"I'm more than my sport": Exploring the dynamic processes of identity change in athletic retirement

Catherine Haslam [a,*], Chloe McAulay [b], Dean Cooper [c], Niels Mertens [d], Pete Coffee [e], Chris Hartley [f], Tarli Young [a], Crystal J. La Rue [a], S. Alexander Haslam [a], Niklas K. Steffens [a], Tegan Cruwys [g], Sarah V. Bentley [a], Clifford J. Mallett [h], Matthew McGregor [i], David Williams [i], Katrien Fransen [d]

[a] School of Psychology, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Queensland, Australia
[b] School of Education, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Queensland, Australia
[c] The Mind Room, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
[d] Department of Movement Sciences, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
[e] Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University, UK
[f] Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK
[g] School of Medicine and Psychology, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia
[h] School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Queensland, Australia
[i] Institute for Social Neuroscience, Ivanhoe, Victoria, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Retirement is one of the most impactful career transitions athletes face. Researchers recognise the role that athletic identity plays in this, but analysis of identity content and change processes is limited. Addressing this gap, we conducted a qualitative study exploring the experience of identity change in 21 competitive and successful elite athletes who had retired from sport. All participated in a one-session psychoeducational program that explored the challenges of transitioning out of sport before being interviewed about their understanding of identity in sport, and their experiences negotiating identity loss and change in retirement. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we identified three themes: (i) the role of identity and self-categorizations in shaping sport performance, (ii) adjusting to identity loss (with subthemes indicating that this experience varied depending on the extent to which a person had multiple or exclusive identities), and (iii) attempts to remoor identity in the transition (with subthemes of searching for a new identity and actively repurposing identity). We interpret these themes through the lens of the Social Identity Model of Identity Change and show that this provides a framework for extending our understanding the complexities of identity change associated with retirement from elite sport.

The biggest thing I felt was a loss of identity and purpose, with no idea of what you want to do and who you want to be … That's a really lonely place and I got quite depressed at that time. (Kelly Holmes, Olympic Gold Medallist; BBC Sport, 2018)

Athletes experience multiple transitions in their careers, but retirement is among the most impactful on their health and wellbeing (e.g., Lavallee et al., 1997; Mannes et al., 2018; Park et al., 2013). Various factors have been shown to influence this life change including pre-retirement planning, control over the nature and timing of exit, goal achievement when competing in sport, and strength of athletic identity

(e.g., Lally, 2007; Martin et al., 2014). The latter, in particular, is emerging as a central factor given the huge investment in developing and embedding athletic identity during one's sporting career. Research shows that individuals with stronger athletic identities engage in less future career planning, report greater indecision, and experience greater conflict around their career choices (Albion & Fogerty, 2005; Martin et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, not all highly identified athletes report problematic retirement experiences. This is particularly true for those who plan for retirement, who feel better prepared, and who receive support in the

transition (Coakley, 1983; Knights et al., 2019; Torregrosa et al., 2015). This raises questions about the dynamics of identity processes and the way they affect retirement experiences. Building on previous research, the present study addresses this issue by drawing on a social identity theory of life change to understand how athletes negotiate identity change in retirement. If, as Kelly Holmes observed, identity loss compromises an athlete's sense of self and purpose, what can be done to offset that loss? More generally, what can be done to help athletes negotiate this identity change successfully into retirement?

1. Identity and sport retirement

Decades of research have pointed to the importance of strength of athletic identity for athletes' retirement experiences (e.g., Brewer et al., 1993; Cosh et al., 2013; Lally, 2007; Lavallee et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2014; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Roberts et al., 2023; Webb et al., 1998). Athletic identity is typically conceptualised as the strength with which one identifies with the category and role of athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). It is recognised as a key driver in performance and motivation to excel in sport, but as a consequence it is also a central factor in how well an athlete adjusts to retirement from sport. There are many studies showing the negative impact of athletic identity on retirement adjustment, which is particularly apparent when athletes have an intense, and exclusive focus on their sport (e.g., Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Wendling & Sagas, 2020). For instance, research shows that identifying strongly as an athlete can compromise mental health, resulting in increased depression and anxiety symptoms in retirement (e.g., Giannone et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2023). However, the impact is shown to be weaker where athlete identity diminishes in strength over time or in the lead up to retirement from sport (e.g., Lally, 2007; Martin et al., 2014). Speaking to this, Lally (2007) found that athletes had a better transition if they had already proactively distanced themselves from sport in the lead up to retirement and branched out to pursue other careers and interests. Similar findings are reported by Martin et al. (2014) who found that as athletes developed intentions to retire, the strength of their athletic identity reduced and this was associated with both greater disengagement from the athletic identity and greater life satisfaction. However, there are also factors affecting the extent to which one can disengage from athletic identity in retirement, which appear to be detrimental to outcomes. Findings from Schmid et al. (2024) show that continued involvement in sport—-through work (e.g., coaching) or recreational competition—and higher satisfaction with one's sporting career is associated with slower decline in athletic identity in retirement.

These advances have been important in understanding experiences of identity loss and change. Nevertheless, where theory has been used to inform analysis of qualitative data, this has generally not focused on theories that speak directly to issues of identity change. Arguably, then, an identity-informed theoretical analysis has the capacity to extend our understanding of identity-specific processes that contribute to successful negotiation of life change. To address this possibility, we take a theoretically informed approach to the study of identity in athlete retirement, that draws and builds on broader models of identity change. In this regard, one candidate approach is offered by the *Social Identity Approach to Health* (SIAH) and the model of life change that it has informed — *the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC)*.

2. Conceptual framework: A social identity informed approach to retirement transitions

The SIAH was developed to provide a framework for understanding the contribution of group and identity processes to a range of health conditions and contexts (Haslam et al., 2018). Key to this approach is the recognition that identity is informed not just by the attributes and characteristics that are unique to an individual, but also by the attributes and characteristics that people share with members of a relevant ingroup (e.g., as members of the same family, team, or profession).

These two aspects of self are reflected in the distinction between the personal self (where a person's *personal identity* as 'I' and 'me' is salient) and the social self (where their *social identity* as 'we' and 'us' is salient). The processes through which personal and social identities become more or less salient — and the implications of this for cognition and behaviour — are explained in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) and these two theories provide the building blocks for the SIAH.

Two hypotheses are foundational to the SIAH. First, that because it provides the basis for meaningful group life, social identity is central to both good and ill health. Second, that the implications of membership in a particular group for health are dependent on the strength of one's identification with that group (Haslam et al., 2018). Where people identify strongly with a given group this also means that they are able to access the social and psychological resources that the group provides. These include access to social support, a sense of meaning and purpose, enhanced self-esteem, and a sense of agency and control (Cruwys et al., 2014; Greenaway et al., 2015; Haslam et al., 2012; Jetten et al., 2015). These resources are particularly important in times of life transition as these are periods when people's group memberships and associated identities can undergo dramatic change, as in the case in sport retirement.

The nature and impact of life transitions are the focus of SIMIC (Haslam, Haslam, et al., 2021). Irrespective of how positive or negative these transitions are, any resulting identity change will involve uncertainty and apprehension. Moreover, failure to resolve this uncertainty can clearly undermine adjustment. According to SIMIC, four identity-related processes help to provide this resolution. The first involves being connected to multiple groups before the transition and thereby having access to *multiple social identities*. Multiple group belonging is important because it speaks to a second process supporting successful adjustment: *social identity continuity*. In this, SIMIC argues that maintenance of at least some pre-transition groups provides a sense of stability in periods of life change, but also access to the resources that those maintained groups provide to manage any challenges that the life change poses. Multiple group memberships also provide a platform for a third process: *social identity gain*. To the extent that they are members of multiple groups prior to a life change, people are more likely to have access to a broad array of connections and skills that they can leverage to join new groups and thereby extend their social networks. This should be particularly important in the context of losing valued social group memberships since — providing they are meaningful and a basis for social identification — joining new groups is an obvious way to counteract this loss. A final component of SIMIC concerns compatibility. While SIMIC advocates the importance of having access to multiple, new, and maintained groups in life transitions, there is also recognition that the identities these enable are more likely to be beneficial when they are *compatible* (e.g., Iyer et al., 2009). For example, a retired golfer gaining a new group membership and identity as the manager of a golf club or as a golf journalist would be more compatible with one's sporting group network than becoming a banker.

Evidence of SIMIC's processes and pathways is emerging in studies with athletes. For example, Rees et al. (2022) demonstrated the importance of multiple group membership in supporting the adjustment of cricketers moving from junior to elite levels of sport as this provided a basis for them to join new groups at the elite level. In the sport retirement context specifically, Haslam, Lam, et al. (2021) used SIMIC to examine the mechanisms underlying adjustment. This study found that identity loss negatively affected health and wellbeing by reducing athletes' access to key psychological resources that their sporting groups provided. Notable here was the reduction in athlete's sense of personal control as well as their sense that life had meaning and purpose. While these data speak to the relevance of SIMIC to career transitions in sport, they lack the richness and depth needed to map and understand the experience of living through identity loss and change. The purpose of the present paper is to fill this gap by using SIMIC as a framework for

qualitatively exploring athletes' negotiation of identity change with a focus on retirement.

3. The present research

The goal of the present research was to study elite athlete experiences of navigating identity-related changes as they retired from their sport. Drawing on SIMIC, the study used reflexive thematic methodology to examine how athletes understood the identity changes they were undergoing and how these affected their ability to negotiate the change.

To enable greater breadth in exploration of identity-related issues in the retirement transition, participants first completed an online psychoeducation program on career transitions in sport that engaged with these issues of identity change. As part of this program a structured set of insights and activities were provided to help athletes reflect on ways in which their social groups and identities can support adjustment to sport retirement. This provided both a shared vocabulary that athletes might find useful in making sense of their identity-related experiences and when reflecting on their own identity changes. Within a week of completing the program, participants took part in a semi-structured interview. This began by exploring their views on the program content and its appropriateness for athletes (reported in Young et al., 2024), and then went on to examine their own experience of negotiating identity loss and change in retirement. The latter provides the focus of the present paper, and this focus allows us to address two fundamental research questions:

RQ1. How do athletes understand and make sense of their identity both within sport and outside of sport after retirement?
RQ2. How do identity-related processes contribute to athletes' experience of retirement from sport?

4. Method

4.1. Methodology and design

We used reflexive thematic analysis to examine data generated from our participant interviews. This allowed us to identify patterns of meaning and themes across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Our philosophical approach was grounded in social constructivist epistemology, that understands knowledge is constructed in social environments and determined by social forces. It was also underpinned by a relativist ontology that understands reality through the lens of subjective human experience. In line with a constructivist approach we drew on our experience and understanding of both the study topic and relevant theory to support interpretation of the data and our reporting of findings. Three assumptions from Guba and Lincoln (2005) relating to ontology, epistemology and methodology informed our approach — the acceptance of multiple perceptions of reality, the subjectivity of knowledge and interactions between researcher and participants, and the re-interpretations and comparisons of findings.

Another factor relevant to our methodology was the grounding we provided to participants on issues of identity and identity change in retirement. This was done to allow an opportunity for greater breadth and depth in exploration of identity processes as reflected in the theorising that we reviewed in the Introduction. While we recognise athletic identity as a well-established construct in the field, we were also conscious of limitations that simply referencing or defining it might pose in drawing out more fully participants' experience and understanding of the construct. This aligns with findings from previous qualitative research on the topic in which understandings of athletic identity that are more personalised and individualised in nature have tended to dominate (i.e., reflections on an athlete's *personal* experience and the impact of retirement on them *as an individual*; e.g., Lally, 2007; Smith & Hardin, 2020; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Based on these data, one might reasonably conclude that personal

athletic identity is the primary driver of retirement experiences. What is more likely though, based on emerging theorising and quantitative research (e.g., Haslam, Lam, et al., 2021; O'Halloran & Haslam, 2020; Rees et al., 2022), is that these studies might not have captured the influence of the wider, social dimensions, of identity. Accordingly, to ensure we enabled participants to take these broader dimensions of identity into consideration when thinking about their retirement experiences, we introduced them to a new program, *More Than Sport*. This facilitated an understanding of both personal *and* social identity and explored the relevance of both forms of identity to the negotiation of identity change. Practically, then, participants were asked to review the program (see Young et al., 2024, for a program description), which took about an hour to complete, before they took part in their own research interview.

4.2. Positionality

The authorship team comprised members aged between 24 and 61 years. CHas, SAH, NS, and TC provided the theoretical expertise to support the project, as evident in their contributions to the literature in development of social identity and/or SIMIC theorising and their application to the health and wellbeing context. The project also benefited from team member research experience in areas of sport and exercise psychology (CJM, PC, CHart), leadership (SAH, NS, KF), life transitions in general (CHas, SAH, TC, NS, TY, SB), and retirement transitions (CHas, CL). Several members of the team drew on their experience as sport psychologists (CHart, PC, MM, KF), performance psychologists in sport and exercise (CJM, DC), movement scientists and sport physiologists (NM), human performance systems and service management (DW), and elite coaching (CJM). These team members brought knowledge and experience in working with athletes at professional and elite levels that was necessary for the running of the study and for recruitment of participants into the research. The team also benefited from the qualitative expertise provided by PC, CHart, and TY which spanned experience in application of thematic analysis, grounded theory, and interpretive phenomenological analysis. It is also worth noting the additional expertise of authors in areas of organisational psychology (AH, NS) and wellbeing management both in general (TY) and in the sporting context (CHart), which they used to support the authorship team in drawing out the implications of findings for sporting organisations and for adjustment to sport retirement.

4.3. Participants

Participants were 21 retired elite athletes from Belgium, Scotland and Australia (8 identified as women, 13 as men). These athletes competed at the Olympic and World Championship levels and engaged professionally in, or made a living from, their sport (e.g., in the Australian Football League). Drawing on the criteria proposed by Swann et al. (2015) in defining elite athletes, our sample would be best characterised as falling across the competitive elite (i.e., regularly competing at the highest level of their sport, such as in top divisions and leagues or the Olympics, but with limited success at that level) and successful elite levels (i.e., competing at the same level, but with some success at that standard, such as winning an event or medal). Participants were recruited through snowballing and purposive strategies, primarily through personal networks and links to national and international sporting bodies. Athletes were informed about the study via these sporting contacts. Those willing to participate were contacted by study interviewers (CM, DC, & NM) who explained the study and requirements in the process of securing consent. The key criterion for study inclusion was to be retired from elite sport, as defined above. A secondary criterion related to the time for which participants had been retired (i.e., the last five years). However, we included one participant who had been retired for six years reasoning that the additional year was unlikely to impact the overall participant experience. Through this procedure we

recruited 21 retired athletes for the study. They were aged between 21 and 41 years and had competed either individually or in teams in one of 13 sports (athletics, badminton, bobsledding, curling, Australian Rules Football, handball, judo, rowing, rugby league, skating, skiing, swimming, and volleyball). Several had profited financially from their sporting careers. Participants' sporting careers had spanned between 4 and 20 years and they had been retired for between 1 month and 6 years. Demographic and other relevant data are presented in Table 1.

4.4. Data collection

Ethical approval for the research was provided by three Institutions involved in conduct of the research (University of Queensland, University of Stirling, and KU Leuven). Data were collected between May and July 2021. After obtaining informed consent, a time was scheduled for participants to complete and review a new career transition program, *More Than Sport*. This online program addressed the factors affecting career transitions in sport (e.g., preparation in transitioning out of sport, the role of sporting identity, goals and values moving forward), and activities that engaged athletes in planning the transition (see Young et al., 2024 for program description). Within a week of completing this program, participants took part in an interview that sought first, to seek their views on the program (data that are reported in a separate paper by Young et al., 2024) and second, to understand their identity-related experiences in retiring from sport (the focus of the present paper). Given the different aims and foci of these interviews, we invited participants to take part in two sessions over the period of a week. However, some participants indicated a preference to complete these in a single session (n = 7) and we accommodated their wishes.

The semi-structured interviews on identity change and management were conducted online by the second, third, and fourth authors (CM, DC and NM), lasting between 45 and 90 min. Participants were asked to reflect on (a) their identity in sport, (b) the factors that connect athletes as a group, (c) the groups and identities important to athletes within and outside sport, and (d) athletes' experiences of retirement (see Appendix A for the interview protocol). Interviews took place either in a single session (n = 7) or across two sessions over the period of a week (n = 14), and were audio recorded and conducted individually. The one exception involved a joint interview, held with two participants who were well known to each other through having competed in the same sport. They were interviewed together due to limitations in interviewer and athlete availability.

4.5. Data coding and analysis

We applied an inductive-deductive approach to analysis, whilst also using researchers' reflexive understandings (e.g., interviewer and coder diaries to support data interpretation). An inductive, data-driven approach was used to generate initial codes. A deductive approach, supported largely by SIMIC, but also the wider literature on athlete retirement, was then used to develop themes and subthemes. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim shortly after each interview. To preserve anonymity, each athlete was identified by a number (A1 to A21) that removed identifiable information from transcripts. Analysis followed the six-stage recursive process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, each transcript was read and re-read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content. Second, semantic codes were separately collated for each interview. Core words, phrases, and interview segments were identified, and their meanings inferred through the creation of key concepts. This process was undertaken by the first three authors (CHas, CM, and DC). Thereafter, CHas led on examining relevant codes and concepts to identify broader patterns of meaning. Distinct themes were then developed from the data with subthemes identified where there was evidence of differentiation within a given theme. Themes and subthemes were defined and then reviewed with members (critical friends) of the authorship team (CM, DC, KF, TY). Finally, meaningful quotes were selected for each theme and subtheme to substantiate our interpretation of participants' responses as they pertain to our research questions.

4.6. Rigor

The strategies used to support rigor in our conduct of this research drew on recommendations for conducting thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Relevant to transcription, the interviews were transcribed in full and the resulting transcripts were checked against interview recordings before undertaking prolonged iterative engagement with the data. In the course of data coding, themes were checked against each other and the original data, and relevant extracts were identified for each theme and subtheme to represent these more comprehensively. Peer debriefing and peer reflection on the part of the four authors directly involved in interviewing (CM, DC, NM) and

Table 1
Participant demographic and sport characteristics.

Participant Code	Gender (M/F)	Age	Sport	Individual (I)/Team (T) Sport	Period retired	Years competing at the elite level	Retirement voluntariness (V/I)
A1	M	30	speed skating	I	3 years	11	V
A2	F	35	judo	I	2 months	17	V
A3	M	27	judo	I	1 year	10	I
A4	M	31	rowing	I	6 months	8	V
A5	M	27	judo	I	2 years	10	I
A6	F	37	athletics	I	6 months	20	V
A7	F	24	swimming	T	2 years	7	V
A8	F	28	curling	T	1 month	5	I
A9	M	28	AFL	T	3 years	5	I
A10	M	27	AFL	T	2 years	4	I
A11	M	30	AFL	T	1 year	10	I
A12	M	31	AFL	T	7 months	6	I
A13	M	32	AFL	T	1 year	9	I
A14	M	29	NRL	T	2 months	11	I
A15	M	33	volleyball	T	2 years	15	V
A16	F	38	skiing	I	6 years	7	V
A17	M	29	handball	T	2 years	6	–
A18	F	41	volleyball	T	5 years	20	V
A19	F	37	volleyball	T	5 years	14	V
A20	M	34	badminton	I	5 years	12	V
A21	F	36	bobsleigh	T	3 years	14	V

Notes: AFL = Australian Football League, NRL: National Rugby League; Retirement Voluntariness: V = voluntary, I = involuntary

analysis (CHas) was used to support interpretation. In particular, this helped to support the distinctiveness and meaningfulness of themes and subthemes generated and evidencing of these in our narrative to ensure they were illustrated with appropriate extracts. Our interviewers were supported by three additional authors who helped them to engage in critical review throughout the interview process (PC, CM, and KF). Rigor was further supported by use of reflexive journaling in which the authors reflected on their experiences of both the interview process and research conduct. This was also the primary strategy used to enable reflection on our positionality and the influence of this on our interpretation of the data and theme development. Interviewer expertise was also important to this process — with those who conducted interviews bringing credibility and experience to the research as competing athletes, either as sport scientists working with elite athletes, or as qualified trainers in particular sports.

5. Results

Three core themes were developed, reflecting (a) the role played by personal and social categorizations of athletic identity, (b) adjusting to identity loss, and (c) the importance of "remooring" identity in enabling athletes to be more than their sport. The latter two themes also had two distinctive subthemes. This reflected the divergence in participants' adjustment to identity loss associated with how they self-defined in the transition — either exclusively in terms of their athletic identity or as belonging to a more diverse network associated with multiple identities. Efforts to remoor identity and find one's place in the world after retirement also took two distinctive forms — differing between athletes who were searching for a new identity that gave them the same fulfillment that they had experienced in sport, and athletes who were able to move forward and adjust to retirement by actively re-purposing their former identity in the context of new pursuits. These themes and subthemes are represented schematically in Figure 1 and discussed in turn below.

5.1. Theme 1: Self categorizations shape sporting outcomes

Many athletes described having several aspects or levels of self, reflecting the personal and social identity aspects of their athletic identity. This related to there being some contexts which required them to self-categorize in personal terms to make the most of their unique personal attributes to succeed, but also others where drawing on the characteristics and attributes they shared with groups of others was more effective. The ability to engage with both personal and social levels of self-categorization tended to be associated with greater success in sport.

All participants described the distinctiveness of their athletic identity in terms of experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values that they shared with other athletes. This was characterised by passion, competitiveness, and determination: *It's what you eat, live and breath, ….you're engulfed by it, just totally sweeps you* [A6, F, athletics, 37 y.o.]; *My identity was what drove me. Like, it's what separates me from people* [A5, M, judo, 27 y.o.].

But this came at a cost, with many recognising the sacrifices they made to reach the pinnacle of their sport: *Not many people understand what we go through, the pressures and stressors* [A10, M, AFL, 27 y.o.]; *[Sacrifices] define who you are and help you endure the pressure of competing* [A1, M, speed skating, 30 y.o.]. These sacrifices were seen to be part of the discipline that all athletes shared to achieve their goals: *Push, push, push, push, push, pressure, pressure, pressure ….makes diamonds ….this is how we do it* [A6, F, athletics, 37 y.o.].

These and other attributes — associated with pride, camaraderie, extreme experiences, and mental toughness — served to collectively define athletes' professional identity and was seen to be core to their sense of self: *When I was a professional athlete, it was the biggest part of my life ….it was my core identity and I was afraid of losing it when I stopped playing* [A20, M, 34 y.o.]. Combined with the privilege and opportunities that elite sport provided, these attributes were also seen to distinguish athletes from other people:

> *You're surrounded with very, very ambitious people for all of your life …. that's something a lot of people will never experience ….My neighbours, I like them, but they will never ever understand how it feels* [A21, F, bobsleigh, 36 y.o.]

Despite its centrality to life in sport, athletic identity was not a unitary construct. Instead, it had individual, or personal, and group-based elements. How athletes balanced these elements contributed to how they performed and saw themselves in relation to their sport. Several athletes focused mainly on the importance of the personal aspects of their athletic identity and how this supported their personal achievements:

> *I have less group identity in sport … a strong sportsperson identity … to get to the top you need to be world champion ….not about groups, team, or collaboration ….it's all down to you.* [A1, M, speed skating, 30 y.o.]

Such descriptions, emphasising the salience of personal identity, were raised more often and more consistently by athletes who had
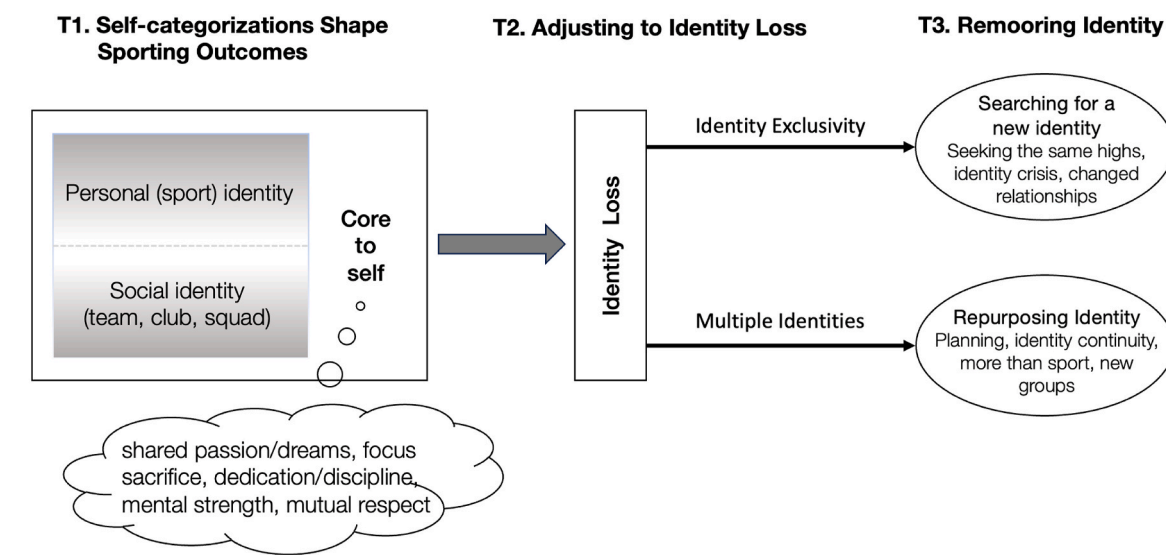

T1. Self-categorizations Shape Sporting Outcomes

T2. Adjusting to Identity Loss

T3. Remooring Identity

Personal (sport) identity

Social identity (team, club, squad)

Core to self

Identity Loss

Identity Exclusivity

Searching for a new identity
Seeking the same highs, identity crisis, changed relationships

Multiple Identities

Repurposing Identity
Planning, identity continuity, more than sport, new groups

shared passion/dreams, focus
sacrifice, dedication/discipline,
mental strength, mutual respect

Figure 1. Thematic map showing key themes and subthemes from analysis.

competed in individual sport. But this was by no means universal. In particular, there were athletes who had competed individually, but could clearly see the group and team-based contribution to their achievements as the product of collective effort:

When I was a bobsleigher, ….that was an individual sport [but] actually, even then, you still belong to a team because you have a coach, you have other athletes you're training with. And maybe it's not your teammates, but you do feel like you belong in a team. You know, it's never only you. [A21, F, bobsleigh, 36 y.o.]

For athletes who competed in teams, a sense of group-based connectedness was consistently described as a strong part of their sporting culture and identity: *The feeling that you get when you're a team player, it's really special. You're part of a group* [A17, M, handball, 29 y.o.]; *One of my key drivers was being part of a team* [A13, M, AFL, 32 y.o.]. And, for some athletes this team connection was so strong that they saw, and still see in retirement, their teammates as part of their family: *We are still a family in that [sporting] group. You are nothing without your teammates.* [A15, M, volleyball, 33 y.o.]

Important here too was evidence of the fluidity between personal and social athletic identity in the reflections of some athletes. They reported being able to draw on personal or social identity as they needed to in order to perform. For instance, when asked about the extent to which athletes in their sport were part of a group, A7 [F, swimming, 24 y.o.] made the point that: *You're not on a team as much ….when it comes to relay you're in a team. But ….there wasn't that team environment as much as other sports.* And yet, in the context of talking about whether they personally would consider themselves to be part of a group in sport, the same athlete expressed a strong sense of camaraderie and connection to their team:

Teams changed a lot ….when I was at the club ….they were like my family ….they were so supportive, everyone was so there for each other ….And you know, just the few of them that you were with everyday, you became like each other [A7, F, swimming, 24 y.o.].

These observations suggest that personal and social identities are most effective when they are balanced and engaged strategically. Both are important to an athlete's sense of self, but they come into play in different contexts to support individual and team achievements, as needed. Reflecting on the influence of both these aspects of self, A18 [F, volleyball, 41 y.o.] explained that:

A typical volleyball player ….the good ones are resilient ….you have to stand up for yourself, but not be too egocentric ….to be a little bit of a mix of an individual and a team player.

5.2. Theme 2: Adjusting to identity loss

Having stressed the centrality of sporting identity, all athletes reported experiencing a deep sense of its loss with retirement, irrespective of the individual or team nature of their sport. As some of the quotes below show, athlete descriptions of identity loss were not unlike those reported in previous research on sport retirement. The extension here was the differential impact of such identity loss depending on the extent to which athletes defined themselves exclusively through sport or in terms of multiple identities.

In line with previous work on athlete retirement, all our participants recognised how central their sporting identity was to the way they self-defined.

I've been a professional athlete for 20 years and that's all I know ….when you quit it's a part of your identity that's been taken away [A21, F, bobsleigh, 36 y.o.]

You've spent every day together for however many years and you've gone through all those shared experiences and the bonding elements. And then to leave. [A12, M, AFL, 31 y.o.]

The sense of loss was characterised by some respondents as a sense of no longer feeling different or special. Becoming more like an average person contrasted with everything they had strived to be during their sporting career; "*I felt like I was nothing any more*" [A17, M, handball, 29 y.o.]; "*I'm now normal ….I'm not who I used to be. I'm not special anymore … I'm nothing … I'm just a regular guy and that was difficult.*" [A5, M, judo, 27 y.o.]

There were, however, differences when it came to athlete reflections and perspectives on the impact of this loss. Some described it in the context of feeling exclusively driven and defined by their sport, and here the experience was typically of feeling lost — of not knowing what to do and being in a state of crisis when they retired. For other participants, the loss occurred in the context of feeling more positive about retirement — experiencing a sense of relief, of being open to new opportunities, and having a wider sense of purpose in life outside sport. These perspectives were fleshed out in two subthemes that captured experiences of identity exclusivity and multiple identity.

5.2.1. Identity exclusivity undermines adjustment

Given the huge investment in sport, it is no surprise that several athletes struggled to adjust to retirement. Common to this group was the experience of defining themselves exclusively as an athlete. In this context, some described retirement as constituting something of an identity crisis associated with an ongoing struggle to understand one's place in the world:

It took about a year to realize why I was struggling and that [it] was my identity — who I am. That was taken away. [A21, F, bobsleigh, 36 y.o.]

[I was] struggling with the identity crisis. It's because I didn't feel any more about [striving for] excellence. [A1, M, speed skating, 30 y.o.]

For others the struggle involved trying to come to terms with changed relationships, and not seeing the people they had spent so much time with when their lives were dedicated to sport:

The shock of not being there, it's hard … it just keeps churning and burning … I think the relationships will stay there; they're just not the same. [A12, M, AFL, 31 y.o.]

The day only existed for me and my [sport] career ….it's such a closed bubble ….for some people it is their life ….the team is the only thing they have. [A19, F, volleyball, 37 y.o.]

Such exclusivity contrasts with being well connected to multiple groups — that SIMIC predicts should be associated with better adjustment to life changes. In line with this prediction, we see evidence of the role that multiple identities played in supporting more positive adjustment trajectories.

5.2.2. Multiple identities provide opportunities in retirement

Where participants experienced loss in the context of being part of a wider social group network, they shifted their focus onto other relationships that they had. Here athletes described coming to terms with the time-limited nature of sport and the need to have other ways of living their life if they were to move on:

It's important that you don't lose all the other parts of you. Because what happens is when that athletic identity is in crisis, or is jeopardized and you can't play your sport. You know, what else have you to fall back on? [A6, F, athletics, 37 y.o.]

Added to this was a sense of relief that those athletes who were well connected experienced when talking about identity loss. This was described in the context of being open to opportunities outside sport and the relief of being free of injury problems:

[I felt] weirdly relieved, because I have a job opportunity [A7, F, swimming, 24 y.o.]

Relief ….because I went through injuries later in my career. There was relief from that point of view, but then you miss the everyday stuff of seeing everyone each day [A14, M, NRL, 29 y.o.]

As this last quote suggests, being able to live a life outside of sport did not necessarily mean that athletes did not experience a sense of loss — instead they just experienced it differently and in a way that enabled a more positive trajectory out of sport.

Summarising this theme, it was clear that a sense of loss around athletic identity was inevitable in retirement. Nevertheless, how an athlete defined their identity — in exclusive terms confined solely to sport or in more distributed terms associated with multiple group belonging — had a different effect on the experience of loss. As the third theme will demonstrate, it also had implications for how participants came to see themselves in retirement.

5.3. Theme 3: Remooring identity to be more than one's sport

Negotiating the transition out of sport was challenging for all participants, but more so for those who kept looking for the same highs that sport had previously provided. Despite dedicating time and effort into new pursuits, these participants reported struggling to find the same satisfaction in their work or study and intensity in their relationships. For the majority though, there was an openness and motivation to move on. What these participants shared was their openness to planning for retirement, to gaining a sense of self-continuity through their relationships outside sport, and to re-purposing their skills in ways that helped them to thrive in a new domain. A common thread in their narratives was the recognition that there was more to their lives than just sport. These alternative experiences were reflected in two subthemes: searching for a new identity and actively repurposing identity. These, however, were associated with contrasting retirement experiences.

5.3.1. Searching for a new identity

For some participants the experience of identity loss affected their ability to let go of the achievements and relationships that had made them and their athletic career so special. Life certainly continued for these participants, as they had acquired new roles (e.g., through new jobs, study), but these were not particularly meaningful and were described as less satisfying and fulfilling. These participants described searching for something that could bring back the elation they had felt when competing, and lamented at not being able to find it:

I don't know really how to describe it but when you play for the national team and the national hymn begins to play it's a feeling you can't describe. Sometimes I'm looking for the feeling in other things but I can't find it. [A17, M, handball, 29 y.o.]

These respondents also described an inability to find elsewhere the sense of camaraderie they had with their teammates. They noted that, regardless of whether they had won or lost, only one's teammates knew what the extremes of success and failure felt like:

That type of working together, but also the decompression I missed a lot ….Once you've played your game, you lost or won it, then you have the decompression with your teammates. You go out and get yourself drunk, but on Sunday morning you get practice again; just that release of tension to build it up again [A15, M, volleyball, 33 y.o.]

Others explained how they tried to keep busy and apply their skills with the aim of excelling in another domain, but found this hard to achieve. Thus, A1 [M, speed skating, 30 y.o.] observed that *taking up study kept me busy*. But it did not provide the connection to excellence he was searching for: *even though I was feeling good about achievement with studying …. it was not that excellent.* As the quotes in this section illustrate, these strategies were part of an attempt by participants to anchor their identity to somewhere new outside of sport, but their difficulties arose from the fact that this was proving unsuccessful and unfulfilling.

5.3.2. Actively repurposing identity

Not all participants described a sense of being moored in the past. As A21 [F, bobsleigh, 36 y.o.] reflected, *Once you lost your identity as a sports athlete, it's important to re-find your identity and to repurpose that identity*. Such re-purposing was typically achieved through active planning and recognising that athletes were more than their sport.

For these athletes planning provided a foundation to move on. Sometimes this was the result of getting into sport later in life, recognising that sport was not going to be forever, or feeling in control of the timing of retirement. Yet regardless of what had stimulated it, planning generally led to athletes being mindful of the need for their identities to 'move on':

When you mature in the system, you come to realise that you need a contingency plan, you need something outside [of sport]. You need balance. [A9, M, AFL, 28 y.o.]

I took [retirement] into my own hands. I started looking for another education while I was still playing [sport] on a high level. I managed to study my bachelor [degree] in three years like any normal person. [A5, M, judo, 27 y.o.]

Active engagement in planning also helped athletes to realise that there was more to life than sport. Indeed, this was a common refrain among participants: *I'm more than my sport ….sport is a massive part of my identity, but I also have other interests* [A2, F, judo, 35 y.o.]; *I'm proud, I'm proud to be one of, you know athletes in the all-time list ….But it's not all of me* [A6, F, athletics, 37 y.o.].

At the same time, thinking about what was coming next in life was also central to their capacity to move on. A common thread was gaining a sense of self-continuity. Maintaining relationships was one way of achieving this and typically involved making time for friends outside sport even when competing *[I] retained groups when [I] got into sport* [A2, F, judo, 35 y.o.]), and feeling comfortable hanging on to those friendships that were forged through sport (*That volleyball group is still the group of my best friends* [A15, M, volleyball, 33 y.o.]). Taking on roles that provided a way of maintaining one's connections to sport — through coaching or taking up a new sport — also provided some self-continuity that supported them in retirement:

I'm one of the coaches. So it's then just switching from not training anymore to giving the example or just telling what to do ….It's still the same, but it's on the other side. [A16, F, skiing, 38 y.o.]

In one sense these new sports-related pursuits constituted new groups and identities that SIMIC predicts enhances adjustment to life change, However, at the same time they also provided the basis for athletes to achieve a sense of self-continuity by allowing them to derive meaning from their sporting identity in a new way. This allowed them to retain an important identity (*AFL is still part of my identity* [A12, M, AFL, 31 y.o.]), but to keep it in perspective by seeing it in a new light. Continuity was also evident in athletes' repurposing of skills that they developed and perfected in their sporting careers. As A9 [M, AFL, 28 y.o.] explained: *You can learn diligence, preparation, all these other things and then taking it to a whole new workplace you can still use similar skill sets.* Seeing how the skills they had developed had value outside of sport contributed to athletes realising that they were more than their sport.

As these subthemes show, athletes had divergent experiences when it came to managing sport retirement. Some athletes had a feeling of being moored in the past; being unable to let go of their sporting identity to find a new identity that would help to give their lives the same meaning and purpose that sport provided. This was reflected in an ongoing search for something that could reconnect them to the same feelings they had when competing. However, for the majority of participants, there was a clear trajectory associated with moving on. Athletes reflected on the sense of pride they had in what they achieved, but also recognised that there was more to them and to life after sport:

When you step out of this rush and you open your mind ....you can see that there is so much more to life ....Am I missing it? For sure. Do I miss the competition? For sure. But in the last 3 years I gained so much more in my life, by just stepping out [A19, F, volleyball, 37 y.o.]

6. Discussion

The present research drew on social identity theorising to understand athletes' experience of negotiating identity loss and change in the context of transitioning out of elite sport. Three central themes were identified in athletes' reflections on these issues. These related (a) to their ability to balance the personal and social aspects of their athletic identity, (b) to their experiences of identity loss which diverged as a function of whether they defined themselves exclusively with reference to their athletic identity or in terms of multiple identities, and (c) to the degree to which they were able to remoor their identity in retirement, characterised by subthemes of searching for a new identity and activity repurposing identity. In what follows, we reflect on the ways that these findings advance on previous research and their implications for theory and practice.

In describing the experience of identity change, athletes focused on the centrality of their sporting identity and what this meant to them. Here they reflected on what they shared with other athletes, but also on what made them distinct from non-athletes. These observations are not unique to our research and align with the findings of a number of previous studies (e.g., Lavallee et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2014). Nevertheless, a novel development here is to show that athletes' sense of sporting identity loss was not just personal but was also *social,* in the sense of reflecting a loss of connection to others who were included as part of their athletic identity. In this way, retirement entailed not just a loss of a sense of 'me' that was unique to themselves as individuals but also a loss of a sense of 'we' and 'us' (and the dedication, mutual respect, and pride that goes along with this). This observation also highlights the dynamic nature of identity, which social identity theorising explains by noting that identity is always tied in meaningful ways to the social context in which perceivers find themselves (Oakes et al., 1994). More specifically, self-categorization theory argues that social context—for example, whether an athlete is at the starting line for a race or in a queue for the cinema—is a key determinant of which aspect of their identity will be fitting and hence become salient. There was also a sense that those athletes who strategically managed and balanced these self-categorizations — drawing on personal identity to achieve their best as an individual and drawing on social identity with the team to achieve their best as part of that team — were more satisfied with their performance. This speaks to the observation that goal achievement in sport is an important predictor of retirement outcomes (Lally, 2007; Martin et al., 2014), but provides a new perspective on the ways in which identity processes — both personal and social — might support such achievement.

A second unifying theme was the sense of identity loss that all athletes shared and which was recognised as the price of a career in elite sport. However, as other researchers have noted, the loss experienced differed between athletes. For example, Martin et al. (2014) found this was dependent on the strength of athletic identity as athletes approached retirement. Along related lines, other studies have shown that having a strong sense of athletic identity puts athletes at greater risk of finding career transitions problematic (e.g., Kuettel et al., 2017; Park et al., 2013). Our findings highlight another differentiating factor in this context; the *exclusivity* of sporting identity. Consistent with the first principle of SIMIC, those athletes who self-categorized primarily in terms of their athletic identity felt the loss more deeply than those who had a sense of multiple identities through family, and membership of friendship, and work networks. Moreover, among the latter there was an associated sense of relief in the transition. We have known for some time that athletic identity foreclosure increases the risk of problematic

adjustment (e.g., Brewer et al., 1993). However, in the present research we observed how a strong exclusive athletic identity precludes access to multiple social identities and thereby exacerbates the sense of identity loss in retirement.

Extending on this point, the third theme showed that exclusivity impacted on adjustment by influencing athletes' capacity to remoor their identity on retirement. Here the minority of respondents who defined themselves primarily through their sport, reflected in nostalgic terms on their inability to let go of this identity and find a new meaningful identity. They essentially anchored themselves to the past and failed to connect strongly with anything other than sport. Their failure to find somewhere new to moor their sense of self stunted their identity development in retirement. In contrast, most of the athletes in our sample reported having moved on by actively evolving and repurposing their identity. These participants had planned for retirement and repurposed the skills they developed in sport. This was often done in ways that helped them still feel connected with sport—whether through work (e.g., coaching, mentoring), by maintaining valued relationships with others in sport, or by joining new groups associated with sport. This ongoing connection provided athletes not only with a sense of self-continuity in the face of change but also with a basis for seeing themselves as more than just their sport.

Again, though, this observation aligns with the work of other researchers in domains other than sport. In particular, the process of identity remooring was previously observed by Ethier and Deaux (1994) among Hispanic students negotiating their ethnic identity when transitioning to university study. Here the researchers found that students who successfully negotiated this transition were able to live out their strong ethnic identity through new Hispanic groups that they joined on campus. Nevertheless, the present study findings extend those of Ethier and Deaux (1994) by drawing attention to the difficulties that can ensue from the experience of failing to remoor. While the students in Ethier and Deaux's research reported a decline in their ethnic identity and felt threatened by being Hispanic, such experiences were not shared by athletes in our study who continued to cling on to a strong sporting identity even in the face of their being unable to live this identity out. Indeed, this inability to live out an identity that still mattered to them was a source of distress and was experienced as a substantial barrier to successful adjustment.

In previous research, there has been considerable focus on cataloguing athletic identity as one of a range of factors that shape retirement adjustment. Inspired by social identity theorising, the specific advance that the present research provides is to draw on an integrated theoretical model — SIMIC — that explains *why* these factors have the impact on adjustment trajectories that they do. Amongst other things, this model allows us to understand why the experience of identity foreclosure and exclusivity is problematic for adjustment since it proposes that adjustment to life change is enhanced to the extent that people belong to multiple groups and hence have access to the various resources that these provide (e.g., social support and a sense of control; Greenaway et al., 2015; Haslam et al., 2012).

In line with SIMIC, we also found that positive transitions were more common among those athletes who had enjoyed ties to multiple social groups, both within and outside sport, in the course of their sporting careers. For these athletes, belonging to multiple and diverse groups increased the opportunities they had to forge a new life beyond the realm of elite sport. Importantly, though, these athletes also discussed how they had maintained their connections with sport, but in ways that reflected their having developed and repurposed their sporting identity. This experience speaks to the importance of SIMIC's identity continuity pathway to adjustment. Additionally, there was also evidence that reflected the importance of SIMIC's identity gain pathway. In particular, this was seen among athletes who reported having had a successful transition to retirement as a result of having joined new groups. Typically, this involved pursuing new study or work opportunities, but again this was facilitated by having been a member of more groups prior to

retirement.

Nevertheless, there are limitations in SIMIC's capacity to explain our findings. In particular, the framework does not provide a clear account of the experiences reflecting an integration or merging of the continuity and gain pathways described by athletes who repurposed their identity after retirement. A clear example of this is the experience of maintaining one's sporting identity at the same time as gaining a new identity as coach. We know this is positive for adjustment, but SIMIC is not particularly clear about how this is enabled. Is adjustment supported primarily by activation of one path (e.g., maintenance over gain), by activation of both paths independently (i.e., maintenance and gain), or a merging of pathways (not an explicit feature of SIMIC)? These are questions that cannot be answered by the present data but deserve attention in future development of the model.

There are additional limitations of the study that have a bearing on interpretation of our findings. The first relates to sampling. As noted in the Method, our sample was largely comprised of athletes who had performed as a competitive elite or successful elite level. However, within this sample were athletes who either competed nationally, internationally, or at both levels. Clearly engagement in sport at these differing levels is not the same. While we feel that this was unlikely to have influenced athlete's discourse in ways that impacted the interpretation of findings, we cannot be entirely sure of this. Also relevant to sampling is the variability in the amount of time competing in elite sport, which ranged from 1 to 20 years. This is a reflection, in part, of the fact that some sports are more conducive to longer careers. We feel this added some richness and validity to the range of experiences athletes described, but we cannot rule out the possibility that this diversity disguised important differences in experience as a consequence of time in elite competition.

There is also the issue of athletes being involved as participants of a program focusing on career transition before interview. This was used to promote a broader conceptualisation of identity in athletes' experience of retirement and to develop a shared vocabulary and context for the study. However, it may have limited discussion about wider factors influencing athlete retirement experiences. Finally, the length of time for which interviewees had been retired varied across our sample and this too may have impacted on the adjustment experiences they described. It might be the case, for example, that recently retired athletes struggle more than those who have been retired for longer, as previous research suggests (e.g., Park et al., 2013). This did not seem to be the case in our sample, which might explain why it did not emerge as a central theme. Athletes retired less than 8 months described different adjustment experiences (i.e., A6 and A12 experienced greater difficulty than A2, A4, and A8) as did athletes retired for two to three years (A1, A5, and A17 experienced greater difficulty than A7, A9 and A10). Nevertheless, this disparity suggests that athletes' experiences are shaped by a range of experiences that might not be fully captured by length of time retired.

7. Conclusion

Identity processes are recognised as central to navigating career transitions in sport. The present research develops this idea to extend our understanding of athlete experiences in retirement. In this context, SIMIC provides a useful framework for understanding the nature of athletes' retirement experiences and the factors that contribute to shaping these. In line with this model, a key factor that emerged from our interviews with retired athletes was the extent to which those athletes' sport-related sense of self was inclusive of multiple and diverse groups and identities (as opposed to being solely identified by sport). This generally had positive implications for retirement adjustment — largely because it supported processes of identity maintenance and gain which allowed athletes to move forward and actively repurpose their identity after they had hung up their boots. In this, the model also provides a framework for active identity management in the context of

retirement — pointing to key identity-related issues that need to be addressed in the process of resourcing and supporting athletes throughout this significant life change. Doing this successfully should ensure that being more than one's sport is not just an aspiration for retirement but a reality.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Catherine Haslam: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Chloe McAulay:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dean Cooper:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Niels Mertens:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Pete Coffee:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Chris Hartley:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Tarli Young:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Crystal J. La Rue:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **S. Alexander Haslam:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Funding acquisition. **Niklas K. Steffens:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Tegan Cruwys:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Sarah V. Bentley:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Clifford J. Mallett:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Matthew McGregor:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Conceptualization. **David Williams:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Katrien Fransen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

Data availability

Anonymous transcripts can be accessed via the open science framework, https://osf.io/j8gtf

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102640.

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