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Former NCAA DIII College Athletes' Perceptions and Plans For Maintaining Post-Sport Exercise Behavior

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Abstract

College athletes in the United States exhibit various declines in physical and mental health following retirement from sport. These declines in health are not well understood, however, one cause may be reduced exercise rates following retirement from regular sports training. It is unknown how former athletes' perceptions of health and fitness change after retirement and affect their exercise behavior post-sport. The purpose of this study was to understand former Division III (DIII) athletes' perceptions of health and fitness following college graduation and sports retirement and to explore what their future plans for exercise maintenance were. Recently graduated student-athletes from Hope College completed semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Participants' interviews were transcribed, then analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methods. Participants included 19 former DIII athletes (22±1 years, 37% male, 84% White). The analysis yielded five key domains. Two pertained to participants' perceptions of health and fitness: "Reasons Why Former Athletes are Exercising" and "Shifting Ideas on How to Exercise Without Sports Training". Three domains described their plans for maintaining future exercise: "Barriers That Limit an Active Lifestyle", "Not a Priority", and "Figuring It Out". Former athletes' perceived a need for a post-sport break following retirement. They avoided exercise activities associated with negative sport experiences. Former athletes reported less activity than when still training in college, due to a lack of knowledge regarding exercise and health maintenance, as many participants were not aware of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults and habitually over- or underestimated healthy exercise thresholds. Former athletes also contended with the influx in autonomy for exercise as they retired; those who were engaging with exercise indicated primarily completing activities familiar to them, and preferred to exercise with family and friends to stay accountable. Researchers may use these results to better prepare athletes for their retirement in the future.

Background

Following athletic retirement, research shows a sharp decrease in physical and mental health in former athletes (Simon & Docherty, 2014). It is well understood that during their athletic careers, those who compete in sport meet and exceed the exercise guidelines given by the American College of Sport Medicine (NCAA, 2015). However, what is not understood is how physical activity (PA) changes after retirement and how these changes may affect former athletes' long-term health.

What research exists examining former college athletes' exercise and PA behavior reports that members of this population may lack competence in their practice of exercise, while at the same time contending with significantly more freedom to choose their activities compared to when they were participating in sport. This excess of autonomy and lack of competence likely influences the overall decline of exercise former athletes exhibit when they no longer have sports training to drive behavior (Simon & Docherty, 2017).

Athletes' plans for and perceptions of exercise following retirement is unknown but should be investigated to understand how best to prepare them for the PA transition they will experience, and ensure they maintain their long-term health and wellness post-sport.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore what former Division III (DIII) athletes' perceptions and future plans for exercise were with the absence of sports training.

Methods

Data Collection: Participants included graduated student-athletes from the Hope College Class of 2023 in Holland Michigan. To be included in this study, participants had to a) be ≥18 years old, b) previously participated in varsity athletics at Hope College, c) completed four years of athletics during college, d) were no longer competing in their sport following retirement, and e) were physically able to complete regular exercise. Former college athletes were recruited during the end of their senior year by word of mouth, flyers posted on campus, and emailing the athletic teams to find individuals interested in completing the study. Individuals were scheduled for a Zoom interview following graduation. All interviews took place between May-June, 2023.

Data Analysis: The semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methods (Hill et al. 2005) to construct a narrative of a) what the former college athletes' perceptions of health and fitness were following retirement, and b) what their plans to maintain exercise were following graduation without sports training.

Results

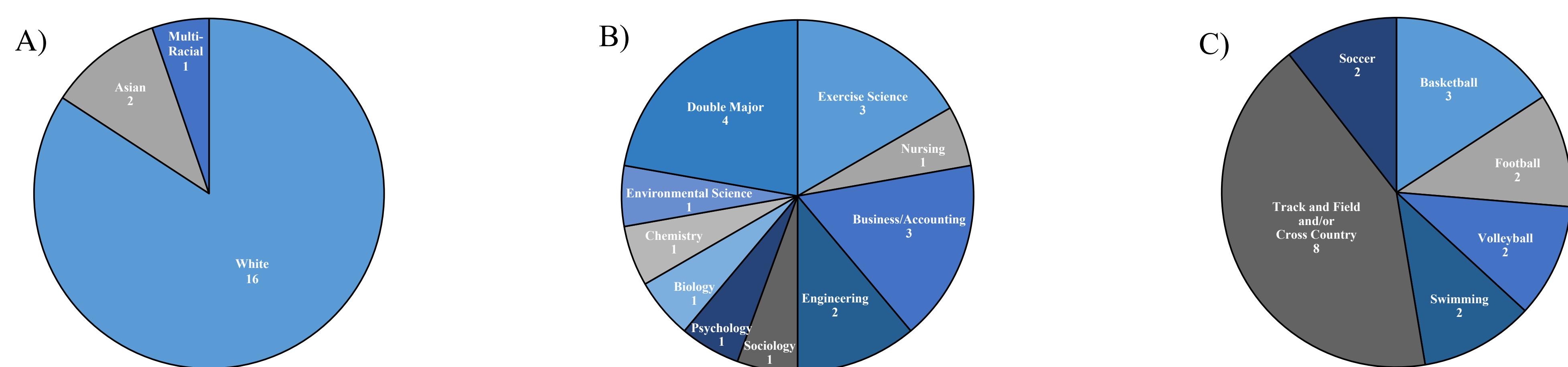


Figure 1. Participants' (N=19; 12 women, 22 ± 1 years) demographics based on A) race, B) major in college, and C) college sport participated in.

Results

Table 1. Resulting domains, categories, and core ideas, with representative participant quotes per the CQR analysis.

Domains	Categories and Core Ideas	Frequencies
Domain 1: Why Former Athletes Are Exercising	<i>Exercise is Primary:</i> For the first time, participants recognized that exercise outside of sports training was important and made them feel good physically and mentally. As such, common reasons to continue partaking in exercise included completing activities for enjoyment, fun, and a desire to be fit and able to continue being active.	General
	<i>Exercise is Secondary - A Means to an End:</i> Former athletes stated various motives for doing exercise beyond enjoyment, such as maintaining body image, being able to eat, and using exercise to spend time with family or friends.	Typical
Domain 2: Shifting Ideas on How to Exercise Without Sports Training	<i>Lacking Knowledge While Focusing on What Feels Good/Right:</i> Regardless of past exposure to the Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults, former college athletes grossly over- or underestimated thresholds of healthy exercise, and instead opted to base exercise choices on subjective feelings (e.g., getting heart rate up, sweating). Many reasoned that doing some form of physical movement was better than none at all, and tended to confuse general forms of physical activity (e.g., dog walking) as adequate ways of achieving appropriate levels of health-benefitting exercise. Further, participants would often wait until they began to feel negative physically or mentally, such as having too much energy, feeling sluggish, or being stressed, to complete lighter or harder forms of exercise, so as to alleviate these feelings.	General
	<i>Past Sport Experiences Impacting Current Exercise Perceptions and Behavior:</i> Participants recognized that their former levels of exercise for sports training were no longer necessary to maintain overall health, and noted that such levels were pointless without competition or obligation to a team. As such, they modified their behavior and refrained from high intensity and unenjoyable activities, as influenced by past sport experiences or injuries received during sports. However, many chose or planned to continue participating in sports recreationally or incorporate aspects of sports training, such as weight training or practice regimens, into their routine at less-intense levels due to familiarity. Some participants felt surprised at how much knowledge they had retained from sports training without a coach to guide them, which made them feel more confident to continue exercising more regularly and intensely on their own. Others felt that relying on past training experiences to exercise was temporary until they discovered new motivations and types of activities to complete.	General
	<i>Sport Seasonality Affecting the Exercise Transition:</i> All participants mentioned needing a break from exercise after stopping sports training. However, depending on what season athletes played and retired in (i.e., Fall, Winter, Spring), some were able to begin their exercise transition away from training while still on-campus, while others had to make the transition completely off-campus. Those who retired on campus exhibited being able to stick to an exercise plan because they still had access to resources such as the free on-campus gyms, TeamBuildr(R) App, and the strength and conditioning coach to provide them with workouts on campus. Those who started their transitions closer to or after graduation did not have access to these resources, exhibited less competence toward exercise compared to those who retired earlier, and a greater degree of uncertainty toward how to begin exercising without sport to guide them.	Typical
	<i>Psychological Barriers:</i> Former college athletes explained that they were hesitant to start exercising due to internal feelings, such as the effects of detraining, not having motivation, or being unsure of how to begin. Many wrestled with shame and guilt following an extended period of inactivity, or were still recovering from negative sport experiences, such as emotional trauma due to sport-related injuries, following their retirement that further discouraged them from starting to exercise.	Variation
Domain 3: Barriers that Limit an Active Lifestyle	<i>Tangible Barriers:</i> Former athletes cited various external factors that contributed to a lack of time within their schedules that limited their ability to exercise, such as job hours and responsibilities, as well as travel after retirement. They also mentioned other barriers that they perceived out of their control, such as a lack of availability to gyms or equipment to continue their exercise pursuits, seasonal changes to the weather, and lingering effects from injuries or health complications (e.g., asthma).	General
	<i>Lacking Direction and Proactivity:</i> Former athletes were clear in not wanting a strict exercise plan because they associated it with sports training, something all participants indicated not wanting to emulate again. However, while participants exhibited a desire to stay active, current exercise could be sporadic, and overall, they lacked clear goals to work toward. Many recognized needing to improve these things, and mentioned strategies such as getting into a routine, waking up earlier/staying up later to work out, and setting goals. However, most had not enacted any of these strategies, and didn't plan to in the immediate future to change behavior or overcome barriers they foresaw, such as more intense work and graduate school schedules.	Typical
Domain 4: Not a Priority	<i>Waiting For New Life Transition to Begin Exercise:</i> All former athletes stated needing or being in the midst of a break from exercise following retirement. Some stated wanting to wait for their next life stage to begin, such as starting graduate school or moving for a new job, to seriously consider exercising regularly. They assumed that by then, they would be more motivated to start and maintain exercise behavior due to being on a regular schedule and having access to better resources. Until then, they settled for being inactive, very light activity, or doing exercises that were most convenient based on what resources were available to them.	Typical
	<i>Learning How to "Do it Yourself":</i> Former college athletes acknowledged experiencing a learning curve when it came to exercising without the influence of sport. Many mentioned needing to increase their knowledge of exercise overall to adequately maintain it in the future, and work around various limitations, such as accessibility to resources and physical limitations from past sport injuries. Without a set practice schedule or accountability from teammates and coaches, many participants started incorporating other methods to engage with exercise regularly, such as bringing exercise clothes with them to work or forcing themselves to go to the gym after their workday instead of going home.	Typical
Domain 5: Figuring it Out	<i>Adjusting to Full Autonomy While Wanting Guidance and Accountability:</i> Former athletes mentioned a sense of relief with the newfound freedom of being able to make their own choices regarding their exercise behavior, without external obligations to a sports team. As such, many tried new types of activities outside of their previous sport after retiring. However, participants were honest in stating they also wanted guidance in the form of an external person to schedule exercise for them, and others to exercise with to hold them accountable. Some sought this social support out through family, friends, coworkers, and group fitness classes, stating these experiences of exercise with others provided a greater drive to complete exercise than trying to do it completely on their own.	General
	<i>Finding Motivation to Exercise Without Sport:</i> Former college athletes indicated that they were still trying to develop appropriate goals to work toward to engage with exercise without sport. Some drew motivation from short-term goals, such as maintaining a certain physique or recreating and engaging with competition where they could. Others thought to long-term goals for motivation, such as maintaining health for their future families. Participants showcased varying levels of frustration with this process, but overall, acknowledged that these motivations would change over time as life transitions took place, such as starting graduate school, new jobs, or families, and believed, or hoped, that they would be able to figure it out with time.	General

Discussion

Former college athletes exhibit drastic changes to their exercise behavior following retirement and graduation. Specifically, former athletes experience a continual process of renegotiating understandings of exercise as influenced by sport while balancing newfound personal wants and needs in their behavior. Researchers should consider expanding student-athletes' exercise-related knowledge prior to graduation, and prepare them for the sudden influx in autonomy related to exercise choices following sports retirement.