in people's rationales for doing recreational sport (i.e. investment in return for health benefits – see for example Gard & Wright, 2005). Again, the idea that participation leads to the acquisition of 'assets' such as skills or fitness, is consistent

with broader arguments that relate to how sport is valued. Lastly, an increasing interest in life skills parallels current interest in holistic approaches to athletic development (Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2009; Potrac, Brewer, Jones, Armour & Hoff, 2000; Stuntz & Spearance, 2007). Coaches and sporting organisations are increasingly taking responsibility for athletes' lives beyond sport and offer programs to help their athletes once they finish (North & Lavallee, 2004).

The idea that involvement in elite sport equips individuals with tools for after their careers is based on broader notions of acquisition and transfer which, despite intuitive appeal, has received sustained critique (see for instance Hodkinson, 2005; Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2007, 2008b). Learning theorists in particular, have pointed to conceptual shortcomings of acquisition/transfer theories that propose that individuals learn generic skills in particular settings and then transfer them to other settings. In this project, we have used the critique of acquisition and transfer as a starting point to explore processes of learning in and through elite sport and transition away to other areas.

1.1. Research objectives and research questions

The broad purpose of this research was to address how learning in elite sport affects participation in lives beyond sport. The study had three specific *research objectives*:

- To present an alternative way of thinking about learning and career transitions based on a construction and reconstruction metaphor;
- To investigate elite sporting environments as sites of learning;
- To consider the movement and transition of athletes from sport to other spheres of activity.

The *research questions* that are connected to these objectives are:

- How does Olympic sport participation shape athletes during their athletic careers?
- How do athletes experience their move away from high-performance sport?
- How do athletes adjust to life outside of sport?

To answer these questions, in-depth semi-structured interviews with retired Olympic athletes were conducted. A cultural view of learning was adopted to analyse the data (see Methodology section).

1.2. Academic significance

The findings of this project contribute to existing academic knowledge on learning in and through sport, as well as transition away from sport to other areas of life. The findings contribute to existing knowledge in four key ways:

a) The results help theorists and practitioners of sport to *conceptualise learning* within the contexts of individual athletes' lives. This is not something that has been done and while current academic literature provides a small number of insights into life skill learning as a process (e.g. Gould & Carson, 2008a), we have almost no examples of how learning takes place within the lives of individual high-performance athletes (see Holt, Tamminen, Tink & Black, 2009, for an exception);

b) Although the topic of sport and life skills has received scholarly attention, few investigations have focused on Olympic athletes (Ungerleider, 1997). The research conducted in this project contributes to existing research by generating understandings of the learning processes of *athletes working at the highest level of sporting competition*. Such athletes make significant investments into sport. In this respect, the sample population has characteristics that differentiate from samples used in existing research;

c) By focusing on *former* Olympic athletes, the research has captured the athletes' retrospective perceptions of their sporting careers and their experiences after finishing these careers. While there is an abundance of career transition investigations that show the difficulties that some athletes face after terminating their careers and have offered strategies for adapting to new circumstances (Petlichkoff, 1994; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2003), these studies have not fore-grounded how athletes bring with them their embodied learning when they enter other settings after leaving competitive sport;

d) By examining individuals' biographies, the findings highlight *blind spots in athletes' careers* where opportunities for didactic activity are warranted. This is an important outcome since it not only provides direction for further research and possible intervention strategies, but helps coaches and practitioners provide athletes with holistic training. This enables those working with athletes to prepare them optimally for elite competition, as well as for life beyond sport.

Three publications have so far emerged from this project. They are:

Barker, D., Barker-Ruchti, N., Rynne S. & Lee, J. (in press) Olympians and Olympism: A pedagogically-oriented investigation of elite sporting communities. *Educational Review.*

Barker-Ruchti, N., Barker, D., Rynne S. & Lee, J. (submitted) 'One door closes, a next door opens up somewhere': The learning of one Olympic synchronised swimmer. Special issue 'Coaching for Performance - Realising the Olympic Dream' of *Reflective Practice. International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives.*

Barker, D., Barker-Ruchti, N., Rynne, S., & Lee, J. (submitted) Taking the person out of sports? A sociocultural examination of athletic career transitions. *Research Quarterly for Exercise Sport.*

At this stage, a book proposal has also been prepared (working title: 'Learning during and after elite sport: Career transition and identity reconstruction'), which will be submitted to two international publishers. The broad objectives of this book are to illustrate the kinds of tacit and unintentional learning that take place in elite sporting contexts and show how these kinds of learning become relevant in settings outside of sport.

1.3. Impact on Olympic Movement

Recognising the centrality of athletes' contributions to the Olympic movement, one of the roles of the International Olympic Committee is "to encourage and support the efforts of sports organisations and public authorities to provide for the social and professional future of athletes" (International Olympic Committee, 2007, p. 15). This project supports a holistic and humanistic approach to elite sport participation by supplying key understandings of how to guarantee the social and professional futures of Olympic/high-performance athletes. The understandings that emerged from this project relate to:

1. The different kinds of futures that athletes create, do not create, and would like to create;
2. The ways that the Olympic experience is or is not used to create futures; and
3. The roles of athletic communities in optimising learning and facilitating the transition process.

This project has identified factors that lead to such differences. These characteristics may be related to the athlete (for example, certain dispositions or biographical circumstances like socio-economic status) or the training environment (coaching strategies, culture of club, social status of sport), or both. The identification of these factors has allowed the researchers responsible for this project to develop recommendations for how organisations can increase efforts that facilitate learning and transfer and minimise factors that detract from it. These include the following key recommendations:

- **The embodied nature of learning**. This involves seeing learning as more than the acquisition of a set of competencies, but as a deep process that affects who people become;
- **The significance of sporting communities**. This means taking a socio-cultural approach to athlete development and seeing how learning can be facilitated (or obstructed) by the people around the athlete;
- **The importance of reflective distance from sport**. This involves seeing sport as an activity that is governed by a set of rules that do not necessarily correspond to the rules of other activities in society.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In what follows, literature relevant to Olympism, learning in and through sport and career transition is discussed. Research on Olympism is included as the findings of this study are related to this philosophy and the statements in the Olympic Charter (see 4.1. and 4.2.). Learning and career transition will be focused on in the sections 4.3. and 4.4.

2.1. Olympism

Pierre de Coubertin coined the term 'Olympism' in 1894. Since then, literally thousands of column inches have been devoted to describing, clarifying, and critiquing what can be loosely described as the Olympic philosophy (Földesi, 1992; de Coubertin, 2000; Binder, 2001; Bale & Krogh Christensen, 2004; Chatziefstathiou & Henry, 2007; Park, 2007; Patsantaras, 2008). It is not our intention to provide a review of these texts but instead to point out that despite sustained attention, many commentators have noted that delineating Olympism as philosophy is remarkably difficult (Segrave, 1988). Indeed, an unambiguous expression of Olympism is difficult to locate. The Olympic Charter, the site where one might expect to find a clear and detailed explanation of Olympism, is surprisingly imprecise. General terms like "peace", "development", "dignity", "mutual understanding", "fairplay", "solidarity", "effort", and "ethical principles" feature under the heading of "Fundamental Principles of Olympism" (International Olympic Committee, 2007, p. 11). The account though is far from explicit. One gets *a sense of* what Olympism stands for but certainly not specific ways that it might be applied or demonstrated.

There are a number of explanations for this abstractness. de Coubertin himself stated that Olympism is, "not a system, but a spiritual and moral attitude" (2000, p. 48). In this sense, he probably never intended Olympism to be reduced to a set of guidelines. In *Notes sur l'Education Publique* [Notes on Public Education] produced in 1901, he commented that, "if [principles] are presented as recommendations or commands, [participants] will ignore them completely" (2000, p. 150). Takacs (1992) points to internal inconsistency within expressions of the philosophy. He suggests for example, that the idea of infinite progress expressed in the motto 'citius, altius, fortius' contradicts other principles such as peace and the democratization of sport. Others have noted that Olympism was, and still is, eclectic in its design (DaCosta, 2006). While some guiding ideas persist, cultural circumstances and sporting practices have changed, inevitably having consequences for Olympism (Parry, 2006) – the idea that women can attain Olympian status being one fairly obvious example. Several

commentators have suggested that a further reason for imprecision is that the Olympic movement benefits from having loosely articulated and vague principles. Wamsley (2004) for example, contends that references to "dignity" and "harmonious development" function as a "metaphoric empty flask" (p. 232) that can be "filled" for political, economic, or educational ends. In his view, ambiguity is a political strategy used to garner political and financial support.

Although it may be general, abstract and eclectic, we are not inclined to view the Olympic philosophy as vacuous, at least not if it somehow comes to be reflected in practices. At this point, we would imagine that values like 'fairplay', 'solidarity' and 'effort' are 'lived' to various degrees, even if examples of anti-Olympist behaviour surface with relative frequency within Olympic contexts (Moller, 2004; Koss, 2011). And despite differences of opinion, we are willing to entertain the notion that people agree on the meaning of terms that appear in the Olympic Charter. Like DaCosta (2006), we think it is useful to think of Olympism as providing a *direction* rather than a roadmap.

Historically, the Olympic philosophy was to be learned *through* the physical. In his many writings, de Coubertin described goals like mastery over one's self and one's environment, achieving balance and harmony, and the display of courage and will power (see chapter two, de Coubertin 2000, for insight into his educational philosophy). The idea that social and moral learning can take place automatically through sport participation, though common in Victorian England (Mangan, 2000), has received serious critique in recent decades. Many educational theorists have argued this confidence in sport to deliver socio-moral outcomes reflects pedagogic idealism (Kirk, 1992; Talbot, 1997), and that desired learning will take place only with careful planning and adequate guidance (Hellison, 2003; Pühse, 2004). Paradoxically, contemporary educational thinking also suggests that learners are socialised through sport participation and that unintended learning takes place in various sporting contexts (see for example, Bain, 1990).

Although sport's educational capacity in the socio-moral realm has received attention (see Jones, 2005; Theodoulides, 2003; Theodoulides & Armour, 2001, for thoughtful discussions), consensus on if and how it might be realised has not been forthcoming. With specific reference to Olympism, a handful of theorists have examined the teaching and learning of Olympism in schools (Binder, 2001; Kohe, 2010), but few authors have considered how participants might experience the philosophy. Here, it is probably useful to note that as a global phenomenon, the Olympics influence an enormous number of people.

'Participants' can be thought of in a broad sense to comprise athletes, coaches, managers, and volunteers, not to mention spectators. That said, our concern here is with athletes and their immediate social environments. We are specifically interested in how Olympism comes to be reflected in the lived experiences of athletes. This process of cultural learning has escaped critical scrutiny (see Koss, 2011, for an exception) and yet seems particularly important since, as McNamee (2006) suggests, athletes are often expected to model 'principles of Olympism'.

2.2. Learning in and through sport

Research examining learning in and through sport has predominantly emerged from psychology. Within this perspective, scholars have focused on the learning of specific skills (often also called 'life skills') such as stress management (see for instance Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993), teamwork (see for instance Bloom & Stevens, 2004; Bloom, Stevens & Wickwire, 2003) and motivation (see for instance Naber, 2006). These skills have come to represent skills useful for and transferrable to lives outside of sport. A standardized, universal definition of 'life skills' does not exist, however, and several commentators have attempted to delineate the term. Danish and his colleagues (2004), for example, suggest that life skills enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school, home and in neighbourhoods. Life skills can be behavioural (communicating effectively with others) or cognitive (making effective decisions); interpersonal (being assertive) or intrapersonal (setting goals) (Danish, et al., 2004).

In a similar vein, Gould and Carson (2008) contend that life skills refer to "those personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred for use in non-sport settings" (p. 353). Jones and Lavallee's (2009b) work, however, shows the complexity of the term 'life skills'. In their investigation, athletes identified 64 different competencies that they believed constituted life skills. The question arises: With whose definition should we work?

The way that life skill learning takes place through sport constitutes a serious deficiency in the literature. Gould and Carson (2008a) note that the whole area of life skill development lacks theoretical explanations. They put forward a model that conceptualises the learning process but are quick to emphasise that the model is a starting point and has not been directly tested. Despite this absence, several factors have been linked with life skill

development. Some research suggests that programs must unambiguously focus on enhancing life skills (Hellison, 2003; Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish & Theodorakis, 2005) and that such skills cannot be thought to develop automatically. Others suggest that interactions with peers are particularly important (Holt, et al., 2009). Perhaps unsurprisingly, research also suggests that coaches play a significant role in the learning of life skills. To be effective, it is thought that coaches must develop life skills in a conscious and systematic manner (Bodey, et al., 2009). Recent work with coaches (Collins, Gould, Lauer & Yongchul, 2009; Gould, et al., 2007) indicates that exceptionally effective coaches do not see the teaching of life skills separate from performance enhancement strategies. Somewhat counter-intuitively, these coaches achieve high success rates while at the same time prioritising the personal development of players.

A number of investigators have adopted quasi-experimental designs to examine life skill interventions. Weiss and her colleagues (2007) for example, evaluated the First Tee Golf Life Skills program. They found several significant group differences with First Tee participants gaining higher scores for life skills transfer, general life skills experiences and psychosocial outcomes. They concluded that the program was having a positive impact on youths' life skills. Papacharisis and his fellow researchers (2005) examined an abridged version of the Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER) program with 11-year olds. Evidence suggested that the program resulted greater knowledge of life skills and constructive thinking about goal setting although the authors did not look specifically at transfer. Also examining the SUPER program, Brunelle, Danish, and Forneris (2007) demonstrated how an additional community service program can increase participants' empathy and social responsibility.

Yet, thinking about learning as acquisition and transfer is *metaphoric* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard, 1998). It is based on a metaphor of 'learner as vessel'. Learners 'fill up' with knowledge/skills in one context, perhaps at a formal educational institute like a university – in our case a sport setting – and then take these knowledge(s)/skills to other contexts where they put them to use. Knowledge(s)/skills comprise a kind of substance that is separate from both the context in which it is learned and the person who acquires it. Hager and Hodkinson (2009) argue that the conceptual disconnection of skills from context is crucial if different people are to be seen to learn skills in one situation and utilise them in another.

Goal setting skills acquired in a sport setting for instance, must be seen as universal and generic if they are to be considered applicable to other situations such as employment.

Significantly, this 'acquisition' thinking aligns with many traditional education and assessment practices (Beach, 1999). Indeed, Beckett and Hager (2002) contend that this has become the "standard paradigm of learning" (p. 98). A substantial problem however, is that acquisition and transfer thinking *fits poorly with experiences of transitions* (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009). Such theories do not illuminate for example, how or why people finish similar learning experiences with different sets of skills/knowledges. Nor do they explain how some educational experiences – and here we are thinking specifically of protracted educational experiences – result in changes that are much deeper and difficult to recognise than a set of skills. In these cases, a focus on skills frames learning too narrowly. Learning theorists have also pointed out that acquisition/transfer thinking ignores that very few transitions allow for skills to be directly transplanted (Beach, 1999). Transiting from one setting to another almost always requires adaptation or modification of skills/knowledge, meaning that the explanatory power of transfer theories often needs to be qualified or tempered.

2.3. Career transitions

Athletic career transitions have proven a compelling theme in recent times, mostly for sport psychologists. Difficulties experienced by athletes as they adjust to life after sport has resulted in an abundance of scholarship (Alfermann, Stamulova & Zemaityte, 2004; Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003; Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignieres, 2003a, 2003b). Despite research that suggests that transitions are rarely as traumatic as is commonly believed (Nagel, 2002), a large number of theorists have examined how transitions can be eased (M. Jones & Lavallee, 2009a; Lavallee & Andersen, 2000; Ogilvie, 1987; Perna, Zaichkowsky & Bocknek, 1996). Many have considered how athletes might be equipped with coping strategies and non-sport-specific skills – sometimes referred to as 'life skills' – during their careers (Baker, et al., 2009; Bodey, et al., 2009; Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993; Gould, et al., 2007; Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000; Waldron, 2009). Central assumptions of this research are that athletes can acquire resources during training and competition and that they can utilise or *transfer* these resources to situations beyond sport. Alfermann and Stamulova (2007) suggest for example that,

> An athlete's available resources are important. His or her ability to cope with the new situation (i.e., coping strategies and career planning after sports) and the social support system have great implications for adaptation. Athletes can use cognitive strategies, such as mental rehearsal of behavioural strategies in the future postcareer, or set goals for the postcareer. Anything that helps former athletes make plans for the future, pursue goals and be active is helpful. (p. 723).

In an instrumental manner, mental rehearsal and goal setting are seen to constitute *techniques* similar to stress management, teamwork and motivation and there is little wonder that theorists have claimed that there is high potential for skill exchange between sport and other areas (Weinberg & McDermott, 2002; Westerbeek & Smith, 2005).

Despite intuitive appeal and general acceptance, the ideas that underpin these claims have been questioned. As noted in the previous section, theorists have pointed to conceptual shortcomings of acquisition and transfer theories and have proposed different ways of thinking about transitions (Beach, 1999; Hager & Hodkinson, 2009). However, very little research on how athletes' learning relates to non-sport areas of life has actually emerged from this perspective. Fleuriel's and Vincent's (2009) study of one French rugby player's career-change difficulties, Carless' and Douglas' (2009) research on career transition in professional golf, as well as Brown's and Potrac's (2009) and Sparkes' (2000) research into identity disruption following premature retirement due to de-selection and illness, are attempts in explaining retirement experiences. These studies do not, however, examine processes of learning related to identity (re-)construction.

3. METHODOLOGY

Based on the critique of 'acquisition' metaphors of learning and notions of skill 'transfer' (see above), this project explores processes of learning and becoming, and transition. In what follows, the theoretical perspective and data collection and analysis methods we have adopted for this research are described.

3.1. Thinking about moving: A reconstruction approach to learning across boundaries

The theoretical framework we have adopted for this research reflects a corpus of literature that frames learning as *moving* and *becoming* (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004; Hodkinson, et al., 2007). Rather than seeing learning in terms of acquisition and transfer, this thinking is based on a reconstruction metaphor. Importantly, we do not present this theoretical impulse as a replacement for transfer thinking but like Sfard (1998), consider it complementary. It is generative in the sense that it provides a different way of looking at a phenomenon and at the same time provides new aspects for consideration.

Within this line of thought, learning is a matter of reconstructing oneself. From a reconstructionist perspective, individuals are considered members of social networks that are held together by social relationships (Hodkinson, et al., 2007). Learning is conceptualised as movement within a network. When individuals move within a network, their relationships to others change. In this sense, learning *is* moving *is* changing relationships. When people learn to be doctors for example, they move from student positions within a network of people (where they follow more experienced doctors' instructions and cannot diagnose patients) to doctor positions (where they might give instructions and diagnose patients). Learning constitutes a reconstruction of the relationships one has with those around them and a reconstruction of self.

Of course, learning to be a doctor requires learning about the body and medicine and techniques – what we might traditionally think of as knowledge and skills. A reconstructionist approach would not challenge this. It would however, mean seeing that these things are only part of learning to be a doctor. Reconstruction theories might draw attention to how doctors learn to speak in particular ways to other doctors, nurses or patients, dress in particular clothes, use certain kinds of handwriting, and approach shift work in a particular way. It might also draw attention to how one comes to believe that certain kinds of medicine are more effective than others – compare say, antibiotics with acupuncture. These kinds of learning are

necessary if one is to become a doctor, but remain out of focus in thinking that is exclusively acquisition and transfer oriented.

To capture the way an individual talks/acts/thinks/values as an analytic term, several commentators have drawn on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of disposition (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009; Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2008a). A disposition refers to how a person generally manages his or her relationships with others – they are, "deep seated orientations that strongly influence actions" (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009, p. 631). In this sense, dispositions become typical or habitual ways of relating to other people. A disposition contains how one holds one's self, how one dresses, how one talks, and what one values. Learning can involve changes to any element of one's disposition.

Dispositions may be deep seated but because people are part of multiple and shifting networks, they are not entirely fixed. Further, the positions that individuals take within networks are not only dependent on their dispositions, but also on the other people in those networks: individuals cannot simply adopt new positions; they need to be granted them. In this sense, learning is limited and facilitated by the people around an individual. This precept is related to expectations and again, there is conceptual lineage to Bourdieu. Granting of positions can be considered at a local level. Take for example a team member that is granted the position of team captain because she has played the most games – there is an expectation that not only can she do the job but that she deserves it. Expectations can also work at a cultural level. In some Western European and North American countries, it is expected for example, that East European and Russian coaches will be tough and successful in particular sports. Such expectations have consequences for these coaches if they move to Western Europe or North America in terms of what they do and the relationships they develop, regardless of whether they are tough and successful.

Here, we might make two additional points. One is that the metaphoric nature of movement and reconstruction should be kept in mind. One does not necessarily have to move geographically to a new network to become someone different. One can stay in the same place and develop new relationships and therefore a new position within the same network. Nor does a different network necessarily constitute a different set of social relations and therefore learn. An athlete could conceivably change the club he plays for, but find himself in the same position with the same kinds of relationships with team mates and administrative personnel, as he had at his former club. In this case, learning could not be considered to have taken place. A second point is that a sense of belonging is important, a point which is

emphasised by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) and is related to the recurring theme of communities in learning literature (Lave, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For an individual to learn, they must assume a position within a network by engaging with other members through communication and practices. If they do not, the possibility of becoming someone different within that group disappears.

These ideas have relevance to considerations of athlete career transitions and as we have suggested, a reconstruction approach to learning directs our attention to different aspects to a traditional acquisition and transfer perspective.

3.2. Methods of data production and analysis

In trying to understand the dispositions developed in and after elite sporting participation, we interviewed former Olympians. Interviewing allowed us to investigate the kinds of relationships the athletes developed and the practices that were commonplace in and out of elite sporting communities. The specific procedures for data production are described below.

Research design

The investigation was interpretive in nature (Silk, 2005) in that the goal was to understand how athletes describe themselves in different contexts. A multiple-case design (Yin, 2003) was employed where eight athletes were investigated and each individual athlete served as a unit of analysis. Like Yin (2003), we would contend that a case study approach is useful because it facilitates a focus on process as data and theory work together to provide a particular understanding of the transition process. Like most case study research, the value of the resulting arguments lies not in their statistical significance but in their 'social significance' (Gobo, 2004). By this, we mean that we are not relying on the number of cases to support the importance of our arguments, but on the insights they produce.

Sampling/recruitment

We wanted to interview individuals that had trained for and competed at the Olympics (winter or summer) since performance at this level could be expected to require substantial learning. We were especially interested in individuals that had retired. This focus was based on the assumption that these people would be in a position to reflect on their experiences and could therefore make a meaningful contribution (Stroh, 2000) to the discussion of transitions. As is sometimes the case with sampling, access played a significant role (Charmaz, 2005) and we

worked with individuals from our respective countries of residence who were willing to take part in the project.

Possible participants were identified through internet searches, but also information provided by National Olympic Committees. They were then contacted via email. They received information about the nature of the investigation and an invitation to take part in the project. It should be noted that this study received ethical clearance from two University ethics committees (The University of Queensland and Griffith University). Key to these clearances were the conditions of informed consent and ability to withdraw at any time. If the individuals chose to be involved, interviews were scheduled for times and places of the individuals' choices. Participants were informed that anonymity could not be guaranteed (given the specialised nature of their experiences) but that efforts would be made to make identification difficult. These efforts included using pseudonyms and minimising identifying information. Participants were provided with an opportunity to check material intended for publication and remove personal comments if they felt necessary.

Data production procedures

Two semi-structured interviews (Rapley, 2004) were held with each participant, with each lasting approximately 1.5 hours. Such interviews have been advanced as an appropriate strategy for investigating individuals' life worlds (Amis, 2005). The first interview covered topics relating to athletic career progression, learning and social relationships. The schedule included questions such as: "How did your sporting participation change over time?", "What did you need to learn in order to do well in the sport?", and "Who was important to you in your sporting context?" After the interviews had been transcribed, and in line with Alvesson and Skolberg's (2000) notion of reflexive methodology, the athletes were interviewed a second time using material from the first conversations as prompts. The subsequent interviews lasted approximately two hours. Some of the interviews were conducted using Skype (video conferencing system).

Analysis as practical activity

The interviews were transcribed using Edley's (2001) transcription notation. The authors considered the interview transcripts independently and mostly on a case to case basis. Once data was structured thematically, each theme was examined more closely. This involved multiple readings and note taking. Annotated transcript excerpts were developed into written

interpretations. Writing with and about the transcripts functioned as a method of inquiry (Richardson & Adams St Pierre, 2005).

Analysis also contained a collective element. Dialogue took place between the four researchers, facilitating reflection. Discussion centred on the nature and meaning of the participants' statements and led to alternative and more reflected ways of understanding the data. Importantly, collaboration was not used as a triangulation-type strategy to ensure convergent interpretations (Cresswell, 2003) but as a way to explore divergent and competing explanations.

3.3. Key information sources consulted for the project

The participants of this study provided the project with invaluable information. Their willingness and openness to talk about their sporting experiences and their lives after retirement form the basis of this project.

Interviewees

Key sources the researchers of this project consulted consisted mainly of the interviewees that took part in this study. The recruited sample of retired Olympians included individuals who competed for a European, Australasian, or North American country at either the Summer or Winter Olympic Games. The sport disciplines differed from individual to team, artistic to combat and traditional to trend sports. In what follows, short biographies of each participant are presented (the names given are pseudonyms):

Michael – individual winter sport: After 16 years, Michael retired from competing in his sport. In a sport that involves high levels of risk and where the margin for error is small, Michael excelled at an early age. For a number of years, he was the youngest member of a small semi-professional team. High expectations were placed upon him at the beginning of his career and he only enjoyed success on the international stage much later. A handful of team mates became good friends and one in particular helped Michael to develop. Since retirement, Michael has changed his country of residence, spent time looking after his small child while his wife finishes her studies, and started teaching physical education. Not only has he found himself in a new geographical and cultural situation, but one in which the demands placed upon him are very different. Although he believes his identity as Olympian has helped in his new employment, he has had to change the way he interacts with people. In some respects, having geographical distance from his old life has made his transition easier.

Jane – individual water sport: Jane showed promise as a young athlete. After an almost accidental foray into competitive sport, Jane tasted success and quickly came to imagine an international career. Jane described herself as the ultimate team player and became completely immersed in the 'squad' culture where athletes (including those she viewed as rivals) trained in teams with shared coaches. Jane said that in hindsight, this team mentality was to the detriment of her career in which she missed selection in four Olympics. It was not until she was dropped from the national squad due to poor performance that she gathered a personal team of coaches and professionals and began to understand her own training needs. It was after that point that Jane was selected for the Olympics. After the Games, Jane retired from elite competition and has since had a child and completed a higher education degree. She says that the confidence gained throughout her athletic career now helps her to juggle work, motherhood, and life's other challenges. Jane continues to compete and achieve moderate success despite little focus on training. She regrets being "young and dumb" in her early career and values the personal understanding of her own needs that she gained later in life. Jane would like to become a coach that understands the individual needs of young athletes.

Thomas – combat sport: Thomas finished competitive involvement after his third Olympic Games. He experienced many highs and lows during a career that spanned 22 years, describing a process of personal growth and development. Elite sport provided challenges that extended beyond the sporting world (participation meant for instance, sacrifice and financial strain). Members of his entourage provided crucial support during this career. Relationships with these members and the interactions that took place within these relationships consequently had marked influences on the way he came to see the world. Thomas had juggled different responsibilities while competing. These included working towards a bachelor's degree and doing educational work with children. Participation in other areas increased when competition stopped. Some of the dispositions required for sporting success proved useful in different settings. Thomas had found that being reflective and patient was, for example, valuable outside of the sport world. The egocentrism that he believed was absolutely essential for success however, was of little practical use. Becoming less "selfish" proved a challenging task. He commented in the context of his coaching role that learning that he could not bend children to his will was "probably one of the hardest things (he has) ever had to do".

Tania – artistic sport: Tania retired from her sport after participating in the Olympic Games twice. The time since retirement has involved a process of re-definition. Professional and

personal goals needed to be developed. Her employment as an assistant at an international company was critical in this regard. Tania's retirement also allowed her to reconnect with her family and friends. Tania's training experiences were significant in how she was shaped by the sport. She spent up to seven hours per day training, at times close to fainting. Her coaches were extremely tough and authoritarian. Tania's ability to steer her career was limited and she was pressured to continue training even when she wanted to retire. At the same time, Tania believed that her early move away from home to train with international coaches, as well as the constant struggle for financial means, helped her to become an independent, ingenious and self-confident person. Today, Tania suggests that she benefits from the confidence gained through her tough experiences. She also notes though that she tends to be submissive, which she regards problematic in her employment.

Monica – interceptive summer team sport: Monica's participation in her sport ended after her last Olympic Games participation. Her participation began in early childhood and she was competing at national level by the age of 12. Monica's international career began in her late teens and required her to leave home to train with the national squad. As a young novice, Monica's early career was shaped by bullying and having to navigate the hierarchy among players and coaches. By the end of her career, Monica had become a senior team member and had experienced a more positive shift in team relations. She came to thoroughly enjoy the team travel and camaraderie involved in an elite athletic career. During her Olympic sporting career, Monica completed a university degree and retained a focus on life after sport with encouragement from family and local level athlete development programs. She now runs a business where she feels that she can utilize her skills in physical, personal, and nutritional development. Monica's tenacity, personal strength, and commitment forged in her early athletic career continue to fuel her drive for success as a working, single-parent. She has enjoyed the opportunity to have more control over her life and re-focus on her family and those close to home after a long career of self-interest, travel, and a "managed" lifestyle.

Michelle – interceptive summer team sport: Michelle followed her mother and sister into her sport and has memories of spending weekends with her family at various tournaments in her home city. As her career progressed, Michelle became highly competent at recognizing what skills certain key personnel had (i.e. coaches) and how they could (and importantly could not) contribute to her performance. As a result, Michelle was extremely strategic in her engagement with certain members of her community. This was no doubt a result of, and a contributing factor to her longevity and success in the sport (3 Olympic Games and 3 Olympic

medals). Michelle was seemingly highly prepared for her exit from competitive sport. She had achieved success in her sport and exited on her terms (i.e. not deselected or chronically injured). She had also completed formal tertiary study qualifying her to be a teacher and she had strong and healthy relationships with her husband, parents and a former team mate who had retired a short time before her. Despite this, Michelle found herself debilitated through depression and anxiety. This required her to draw upon members of her community in new and different ways. In doing so, she has subsequently achieved high levels of success in her work and family life.

Zoe – individual summer sport: Zoe was an active child who grew up in a rural community. While she enjoyed a range of sports and play activities (she is a self-described 'tom-boy') she eventually settled on one sport. Her involvement in this sport came fairly late and was fostered through a school-based talent identification process. After almost missing the testing date, Zoe was eventually identified as having some potential and put into a special program of training and support. Her professional career spanned 13 years and included two Olympic and two Commonwealth Games. During that time, a number of coaches helped shape Zoe's development in sport. But despite her obvious passion and high achievement in her sport (including an Olympic gold medal), Zoe often struggled to find a comfortable position in the social fabric of competitive racing and representative teams. Her retirement brought a new set of challenges as Zoe set about trying to capitalize on her previous sporting success while moving away from competitive elite sport. Increasingly, she chose to draw on her formal business qualifications and a very select group of friends and family to develop a property portfolio and start her own coaching business.

Christian – individual summer sport: The family introduced Christian to a variety of sports. As a neighbor erected a home-made practicing facility in their backyard, Christian discovered that he was talented at and enjoyed jumping. At the age of 11, he entered a club and began training his sport. At the age of 15, he realized that he might be able to reach Olympic level. His father was keen for Christian to achieve, and in order to provide him with the best circumstances, he became his son's coach. Christian's career very much became a family affair, one that eventually allowed both son and father to attend the Olympic Games. Throughout his professional years, Christian mostly trained by himself, even without his father. As he was not integrated into a community, he thought he was influenced by only a handful of others. During his career spanning more than 20 years, Christian completed a bachelor's degree, met and married his wife and had a son. Today, Christian still trains

regularly and competes occasionally. He is further involved in his sport through sports organizational mandates, public speaking engagements and various sponsoring deals. He also still very much identifies himself as an athlete, and even admits that he cannot imagine himself being anything else.

Other sources

Other information sources that were collected for the project include scientific literature. Please see the bibliography at the end of this document for further information. In addition, Olympic documents (e.g. Olympic Charter) were downloaded. Lastly, websites, popular literature and documentaries were consulted in order to get to know the participants of this project.

4. RESULTS

The findings this research project has produced to date are presented in two blocks:

a) The Olympic sporting community; and
b) Learning in and through Olympic sport and transitioning away into other areas of life.

In both sections, direct quotes from the interviews are included. Each section is concluded with a discussion. We would like to mention here, however, that the space given in this report cannot give justice to the comprehensive and in-depth information the interviewees provided. Despite common patterns, providing an account of the subtleties of the learning experiences the eight study participants described would require a more expansive format.

4.1. The Olympic sporting community

The theoretical framework adopted directed the researchers' attention to the participants' sporting communities. In what follows, we show how *three* athletes trained and competed within their communities and how the members of these communities shaped the athletes' identities. We identify key attitudes, dispositions and practices that the athletes believed were necessary for 'expert participation' in their sports and describe how these features came to make sense in different settings. In the discussion, we consider the significance of the empirical material to Olympism and high-performance sport settings as communities.

Case One: Thomas – Combat sport

Thomas described an active childhood, taking part in many organised sports. At 12, he wanted to concentrate on the combat sport and give up his other activities but his parents convinced him to wait until he was 15. He had already shown a certain aptitude in the combat sport and during adolescence, he began training with adults and competing in regional and national tournaments. He achieved a placing at his first national tournament, an event that allowed him to take part in international competitions. Thomas eventually attended three Olympic Games experiencing a 'shock defeat' in the first round of competition at the second Olympics where he was expected to place. In his final Olympics, he won a medal and indicated that this enabled him to finish his career "at peace" with himself.

A number of people comprised what Thomas referred to as his "entourage" – people that could be considered members of his Olympic community. According to Thomas, his parents were important. He worked closely with a national coach and a club coach. A small

group of medical professionals including two doctors, a physiotherapist, a nutritionist, and a physiotherapist provided not only medical advice but also emotional guidance. Thomas had three close friends who were also involved in the combat sport and whom he described as influential. He also had a friend that worked voluntarily as his manager.

Thomas emphasised that achieving success in increments and foregoing 'instant gratification' was a significant feature of learning to be an expert. He cited interactions with his club coach and his parents as critical in this area. His club coach worked from the premise that technique development should take precedence over winning at the start of an athletic career. In practice, this meant that Thomas lost matches and missed medals during his teenage years. The scope of this challenge was especially evident in the following account:

> I was always losing against the kids from that club there [in Shelby]. And I told my dad, "Listen, I want to go to the Shelby [combat] club because I'm always number two, number three or number four but they are always number one. I always lose against them". And then he told me, "No. You don't go there. I don't allow you to go there. You still go to your coach"… And I'm glad that my dad took this decision because all my opponents at that age which were beating me, they all stopped [the combat sport]. Because this club is pushing young kids during two, three years, and they are so fed up afterwards that they retire. And actually, my coach was just doing the opposite. Trying to give the pleasure working on the technique, to give the pleasure to find out that you get better every day.

Another recurring feature related to being an expert was achieving distance from the sporting world. This distance was developed in various settings and with different people. Conversations with medical practitioners were useful as he was able to see the perspectives of people who were not 'living' the combat sport. Reflecting on the sport culture, Thomas acknowledged that it was important to "be a strong man", "to be hard", "not to cry or show fear". Still, he maintained that competitive success requires perspective and distances. If such distance could not be achieve, so Thomas, the pressure would simply become too great.

His unexpected loss constituted a critical incident, however his account suggested that the following months were formative. They allowed him to reflect on the importance he placed on sporting success and the consequences it had for his view of himself. He recounted how, in the lead up to his final Olympics, he realised that this value system could be destructive:

> What happens if you fight and you lose and you don't have the recognition? You commit suicide or what? You have to find something else.

Although Thomas did not use the term paradox, he described how the sporting culture encouraged athletes to focus on medals, money and success, and yet to be really successful over time he maintained that you have to "be free" and break away from these values. His account of Russian combat athletes was illustrative. He commented that, although he was similar to these athletes,

> I was a bit more free. Because for them it's really a question of death or life, almost, which was not my case. And you were able to…you saw it on their face… they want to kill you, they want to destroy you, because they want to get the money, they want to win. You see it, and at the beginning you are a bit impressed. But after a while, actually, it's a weakness of them, they show a weakness. Because that shows they depend on this, and that gives actually more motivation to beat them. So it's a weakness, but it takes time that you understand that it's a weakness of them.

What enables someone to become an expert then, according to Thomas, was freedom. This was because passion and joy for sport – necessary ingredients for expert Olympic participation in Thomas's view – only come with freedom from elements of the sporting culture.

A final 'way of being' was what Thomas referred to as a "fighting spirit". This appeared to be extremely important and Thomas explained at length how this needed to be embodied if one was to become an expert. The fighting spirit went beyond determination and giving everything (although these features were certainly part of the fighting spirit). Thomas used the phrase being "rude" and related the idea to egotism:

> We miss a bit this rudeness… Sport is like this…when you do competition sport, you think about you, what I'm gonna do to beat my opponent. That's it. You have to think like that. If you quit and you retire from sport, you can't only think like this and you are not alone anymore, and it's not only going on success or that you win. You are living with other people and you have to socialize or whatever. It's a bit more complex.

Indeed, Thomas has found that since his retirement, there are few times when he needs to think only of himself. When he is coaching for example, he cannot simply concentrate on what he wants and how he can get it. He must consider his junior athletes and their needs and

sometimes these are very different from his own. In essence, the way he learned to interact and participate with others as an athlete contradicts the demands of his current setting. From this perspective, Thomas's experience effectively highlights the situatedness of his learning.

Case Two: Tania – Artistic sport

Tania began her sport at the age of nine. During her first interview, she recounted how she had grown bored with ballet and track and field and said that she wanted to do a more intense activity. She chose an artistic sport and began training once per week for between two and three hours. From the age of ten, she trained three to four times per week. Tania described how at first, her parents struggled to accept her "commitment" but they eventually understood that she enjoyed this relatively intense participation. Her parents stipulated, Tania remembered, that she could participate as long as she made her own way to training (a train ride to the next village) and maintained her school performance.

As a teenager, Tania achieved various national titles and quickly moved from national development to junior and senior teams. She competed at a number of international competitions, including European and World Championships, and two Olympic Games. Nationally, Tania frequently held the top ranking and internationally, she consistently placed within the top ten. During her account, Tania stressed that she received little financial support and paid her own costs.

A number of individuals formed Tania's setting. From the age of 17, she lived away from home so that she could train with two national coaches. Tania described these coaches, both from the former Soviet Union, as extremely tough and authoritarian. Other influential members of her community were Tania's team partners. During the preparation for her second Olympic Games, she lived together with her team partner. She recounted how they used to laugh about their closeness, describing it as more intimate than a romantic relationship. Finally, medical specialists, physiotherapists and two club officials were significant members of her setting.

Tania maintained that self-subordination was essential for success in her sport. She linked it with 'functioning':

> That was very important, that you can simply function, in all situations and moments of your life. To ignore your needs, to accept critique and to deal with that critique.

Tania suggested that submitting to others and suppressing personal needs were necessary during training and competitions. While some team members spoke out when they felt that something was wrong, Tania said that she:

> Simply submitted. Because I knew, if I wanted to achieve my goal, I had to submit.

Tania said that even at the time, she felt that her submission was problematic and "put her in difficult situations". She agreed, for instance, to continue her Olympic preparation with her team partner despite illness and desperately wanting to retire. In retrospect, Tania expressed satisfaction at having 'stuck it out' for her partner but realised that she had subverted her own needs and desires. Although Tania had achieved her sporting goals, she questioned whether her prolonged career had been worth her while.

Subordination also involved stretching physical and emotional limits. When asked about her training, Tania described it as:

> Inhumane ... every now and then, someone had to carry me out because I was so finished. To push yourself to this limit, that requires a lot of will. And that wasn't nice, actually ... we always had to train until we almost fainted.

She referred to several situations in which she was pushed to her limits. She described how during a training camp in Asia, she became sick:

> I must have eaten something bad and I had something intestinal and they sent me to see a doctor. He said, "Yes, it's completely normal that you have diarrhoea" and I said, "No, it's something else". And then he gave me Imodium and I trained with this, but always also a sip of brandy, a sip of coke and that was all that I could eat. And my coach said, "You train, you stay", because we had to prepare for the Olympics. And then later, I called the Olympic doctor at home and he gave me antibiotics and things got better. But it was one week, completely at my limit and I had to keep going and that was very tough.

Tania not only became 'expert' in dealing with physical hardship. Her precarious financial situation throughout her Olympic career meant that she became accustomed to psychological hardship. The circumstances surrounding the training camp in Asia were illustrative.

> We went there right after Christmas and I thought 'Okay. I have absolutely no money. I'm away for three weeks, I come back and I don't know how to pay my bills'. I was totally at my limits even then... When I talked to my coach, she insisted that I travel to

> the camp, even though I said I don't know how to finance my life. And she said, "Yes, you come, we have to train, we will find a solution". And then I got sick and everything came to a head, the entire situation of coming home, no money, receiving payment reminders…

At the same time, Tania maintained that the physical and emotional challenges that she endured allowed her to develop ingenuity. She began to ask businesses for financial support. Pushing limits, Tania argued, made her believe that she could always find a solution. Her efforts, while intimately linked with hardship, made her optimistic:

> And somehow, those are moments when you realise, 'Okay, I have to do this on my own. You have to take care of this, you have to get it sorted. It doesn't matter how. And yes, you learn to deal with that somehow, and I learned to deal with problems and to find a solution. It didn't matter how, when or where. There's always a solution for everything.

Although Tania would like to have avoided constantly working at her limits, she stated that optimism had developed from having to manage these difficulties. She felt that it gave her a basic trust in herself and a confidence that she could handle any situation.

Case Three: Michelle –team sport

Like the previous two athletes, Michelle recalled an extremely active childhood. While she enjoyed a number of these sports, she excelled early in the sport she eventually focused on. Micelle began representing her city at the age of 11, being on average two years younger than her teammates. This became a recurring feature of her participation and she was typically the youngest athlete selected for junior representation. She became immersed in the sport quickly and represented her country for the first time at the age of 16.

Michelle's escalating involvement in the sport was facilitated by a number of key people. She met a small group of athletes while playing in representative teams and they she ended up being teammates in various Olympic campaigns. Michelle identified several coaches that were instrumental in her development as a player and who were strong contributors (not always in positive ways) to her Olympic experiences. Team support personnel (e.g. strength and conditioning, sports psychology) were referred to as an important part of her community regarding her development in the lead up to, during and after her Olympic involvement. Finally, Michelle cited the impact of her parents and later, her husband and spoke highly of their contributions to her sporting endeavours.

As her participation changed from social- to performance-focussed, Michelle spoke of the increasing training and travelling commitments involved in her sport. Rather than a sacrifice, Michelle framed increasing participation in positive terms:

> Yeah I love travelling. We'd go overseas three or four times a year most years so that's very cool. I love that part of being an athlete.

She also articulated a passion for training and expressed an enthusiasm for being involved:

> I almost loved it more than playing… sometimes you wouldn't get a ball in a game. So I love training.

A theme that Michelle emphasised when referring to her achievement was the need for purposeful effort. She was very clear that it was not enough to just train. Rather for her, there was a need to "make training purposeful". While she credited some part of this approach to goal setting activities she had done with elite sport academies, this insight was primarily distilled from watching fellow athletes who,

> Would get up at five o'clock, go to the gym, go to training, go to work, come back to training, six days a week and never get anywhere.

For the majority of her career, the importance of purposeful effort was about personal improvement. As she matured and became a more senior member of the national team it was about setting a standard because as she put it,

> When you make the national team or you make the Olympic teams, everyone has to be a leader.

In her junior years, Michelle could not identify why she was being selected in representative teams. As she progressed in her playing career however, she gained confidence and became increasingly aware of what she needed from those around her – particularly her coaches. In her second Olympic Games she became disappointed that her coach did not understand how to get the best from her. Her frustration was compounded by her view that it was the coach's job to do this. In her third Olympics (and with her third Olympic coach) she took a more active approach:

> I think it was my best, the best 'me' I could ever be in that period of time because I just said to that coach ... "This is who I am, this is what I need, this is what I need you tell me, this is what I'm feeling when I'm playing bad, this is what…" I just spelled it out and we were awesome. He was awesome for me but it's like I almost showed him.

Michelle attributed much of this active attitude to having limited success with previous coaches and the knowledge that it was likely to be her final Olympics. However, Michelle's concern for her body was also an important factor in shaping her approach. She commented that she could not rely on coaches to know what was best for her, suggesting that she started to become more responsible:

> I'd had five surgeries by then ... So you just can't do that anymore. So train less in some things, train differently in others. I had to be okay with it.

While Michelle appeared to gradually take control of her sporting experience, her attitude to elite sport also shifted. On a number of occasions she noted that even at the Olympic level "it's just a game". Michelle referred to a kind of epiphany while at an international competition:

> We were in Holland. It was midnight, one degree [Celcius]. I just remember standing there giggling. It was freezing and we were playing a game – the same game that these other random people that I don't even know are playing and they're on the other side of the world. Here we are playing a game. It's just a game.

Although she presented a self that was easily accepted in her sporting community (highly driven, extremely competitive, and talented-but-modest), she developed a view of elite sport was at odds to her coaches' views. Indeed, at one point she indicated that, "The coaches don't like it when I say that it's just a game... probably won't mention that again".

4.2. Discussion I: The Olympic sporting community

We would like to consider the implications of the findings for Olympism as a community of practice. Specifically, we focus on parallels and tensions that emerged between sporting practices and the kind of learning that the Olympic Charter prescribes. In this study, focus was primarily placed on the following aspects of the first fundamental principle of Olympism: (1) "exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind"; (2) creating "a way of life based on the joy of effort"; and (3) "respect for universal fundamental ethical principles" (International Olympic Committee, 2011, p. 10). Although we focus on three aspects, we would suggest that our arguments are relevant to a broader consideration of Olympism and can be used to stimulate further discussion.

We will begin by commenting that, as previously noted (Parry, 2006; Segrave, 1988), the language of the Charter's statements is imprecise. Despite ambiguity, one can draw parallels between the first aspect above and the commentaries provided by the participants. The need to be determined and to train at physical and emotional limits was a recurring theme in the participants' explanations. In this respect, their accounts could be seen to reflect a central aspect of Olympism. At the same time, narratives of emotional subordination, self-centeredness and repeated injury also emerged. These features implied imbalance and contradict the tenor of the statement, regardless of the vagueness of the language. One might argue that these events constitute anomalies or alternatively that they somehow call into question the relevance of the Charter to the 'real' experiences of athletes. We disagree with both positions and if we consider Olympism more broadly, we can reconcile this apparent discrepancy. References to imbalance and excess align with the Olympics' assignment of infinite progress and its motto "citius, altius, fortius". From this perspective, the contradictory nature of athletic experiences can be seen to reflect the inconsistent nature of Olympism itself (see Takacs, 1992). Just as the Charter simultaneously contains balance *and* excess, so too do athletes' experiences.

Making this conflict explicit in official documentation would probably help to avoid confusion and criticism. We would argue that tensions are not inherently problematic at the level of practice either, if they are made overt. In fact, as far as an Olympic education is concerned, this kind of incongruity could be extraordinarily generative. The data suggest that finding balance and moderation while achieving feats of extreme difficulty represents an enduring challenge that shapes athletes' environments. Attention to how one negotiates these competing discourses could form an important part of an alternative Olympic pedagogy. Importantly, this would not be done by adhering to a traditional view of learning through sport where learning is seen to take place by default (Jones, 2005; Theodoulides & Armour, 2001). Rather, learning (and coaching) could take place in a reflective manner with attention to the cultural dimensions of settings (Kirk & Kinchin, 2003) and the role of significant others (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

We might add here that the participants in this investigation were successful and reflective and had managed to negotiate the contradictions inherent in their cultures – Michelle and Thomas's distance from their sporting cultures serve as illustrations. Still, this appeared to have been the result of good fortune rather than good planning. Both Michelle and Thomas explained how developing distance had meant *challenging* the practices of their

communities. We are suggesting that reflection constitutes an accepted part of sporting cultures. As an additional note, we might well ask how many athletes finish careers without making it to the Olympics and without the ability to reflect on the contradictory nature of elite level sport.

With respect to the second aspect of the Charter's statement, there is no doubt that Olympic performance requires effort. Whether individuals learn to take joy from this effort is less clear, especially if effort is not associated with success. Thomas's account showed how despite attempts by his coach to teach him to enjoy training, prizes and recognition were important. While he indicated that he had learned to value effort and that passion and joy were crucial, he still pointed out that had he not won an Olympic medal, he probably would not have been satisfied with his athletic career. Pleasure featured in Michelle's accounts and one gets a sense that she learned to value effort from a young age. Of the three participants, Thomas made probably the most reference to effort but the least to joy. For Thomas, adjectives like "inhumane" countered any suggestion that the substantial investment he made was joyous. Somewhat ironically, Thomas still attached importance to effort even though he could not take enjoyment from it.

All three cases draw attention to the complexity of ideas like 'effort' and 'joy' in Olympic experiences and encourage us to question the at times one-dimensional nature of statements espoused by de Coubertin (2000) and the Olympic Charter. They illustrate how principles that relate to recognition and domination, for example, become embedded in athletes' frameworks of meaning without being part of the official Olympic mandate and possibly without even being part of the training intended by coaches. In this respect, the cases support critiques of sport's positive educational capacity (Kirk, 1992; Talbot, 1997) and remind us that ignoring implicit learning that takes place during participation is both idealistic and risky.

Finally, the participants' comments are relevant to a consideration of ethical aspects of learning through Olympic participation. The Charter makes references to moral behaviour in phrases like "fair play" and "human dignity" (International Olympic Committee, p. 11). These concepts are expounded in the IOC's (2009) "Code of Ethics". With the exception of allusions to doping and abuse, the Code has a clearer focus on the conduct of Olympic "parties" – "the IOC and each of its members, the cities wishing to organise the Olympic Games, the organising committees of the Olympic Games, and the National Olympic Committees" (International Olympic Committee, 2009, p. 83) – than it does on the conduct of athletes.

Ethics have been a focus of educational materials produced by the IOC (see for example, International Olympic Committee, 2007) but here intended audiences have been school children.

The seeming lack of concern for athletes' conduct may account for the recurrence of anti-Olympic behaviour (Moller, 2004; Koss, 2011) but again, this would be a simplistic argument to make. While the participants in this project did not claim to have engaged in un-ethical practices neither did they make claims to especially ethical behaviour. It would be difficult in our view to argue that Olympic participation had produced individuals that were ethically superior to people that have worked as plumbers or lawyers for instance, or that they should be held up as moral role models (McNamee, 2006). Our analysis suggested that the participants' behaviours were guided by the accepted practices of the communities in which they worked. What was 'appropriate' was negotiated and determined by the members of the group in their everyday interactions.

This result has pedagogical implications because it emphasises the importance of commonplace, routine actions such as comments and gestures. The result suggests that these too, shape how things should be done and hence have an ethical dimension. The result also however, challenges the notion universalism. The empirical material suggests that rather than being led by universal principles, learning is likely to be context-specific and driven by perceived consequences. To paraphrase Thomas, 'it's not what he wanted to do but it got him to the Olympics'. In this light, ethics education for athletes should provide not statements of abstract principles but ideas and examples for how practices can be discussed, challenged or changed. This kind of focus would involve all members of communities because, as we have suggested, all members act and are hence responsible for emerging cultures. This type of approach would appear to fit the democratic approach that the Charter advocates.

4.3. Learning in and through, and transitioning away from Olympic sport

In this section, we focus on the transitioning *three* athletes underwent and experienced when they retired from high-performance sport. We focus on elements of dispositions the three former athletes adopted and appeared significant within the participants' own accounts. The orientations presented are consequently ones to which the participants attached importance. In saying this, the descriptions that appear below constitute our interpretations since we have chosen what text to include and how to present it. Each individual discussed a range of

dispositional elements and we have attempted to present orientations that appeared to cause tensions across transitions and orientations that did not. It is not our intention to advance an assessment of the dispositions developed in sport. At the same time, the accounts encourage to think about the kinds of orientations elite sport participation creates and the consequences learning has for after sport.

Thomas - combat sport

For Thomas, a key element of becoming an elite sportsperson was learning to be egotistic or selfish. He explained how this did not come naturally to most people, and believed it was something that an athlete must learn to perform well:

> Sport is like this: when you do competition sport, you think about you, what I'm going to do to beat my opponent. That's it. You have to think like that.

He described how getting your own way was essential, using the metaphor of making your voice heard over others. This self-centredness was supported by the relationships within his sporting network. Thomas had an extensive "entourage" that (sometimes voluntarily) invested vast amounts of time and money into his performance. He commented that if he wanted advice or support of any kind, he knew where he could get it. While it is difficult to say with certainty, this self-centredness seemed to be related to Thomas's difficulty finding training partners in the latter stages of his career.

The relevance of egotism in his approach to practices and relationships after sport was evident in Thomas's interview. He did not see coaching as a long-term career option because it involved too much personal sacrifice. Despite knowledge, contacts and opportunities, he was not prepared to move from an athlete position to a full coaching position because of what the latter involved (substantial amounts of time in gyms, travelling to competitions), especially as he felt that his athletes' chances of success were slim. At the same time, his account of transitioning to part-time coach revealed a process of adaptation where he had learned to approach relationships less egotistically. During coaching activities, there were times when his charges did not want to train as he wanted and he had to consider their needs. Thomas explained that there was a difference between being an elite sportsperson and being a person:

> If you quit and you retire from sport, you can't only think like this and you are not alone anymore, and it's not only going on success or that you win. You are living with other people and you have to socialize or whatever. It's a bit more complex.

Still, reconstructing himself and his relationships was extremely difficult and it is significant that he referred to compromise as the "hardest thing [he had] ever had to do".

Thomas's commentary on the purpose of sport connected to a second dispositional element which concerned reflective distance. Thomas recounted how the combat sport culture revolved around competing for recognition. He maintained however, that distancing oneself from that culture was crucial if one is to be successful:

> If you want to be good and you want to be free, you have to take a distance from this. Otherwise you are in this world. Then you have the pressure. Maybe it works. You can win one time, two times. But one day it gets you. And that's one part of it that got me at the [second] Olympic Games… What happens if you fight and you lose and you don't have the recognition? You commit suicide or what? You have to find something else.

It is not difficult to see how contemporary sports privilege rewards. Less evident is how a reflective disposition can be developed against the dominant culture. Thomas's unexpected loss at his second Olympics constituted a critical incident and his account suggested that it effectively forced him to reflect on the importance he placed on sporting success and his view of himself. Thomas's commentary also suggested that practically all members of his community encouraged him to take a long term approach to achievement. One influential coach urged him to take pleasure from training and personal improvement and not focus on medals or what other athletes were doing.

Issues of recognition and reward emerged in Thomas's account of transition. He stated for example, that when he finished his athletic career he received job offers and could have accepted what he considered a reasonable salary immediately after his retirement. Instead, he chose to complete his studies. The propensity to look past rewards however, was not consistently represented throughout his account and Thomas's comments reflected not so much a rejection of material rewards as a willingness to wait for them. Indeed, monetary remunerations did seem to be important and he foregrounded payment for his services on several occasions. Further and by his own admission, Thomas was not sure whether he would have been satisfied with his Olympic performances had he not won a medal.

Tania - artistic sport

Tania maintained that putting herself in a position in which she was controlled by others (what she called "self-subordination") was key to becoming an Olympic artistic athlete. She

suggested that ignoring one's needs was critical for success in elite sport. As she said, she had to submit because it was necessary to 'function'. There were a number of practices in her sporting context that encouraged this orientation. Several coaches used authoritarian training styles that involved physical and verbal abuse and encouraged conformity. For much of her career it appeared to be a case of submit or drop out. In one instance, she left her club but not the sport. For Tania, selection processes lacked transparency. She stated she had little control over whether she was picked and agency in her athlete position was further undermined. She also had team mates that were dependent on her. This meant that personal choices were rarely entirely personal – they would have consequences for others. Sacrifice for the good of the team was the norm. Finally, submission took on a physical dimension. As we have seen earlier, Tania described her training as inhumane. She said that even at the time, she felt that her tendency to "function like a soldier" was destructive and "put her in difficult situations". Perhaps not surprisingly, her submissive orientation proved problematic beyond the sporting environment. She recounted how when she first started to work she was prepared to accept whatever tasks her boss gave her and felt that she had to prove that she could do the job:

> Someone could say: "hey, you do that!" and then I was "rrr" and did it. I didn't think about it that much.

Gradually though, she adopted a new position and a new set of relationships in her employment. She said:

> What I definitely took with me that is something I still think of today: 'You have to stop subordinating yourself.' And that's difficult to really achieve. I still carry that in me. And it takes a while until I get rid of it or just realise: 'You don't have to do it, why are you doing this?' you know. So now I question things. But [in the artistic sport], to question things wasn't good.

In her current employment, Tania no longer feels that she needs to prove anything. She commented that she did not have to stay with her employer and that she would leave if she felt it necessary. In this respect, her account suggests that she has taken a degree of control over her situation. In fact, Tania maintained that this was something that separated her from a number of her colleagues who she said would complain about work but never leave.

Tania also suggested that she had learned to be flexible and positive. This seems somewhat hard to reconcile with the notion of submission but her explanation has logic. She described how throughout her career, she not only needed to deal with tough training regimes

but also to find ways to make things work. Training venues were not always available and she needed to travel. Tania had little money and financial strain was a central feature of her elite sporting experience. She said for example:

> If you have to ring up an insurance [company] to say: 'I'm sorry, but I can't pay the bills because I don't have any money' and you're 17 or 18, that's not much fun. But there's always a way and that applied to every other area as well... I think that hopefully I will be able to keep that for the rest of my life...

Becoming flexible and positive has also had consequences in life beyond sport. After sporting retirement, she travelled abroad where she knew few people and did not have a job. She finished a diploma and indicated that she believed she could "manage a degree". This appeared particularly significant to Tania and she noted that, as a child, her parents had never discussed the possibility of attending university.

Michelle - team sport

Like some of the other athletes, Michelle remarked that she had always managed to keep sport in perspective. She said that her coaches did not like it when she said "it's just a game". Somewhat paradoxically, of the athletes in the study, she experienced tensions during transition most acutely. She suffered from depression and anxiety for more than a year, describing her condition as "debilitating". She indicated that her transition from sportsperson within a sporting network to teacher within a primary school was especially difficult.

Aspects of Michelle's disposition emerged in her explanation of her career and her transition. She stated that a perfectionist approach was critical for her own success in sport. She said that she:

> …loved perfecting intricate skills. It never bored me. I loved that. Just by the end it was...you're trying to tweak the smallest little thing and I really enjoyed that.

Attention to detail was embedded in the sport's practices ranging from physical and technical training to the selection of materials to corporeal monitoring. Combined, these practices contributed to a particular orientation in which small details mattered and every action counted. Michelle explained that,

> In [my sport] you would be training for some intricate little skill that you want to improve or perfect and you had constant goals and you had constant reassurances that you were doing the right thing.

This comment is particularly illustrative because it shows that what she liked about perfection was: (1) that efforts are recognised by those around her and; (2) that it is clear what should be done. These were recurring features in both Michelle's interviews. By her third Olympics, Michelle was even clearer about the nature of recognition and direction she needed. When discussing her interactions with her third Olympic coach she recalled:

> I don't care if I'm needy – tell me I'm shit hot if that's going to make me play better.

Her employment setting post-retirement was significantly different from sport and thus necessitated substantial learning. Reflecting on her work as a primary school teacher she said,

> I went to teaching and there's no feedback really … I had no measure of how I was going or was I going in the right direction or, of course as an athlete you have very high expectations, so I want to know that it's going to be there in a fast manner. I kind of thought, I was overwhelmed by the fact that this wasn't true anymore.

It was not the possibility for achieving perfection that was missing but the feedback and assurance that she was doing the 'right thing'. At school, the absence of success markers (compared the measurement culture that characterised her sport) led to a profound kind of confusion where she could not live her perfectionist orientation. It is noteworthy that she said that what was once true had become false. In sport, she could get clear, direct answers. In teaching, no-one told her how to do things or how to be successful. Moreover, unlike the clear goal of the Olympics, towards which her sporting progress could be meticulously planned, there was no single end point towards which her efforts could be directed in teaching.

A second aspect that emerged was preparedness to work and wait – what Michelle referred to as "doing the time". This involved not expecting things to come quickly and also accepting that things do not always run how you want them to. Michelle spoke of younger players who sometimes got upset when they did not have immediate success and recalled instances where she had done the same. She also referred to experienced players that would accept failure quietly who she came to admire. This is how she felt she was at the end of her career – "just much more mature and much more at ease and at peace with the whole thing".

This orientation was also reflected in her approach to teaching. She said that she "was humble enough to realize that [she] wasn't going to be a great teacher in [her] first year". She suggested that, although it was daunting, it would probably take a number of years to be a really good teacher. At the same time though, Michelle stated that she wanted to "see progress". In this situation, her perfectionist orientation and a reliance on success markers

seemed to counter a potentially generative approach to employment. To use an analogy: it was as if Michelle was prepared to drive slowly but she felt like she could not see the road.

4.4. Discussion II: Learning in and through and transitioning away from sport

By way of three cases, we have illustrated what a theory of learning and transfer based on the notion of reconstruction might reveal about athletic transitions. Drawing from sociocultural learning theory, we have tried to understand the kinds of learning that were supported in sporting contexts and how particular 'ways of being' persisted or were reconstructed across practice boundaries. What we would like to do now is make three broader arguments based on the empirical material. These relate to differences between transfer and reconstruction thinking, along with a consideration of consequences.

Thinking in terms of reconstruction as opposed to acquisition and transfer brings different aspects into focus. A traditional transfer perspective encourages us to see skills as assets that athletes can lose or simply choose not to use (Baker, et al., 2009; Bodey, et al., 2009; Waldron, 2009). Dispositional thinking in contrast, encourages us to think of learning in a deeper, embodied sense (Hodkinson, et al., 2008a). This does not mean that it is a better perspective but it did appear appropriate in that the athletes did not seem to consciously choose to employ strategies. Thomas could not switch on and off his orientation towards rewards, nor could Tania simply stop subordinating herself once she had finished her athletic career. Michelle might have liked to shed her perfectionist orientation but it was a part of her. Indeed, this was one reason that her transition was difficult. As a sociocultural approach suggests though (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009), dispositions were not entirely stable nor were individuals bound to particular ways of being. The accounts contained examples of change and development. Reconstruction thinking however, underscores the *effort*, for want of a better word, involved in adapting to new settings. When the athletes moved to a new set of people, they were faced with the challenge (and the opportunity) of developing new sets of relationships. Here, it is useful to think about the difference between moving in a literal sense and moving as becoming someone else. Theoretically, it is possible to literally move, but not actually develop new ways of interacting with others (metaphorical move). In the participants' accounts, departing from athlete positions located within networks of team mates, coaches and a raft of others and adopting new positions as coaches, teachers or administrative staff in different contexts, did result in learning and it did require work (consider Thomas's claim that learning to compromise was one of the hardest things he has had to do). Tensions arose when

individuals moved to new communities, but their moves were not accompanied by a dispositional shift. In a way, while transfer thinking suggests that problems arise when individuals fail to bring elements from their old setting to the new, reconstruction thinking suggests that problems are more likely to occur when individuals continue to embody elements from their old setting that are inconsistent with expectations of the new. This way of thinking reflects Bourdieu's theory of habitus. That is, as Thomas, for instance, (but also the other participants of this study), had come to embody dispositions suitable to his combat sport, he could not question these because they were a product of this setting. It was, as Bourdieu (1990) writes, as if Thomas was a fish in water, but could not feel the weight of the water because this 'world' is taken for granted. However, as Thomas exited sport and entered other spheres, he became a 'fish out of water', which necessitated him to (at least partially) reconstruct his self, but also enabled him to reflect upon his 'in water' experiences.

A related point for discussion concerns the positive connotations of skill transfer. Skills and assets are generally helpful and the terms imply that learning is inherently positive. A reconstruction approach encourages us to suspend evaluation and reflect on the process of becoming. In each of the cases, the dispositions developed in sport could have proven useful afterwards. Michelle's perfectionistic orientation could have been useful had she entered a setting where the goals were clear and she could receive regular feedback – perhaps if she had gone on to further study. This suggests that labelling learning as positive or negative is probably not that helpful and like Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2008a) we are more inclined to think in terms of 'contextual productivity'. By contextual productivity we mean how well an adopted position matches the expectations placed upon that position in a given setting. This is not to say that we do not make ethical evaluations of the dispositions that developed. Thomas's claims of egotism certainly evoked an emotional response from the members of our research team. But these responses were grounded in our own cultural notions of ethical behaviour, rather than his local situation where what was good and bad were negotiated.

Finally, in contrast to acquisition and transfer thinking, a reconstructive approach brings into focus unintentional learning. The kinds of dispositions that developed in sport were not set out in a program, but rather emerged with particular positions in given constellations of people and relationships. For a coach interested in preparing athletes for worlds beyond sports careers, a reconstructive approach does not seem to offer the concrete practical suggestions that life skills programs, for instance seem to offer.

We would contend however, that the approach also has the potential to steer our actions. Sport pedagogues interested in holistic learning (Cassidy, et al., 2009; Potrac, et al., 2000; Stuntz & Spearance, 2007) might concentrate on how the practices of our communities support the development of certain kinds of dispositions. For example, we might examine how giving continuous and extensive feedback may help individuals to become reliant on feedback. Or we might look at how creating training environments that place one athlete at the centre of a large group's efforts may produce individuals that are self-centred. The cases above encourage us to think of how learning is contained within the practices of our sporting communities with a view to changing them. But without acknowledging the kinds of learning that inhere in our own interactions, our training schedules and routines, our systems of recognition and our physical environments to make just a few examples, it may be difficult to help individuals to transit across boundaries and participate in other practices.

5. CONCLUSION

The research is based on the broad notion of learning as moving or becoming. This idea was applied to interview data from former Olympic participants who had transited out of their respective sports. A reconstructive reading drew attention to the dispositions that were developed in sport and how these dispositions proved persistent or were reconstructed after sport. The data were effective in highlighting the importance of developing different kinds of relationships in new settings.

In the discussion sections of this report, we moved away from the data to make more general points. In discussion I, on Olympism as a sporting community, we argued that Olympism is a slippery term and that concrete expressions of the philosophy are difficult to locate. We claimed that despite ambiguity, one could get a sense of what Olympism referred to and that it was possible to look at how the philosophy came to be learned through sporting experiences. Drawing on the idea of cultural learning, the three athletes' accounts of learning to become 'experts' in their respective fields, illustrated how athletes' relationships within sporting communities are influential in this regard.

The athletes identified a number of ways of being that they maintained were crucial for becoming expert. Olympic notions such as balance, joy of effort, and universal ethical principles could be located within some of the described ways of being, however, the pictures painted by the athletes were certainly not straightforward. The athletes described situations in which they struggled to keep their balance or experience joy. Recovering balance and joy often meant rejecting the practices of their wider sports communities despite pressure to take part in them. Similarly, while the Olympic Charter states that Olympism is about learning the "joy of effort", the cases suggest that sporting cultures can work against this prospect. In cultures where rewards are highly valued, effort can come to be seen as less important than markers of success such as medals and money. Whether effort is experienced as something positive appears to be a function of the setting in which it takes place. The idea of "universal ethical principles" is a topic that extends beyond the scope of this investigation. It suffices to say that there were common features between the athletes but there were also differences. As a result, any claim to learning absolute principles becomes relatively difficult to maintain.

Finally, it should be noted that to become expert, the athletes at times needed to take on characteristics that were at odds with Olympism. These included things like being submissive or self-centred. While these characteristics maybe seen as undesirable in non-sporting contexts, these ways of being are part of the Olympic experience. Should we hold

them up as examples of anti-Olympic practices? Should we broaden the scope of Olympism to take account of these kinds of practices? What is clear is that these kinds of issues require discussion and debate. It is through such dialogue that the practices of the Olympics might reflect the principles of Olympism.

In discussion II, we claimed that a reconstructive approach means assuming that (1) transitions require effort; (2) learning cannot be thought of in positive or negative terms and that productivity might be a more generative descriptor; and (3) unintentional learning inheres in our sporting environments. The investigation raises issues that warrant further attention from sport pedagogues. Taking the idea of contextual productivity seriously means attempting to prepare athletes for the individual circumstances they expect to encounter when they finish sport. In our views, this might prove an interesting topic for discussion, both for practitioners working with athletes and scholars interested in transitions. In practice, this type of approach would entail a differentiated or individualized approach to learning, rather than a universal one. One might also consider though, the scope afforded by elite sporting communities for the development of different kinds of dispositions. The athletes presented here claimed that their orientations were necessary for success in sport and insisted that they needed to be these kinds of people. Here, a broader consideration of athletic environments as sites of learning could prove useful. Third, the procedures employed for data production allowed us to look at some important aspects of athletic dispositions but certainly not all. We have not discussed, for instance, what the participants wore, how they spoke, or how they held themselves. These kinds of aspects could be extremely important when transiting but this could require different research methods to those utilized here. Finally, while interpretive research generally eschews claims to prediction, some of the tensions that emerged during these participants' transitions could have been anticipated. By looking at the orientations that are created in sporting environments, one might be able to predict the kinds of activities that will present individuals with difficulties once they have finished sport. Without being deterministic, transitions across specific types of boundaries could be made easier.

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