

Exploring Athletic Identity in a Team of NCAA Division II Women's Basketball  
Players

By

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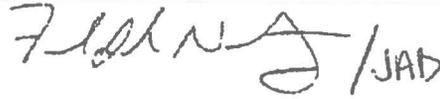


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EXPLORING ATHLETIC IDENTITY IN A TEAM OF NCAA DIVISION II  
WOMEN'S BASKETBALL PLAYERS

A thesis prepared by Katelyn Smith

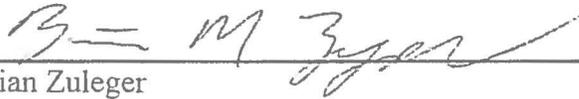
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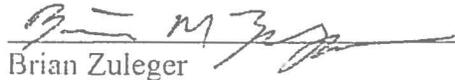


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### **Abstract**

An athlete will one day experience retirement from their respective sport. Athletic identity can play a role in how the athlete may cope with this transition to life without athletics. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in a team of Division II Women's Basketball players, and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity. This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative measures to gain insight on the topic of athletic identity. Questionnaires, interviews and interventions were conducted over a period of five weeks. Seven NCAA Division II women's basketball players at a small rural university participated in the study. Through the interviews focused on discovering underlying factors of athletic identity, six emergent themes arose: psychological need to be viewed as an athlete, self-defined athlete, highly invested in sport throughout life, family influence, lack of purpose outside of sport and lack of balance outside of sport. Post-interviews were conducted, focused on discovering the athlete's perceptions of a positive psychology intervention and five emergent themes were discovered: lack of understanding of strengths without sport, intention to stay involved in sport, sport has influenced career choices, self-defined athletes and intervention beneficial and enjoyable. These results suggest that overall, the underlying factors to athletic identity were based on a lack of the athletes finding purpose outside of sport, influence from family and society, as well as a need to be viewed and seen as an athlete. Results also suggested a positive psychology intervention can be beneficial to athletes in allowing them to reflect and gain a better understanding of their life outside of sport.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As the buzzer went off in the second half for the very last time I thought I would be fine, but in many ways I was not, as my athletic career came to an end. I played four years at the collegiate level and had dedicated my life to the sport of basketball. I spent countless hours practicing, competing, spending time traveling and being with my teammates. Being an athlete was all I knew and I didn't want to accept the fact that my career as an athlete was over. I didn't realize and accept the fact that I was no longer an athlete until I reached graduate school. I would no longer attend pre-season conditioning, weight lifting and open gyms. I would no longer step on the floor in mid-October as a collegiate athlete. I was lost and confused. I felt as if I had lost the most important aspect of me and didn't know my worth. I reaped the costs of holding onto a strong athletic identity. Re-defining myself was the next step, but what else did I know? What else could I do? The journey of re-identifying myself was taxing and mentally exhausting. I took the next step of life as a non-athlete, which was uncomfortable and difficult. I had to learn to re-define myself and discover a new identity without athletics.

As collegiate athletic careers come to an end, many athletes are faced with the inevitable decision of deciding what to do next. Many athletes at the collegiate level are consumed by their sport and have dedicated most of their lives to it. Athletes in general typically have started playing their sport at a very young age, and have spent countless hours practicing, competing and training to be the best. Due to countless hours spent in sport, there is usually a decreased amount of time for outside activities that do not involve the sport. The excessive amount of time spent in sport, usually results in athletes being consumed by their sport at a very young age, identifying as an athlete, and not having a chance to explore other identities (Houle, Brewer & Kluck, 2010).

Some athletes, especially at the collegiate level, have greater mental and physical demands than the average student (Clow, 2001). Student-athletes spend over twenty hours a week participating in their sport, miss classes traveling to competitions, and often sustain injury and experience fatigue (Watt & Moore, 2001; Wolverton, 2008). Student-athletes are required to maintain grades high enough to continue to be eligible to play (Gayles, 2009). Student-athletes' social constructs typically consist of predominantly other student-athletes; as they spend a great deal of time together, whether it be practicing, dining or traveling (Clow, 2001; Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993). Many of the student-athletes' conversations are also focused around the sport, even when talking with non-athletes (Clow, 2001; Danish et al., 1993). The amount of time many student-athletes devote to their sport requires them to adapt an identity as an athlete before exploring or adapting to any other role (Beamon, 2012).

There is a small amount of athletes who make it to the professional level in their respective sport (NCAA, 2012). As a result, many athletes retire from their sport after their collegiate career comes to an end. There are approximately 460,000 college students participating in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletics each year (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; NCAA, 2012). "Approximately 1% of collegiate athletes become professionals, and the average sports career lasts around three-and-a-half years" (Beamon, 2012, p. 195). The 99% of NCAA athletes who do not make it to the professional level are usually required to explore other career or life options. During this transition period they are required to re-define their self-identity and social identity (Beamon, 2012).

Identity theory explains why humans will focus the majority of their time on the tasks they identify most with (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Hoberman, 2000). As the identity is reinforced and activated with others, meaning society places an emphasis on a certain identity,

the more important and valuable it becomes to that individual (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013).

Identity development is a process that can take time and is dependent on the person, and their individual values and society (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). Athletic identity is defined as the extent to which an individual identifies with the athlete role and can have both positive and negative effects on an athlete (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). The degree an athlete identifies with the athlete role can be a factor in how the costs of a strong athletic identity may outweigh the benefits (Brewer et al., 1993).

Athletes who place value and meaning on their sport have been known to experience success to an extent (Balague, 1999). Athletic identity can also be understood through the explanation of why athletes want to be athletes and understanding what is important to them (Balague, 1999). Valuing goals, both task-oriented and ego-oriented, correlates to the commitment an athlete needs to achieve such goals (Balague, 1999). If these athletes do not value the goals, or if the goals do not have meaning to them, then the goals will not be seen as important (Balague, 1999). Thus, an athlete will be less likely to identify with such attributes to the sport or skill (Balague, 1999).

### **Statement of the problem**

A strong athletic identity can be beneficial to an athlete because they have a sense of who they are and are confident in that role (Brewer et al., 1993). However, a strong athletic identity can also be costly to an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). In many cases, athletes who hold a strong athletic identity have increased emotional problems when dealing with injury, have difficulty when choosing a career, and have difficulties with life after athletics (Brewer et al., 1993). These athletes are also faced with a society that continues to reinforce and promote their athletic identity. This can lead to a difficult transition to life after athletics and identity foreclosure,

which means they have solely identified as an athlete without exploring any other roles (Beamon, 2012).

### **Purpose of the study**

According to Balague (1999) there are many benefits to conducting intimate, long-term case studies of athletes in order to expand “our understanding of the identities, meanings, and values of these rare individuals” (p. 97). Also, exploring other career choices, identity and participation in other activities can benefit athletes during their time in the sport, and decrease mental and emotional distress when their athletic careers come to an end (Brewer et al., 1993; Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in a team of Division II Women's Basketball players, and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity.

### **Research Questions**

Pre-Intervention:

What are some underlying factors of athletic identity in a team of NCAA Division II women's basketball players?

Post-Intervention:

What are student-athletes' experiences and perspectives of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity?

**Delimitations**

1. The study strictly examined NCAA Division II women's basketball players.
2. Participants are from one single university.
3. This study only examined a team during one season of play (2015-2016).
4. Only three positive psychology interventions (Discovering Strengths, Best Possible Self and writing a Sport Narrative) were used for the interventions.
5. The duration of the study was five weeks.
6. The subjects in the study are only female.

**Limitations**

1. If the athlete is injured and can't play at the time of the study, it may affect how they identify with the athlete role.
2. Playing time and if the athletes are a starter could affect their identity during this time of the study.

**Assumptions**

1. The student-athletes had a general idea of their identity and were able to answer questions based off of the identity they best relate to.
2. Athletes responded honestly and to the best of their ability.
3. Questions were understood, and allowed them to elaborate and expand on the topic.

**Definition of terms**

*Athletic Identity*: The extent to which an individual identifies themselves with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993).

*Career Transition:* As an athlete, transition from athlete to post-athletic career (Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996).

*Collegiate Athlete:* Non-professional athlete participating in competitive sport provided by an educational institution (NCAA, 2012).

*Identity Foreclosure:* Commitment to an identity before one has explored or engaged in other activities, or has shown exploratory behavior of other activities (Danish et al., 1993; Marcia, 1966).

*Identity Theory:* The more often an identity becomes reinforced or activated through others, the more salient it becomes to a person; if one identity becomes more recognizable, then more time will be spent on that identity at the expense of the other one (Burke, 1980; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Hoberman, 2000).

*Identity Saliency:* Concept that makes sense of the way a person responds to different situations based on their identity (Stryker, 1968).

*Injury:* Damage to the body, which can hinder one from doing everyday things or participate in activities, or prohibit athletes from competing (Almeida, Olmedilla, Rubio & Palou, 2014).

*Meaning:* The significance of something specifically to the person (Balague, 1999).

*NCAA Division II:* Part of the National Collegiate Athletic Association; an intermediate level of competition (NCAA, 2012).

*Retirement from sport:* Termination to a sports career due to no eligibility, can't continue to the next level of play, injury or by choice (Grove, Lavalley & Gordon, 1997).

*Value:* In an athletic setting, can determine athlete priorities, and what matters most (Balague, 1999).

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### Introduction

Beginning at a young age, as early as ten years old, some athletes are consumed by their sport and have already psychologically committed to their role as an athlete (Johnson & Migliaccio, 2009). Athletic identity can be both beneficial and costly to an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). Athletes are continually reinforced of their athletic identity through society, teammates, family members, etc. (Beamon, 2012). Athletes are at a higher risk for emotional damage and suffering, both temporary and career-ending, as the result of injury or during the completion of their sport due to eligibility (Brewer et al., 1993). The risks athletes face, are highly dependent on what athletes identify most with and how they respond in certain situations. There is a need for professionals to assist athletes in determining roles they most identify with (Beamon, 2012), and to expand those roles to other aspects of their life. The purpose of this study was to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in a team of Division II Women's Basketball players, and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity, in preventing these increased risks of emotional damage.

### Identity Theory

Identity theory can be used as a basis to better understand athletic identity. Identity theory states that the more often an identity becomes reinforced, through social interactions, the more salient it becomes to a person (Burke, 1980; Stryker, 1968). According to Stryker (1968), identity salience is the probability an identity will be activated and reinforced in certain situations. People will choose to identify with the roles that are most reinforced by society, through recognition and acknowledgement (Burke, 1980; Stryker, 1968). Thus, these roles

become what they focus on developing at the expense of other identities and other aspects of life (Hoberman, 2000). People will also choose identities which are consistent with aspects of their self-concept (Cornelius, 1995). Self-concept refers to how an individual may evaluate or perceive themselves (Bee, 1992). This can also refer to what an individual may think about themselves, including their attributes (Bee, 1992). Identity is also formed through a process of self-categorization, and the aspect that the person belongs with a certain group (Stets & Burke, 2000). People tend to place themselves in groups they relate most with and categorize themselves into that certain identity (Stets & Burke, 2000).

According to Higgins (1987) and Linville (1985; 1987), a person's self-concept is viewed as a multidimensional structure that consists of a person's thoughts and feelings about the self, including self-schema, past self, present self and future positive self (Bee, 1992). Self-concept typically refers to the belief that an individual has about his or her attributes, a self-schema (Campbell & Lavalley, 1993). This self-schema will organize and process information related to the self (Markus, 1977). For example, in the realm of sport, an athlete with a stronger athletic identity will process negative events, such as an injury, in terms of how they function solely as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). An athlete will typically experience and interpret events that occur in terms of their athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). This cognitive structure may consume the athlete and can affect how the athlete interprets successes and failures (Brewer et al., 1993).

Identity is also related to what one participates in, and what they enjoy in life (Vlachopoulos, Kaperoni & Moustaka, 2011). Identity theory is a central factor in human behavior in respect to the social groups one participates in, and people believe that they belong to a certain group and will adhere to that specific group because it is what they know and are most

comfortable with (Stets & Burke, 2000; Vlachopoulos et al., 2011). Identity theory describes the relationship between the person and the role they identify with, and their behaviors within that role (Burke, 2007). People can hold many identities but they may relate to certain ones stronger than others (Burke, 2007; Stryker, 1968).

According to Erikson (1980), the formation of one's identity is a long process that takes plenty of development and is a lifelong process. Once identity-defining commitments have been made, identity development seems to be stable (Kroger, Martinussen & Marcia, 2010). Carlsson, Wängqvist and Frisé (2015), examined identity development that occurred in the first 20 years of life in 124 individuals from the ages of 25-29 years, in order to track development even after identity commitments had been made. Three dimensions were focused on including meaning making, development of personal life direction and their approach to changing life conditions (Carlsson et al., 2015). Through an interviewing process that focused on identity change based on the three dimensions, the researchers found that identity development did continue into the late 20's, depending on how the participants approached life changing decisions (career choice, etc.), and how they placed meaning on those events (Carlsson et al., 2015). Therefore, the developmental process is continuing but must have meaning for identity to be altered after such commitment or identity foreclosure occurs (Carlsson et al., 2015). Identity is a continuing process that should be addressed and individuals should be advised to always continue the identity developmental process (Carlsson et al., 2015).

In the realm of athletics, Adler and Adler (1991), examined the academic and athletic roles through a chronological account under the context of identity theory. Over the course of ten years, there were 39 athletes and seven coaches at a private university involved in this research (Adler & Adler, 1991). The researchers followed, observed and interviewed athletes throughout

the years and served as advisors and confidants to the subjects (Adler & Adler, 1991).

Throughout the study the researchers found that many of the athletes who first entered college held a salient academic identity, but wanted to gain fame and recognition through sport at this level (Adler & Adler, 1991). However, due to lack of reinforcement and development of the academic role, it became less prevalent and athletics became the more salient identity (Adler & Adler, 1991). Identities become more salient in the athletic role and the identity as an athlete became foreclosed, meaning they have chosen to identify as an athlete without further exploring other identities (Adler & Adler, 1991). The athletes became dominated by this role, and felt as if they were in the "spotlight" (Adler & Adler, 1991). This salience occurs from continued reinforcement of society and teammates, due to the mental and physical demands of the sport (Beamon, 2012).

### **Identity Foreclosure**

Identity foreclosure is the process of committing to a role without exploring other behaviors (Marcia, 1966). Foreclosure could be caused by individual choice or, in other cases, demands from the environment, which prohibit the person from exploring other roles (Danish et al., 1993). For example, in order for identity foreclosure to occur, it must be reinforced by society through recognition of that role and solidifying that role (Beamon, 2012). Athletes are, in some cases, restricted from exploring other activities outside of the sport due to the psychological and physical demands placed on them on a day-to-day basis (Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy, Petitpas & Brewer, 1996). Athletes are also reinforced through society in how they are solely identified as an athlete, which can also bring an increased risk for identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012). Identity foreclosure can lead to increased difficulty in choosing a career, as

well as difficulty when dealing with injuries or retirement from sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy et al., 1996; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Murphy et al. (1996) examined 124 intercollegiate athletes, 99 men and 25 women, participating in nine different sports at the NCAA Division I level. The sports included football (47), men's and women's basketball (8), men's ice hockey (6), field hockey (1), wrestling (1), men's and women's crew (60), and men's swimming (60) (Murphy et al., 1996). The purpose of their study was to understand and explore students' levels of identity foreclosure and athletic identity, and how those were related to career maturity (based on a career-decision making process) (Murphy et al., 1996). Identity foreclosure was measured through the foreclosure subscale of the Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status (OM-EIS; Adams, Shea & Fitch, 1979). Athletic identity was measured through the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993). Career maturity was measured through the Attitude scale of the Career Maturity Inventory (CMI; Crites, 1978). Researchers suggested that both identity foreclosure and athletic identity were inversely related to career maturity, meaning that athletes are more likely to not explore non-sport related careers (Murphy et al., 1996). These findings support the implementation of career exploration during athletics, and identifying what the athletes like and dislike to aid this process (Murphy et al., 1996). This allows for greater career maturity and decreased chance of a strong athletic identity and identity foreclosure (Murphy et al., 1996).

Other researchers have shown that society may place great demands on the athlete, which prevent them from exploring other options, which could result in identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012). Beamon (2012) interviewed 20 former Division 1 male football (17) and basketball (3) players ranging in age from 22 to 47 years. Interviews were conducted in terms of how athletes perceived themselves after the completion of their sport (Beamon, 2012). The purpose of the

study was to qualitatively examine athletic identity salience with the grounding of athletes (Beamon, 2012). Athletes are typically reinforced by society which allows them to hold an athletic identity even when not in an athletic setting (Beamon, 2012). Three of the participants were playing sports professionally and the remaining were unemployed or holding jobs in other professions (Beamon, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in terms of how these former athletes defined themselves even after participation in sport (Beamon, 2012). Such questions included "How do you define yourself?" and "How do you think others define you?" (Beamon, 2012). One of the participants in Beamon's qualitative study says that his identity as an athlete was "cemented by the time I was twelve" (Beamon, 2012, p. 200). He also could make a distinction between athletes and non-athletes by the time he was a junior in high school (Beamon, 2012). He saw a significant difference between him being an athlete and "other people," solidifying his athletic identity very soon and reaching identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012). Another participant in the study described his interactions with others who felt that sports was the "only way he would make it," which increased his athletic identity, resulting in identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012). Many were unable to re-define themselves and had a difficult time transitioning out of athletics and making career decisions (Beamon, 2012). Some of the athletes felt they were now a "regular" person as opposed to a great athlete, and career transition was also difficult because they felt they suffered a loss of status and loss of self (Beamon, 2012). A salient athletic identity can be detrimental to an athlete if they do not understand how to transition and proceed to a new identity after athletics (Beamon, 2012).

Researchers have suggested identity foreclosure can occur as early as childhood, especially for athletes (Beamon, 2012; Houle, Brewer & Kluck, 2010). Houle et al., (2010) examined 63 intercollegiate female gymnasts, 18-22 years of age, who had been participating in

their sport for at least 10 years. The subjects were asked to complete an AIMS scale, which is a measurement of ones' athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993), as if they were from the ages of ten and fifteen, and current age, with the purpose of examining athletic identity trends over a period of five years (Houle et al., 2010). Results demonstrated a significant increase in athletic identity between the ages of ten and fifteen ( $M=37.82$ ,  $SD=5.64$ ,  $t(60)=3.42$ ,  $p=.001$ ), and no significant change from age fifteen to current age ( $t(60)=.65$ ,  $p>.05$ ) (Houle et al., 2010). Based on these findings, athletic identity may be occurring at very young ages (Houle et al., 2010). Athletes in this particular study were at a point where they have already reached identity foreclosure, and had not explored or were not intending to explore other self-identifying options (Beamon, 2012; Houle et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 1996). Also, transition out of sport may imply an identity change will occur, and athletes who have a foreclosed identity may experience identity crisis and have difficulties with that transition process (IOC, 2012).

### **Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity is defined as the "degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). Athletes who identify solely as an athlete can be at risk for emotional distress when their athletic career comes to an end (Beamon, 2012). Some athletes may encounter difficulties in sport career transitions, such as when dealing with injury, being cut from the team, and athletic career termination (Brewer et al., 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Athletes may also have a harder time making a career decision due to extreme athletic identity and the inability to explore other career options (Beamon, 2012; Brewer et al., 1993; Grove, Lavalley & Gordon; 2008).

Student-athletes face many demands and challenges not experienced by the average population (Watson, 2006). For example, not only are they faced with a "dual role" of a student

and an amateur athlete, but they are also faced with many more responsibilities (Fletcher, Benshoff & Richburg, 2003; Ford, 2007; Watson, 2006). They must balance: both athletic and academic endeavors, social activities, successes and failures, physical health, injuries that may occur, multiple relationships with coaches, friends, teammates, family etc., and deal with the termination of one's athletic career whenever that may occur (Parham, 1993). The challenges an athlete faces on a day-to-day basis may be better understood through the extent to which they identify as an athlete (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013).

Beamon (2012) discovered that over half of the former athletes still felt athletics was a part of their self-definition. Also, 12 of the 20 athletes felt that sports make up over 75% of them as a person (Beamon, 2012). According to Beamon (2012), 17 of the 20 athletes interviewed discussed that others, and society viewed and related to the retired athletes in terms of their athletic identity. This is problematic because they were continuing to have foreclosed identity even after retirement (Beamon, 2012). They were at greater risk for not being able to explore other career options, thus causing emotional distress (Brewer et al., 1993). When society places an overemphasis on the athlete's athletic identity, they are at a higher risk of identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012). One of the athletes felt that people only knew him as an athlete, and another stated "or that's the only way they (society, family friends, etc.) can communicate with you" (Beamon, 2012, p. 202). Some of the former athletes were also reinforced by their physical characteristics (Beamon, 2012). For example, one of the athletes mentioned that because he is 6'5" society and others would ask "you play basketball?" (Beamon, 2012). Even though he used to play basketball, society would not let him choose a different identity: "It was kinda like an actor named Ricky when he was a child and now he wants to be called Rick when he is older"

(Beamon, 2012, p. 202). In terms of identity foreclosure, the behavior must be reinforced by others: family, friends, general public, etc. (Beamon, 2012).

The demands required by the athlete to excel in their sport can potentially restrict the student-athlete in engaging in exploratory behavior, which is critical for career development (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Jordaan 1963; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Super, 1957). Murphy et al. (1996) examined relationships between identity foreclosure, athletic identity and career maturation. The researchers found a negative correlation ( $r = -.36$ ) between identity foreclosure and career maturity (Identity Foreclosure Mean=14.79, Career Maturity Mean = 32.21, Athletic Identity Mean=49.56,  $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .005$ ), implying that allowing athletes to explore other identities besides only an athlete is essential for career development (Murphy et al., 1996). There was also an inverse relationship (athletic identity standard deviation=10.18 and career maturity standard deviation=7.38) between athletic identity and career maturity, meaning an athlete who solely and exclusively identifies with the athlete role is more likely to explore careers in an exercise or athletic setting, instead of exploring careers that don't involve sport (Murphy et al., 1996). An athlete who explores other career opportunities is more likely to do better academically than those who do not perform any career planning (Murphy et al., 1996).

There is a significant difference between saying "I am a runner" compared to "I enjoy running" (Symes, 2010). Rebecca Symes who is a leading sport psychology consultant with an emphasis in athletic identity explains how difficult the question "Who am I?" can be (Symes, 2010). There are many identities that can be used to define individuals, yet the problem is that having a strong athletic identity can result in over-training and an over commitment to that role (Symes, 2010). Professionals can help reduce the negative effects of athletic identity by showing athletes that they are a person as well as an athlete, and to help them realize their roles outside of

the sport (Symes, 2010). This can improve psychological health and overall well-being (Symes, 2010).

There are measures that can be used to grasp an understanding of the extent an athlete identifies with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993; Nasco & Webb, 2006). The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993) is a 10-item questionnaire used to measure the extent to which the athlete identifies with the athlete role based on a 7-point Likert-scale.

Another measure used is the Public-Private Athletic Identity Scale (PPAIS; Nasco & Webb, 2006). This is a 10-item scale that analyzes athletic identity and its relation to the public and private relations (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The private relations means the degree to which one person internalizes their athletic identity, and public relations means how the athlete identifies with the athlete role based on external circumstances and rewards (Nasco & Webb, 2006). Both measures have been proven valid and reliable for measuring athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993; Nasco & Webb, 2006).

### **Value and Meaning in Sport**

Value and meaning in sport can be crucial to an athlete, as well as understanding larger issues of identities and what the sport means to them (Balague, 1999). In some cases, value in training can be for creating pleasure or for social interaction (Ommundsen & Roberts, 1996). "Athletic performance often has central meaning to elite athletes because it represents a large portion of their self-identities" (Balague, 1999, p. 90). Understanding what an athlete "values" instead of just what they "like" can be a bridge to understanding their identity and how they can become their best possible self (Balague, 1999). Value determines an athlete's priorities, and when they value something they are more likely to commit and become involved with that activity, thus leading to an identity involved in that specific activity or sport (Balague, 1999).

Studies have shown that athletes lean toward valuing the social aspects of sport compared to the physical aspects of sport (Ommundsen & Roberts, 1996). Ommundsen and Roberts (1996), studied 230 elite athletes (123 male and 107 female) across eight different sports, within the Norwegian sport association, with the intent to examine the relationships between goal relations and perceived purpose of sport, to further understand what the sport means to these athletes (Ommundsen & Roberts, 1996). Questionnaires were mailed out to the elite athletes, and demographic information was assessed at first (Ommundsen & Roberts, 1996). The Perception of Success Questionnaire was used to measure task and ego goal perspectives and how they measured their successes (Ommundsen & Roberts, 1996). Results from this particular study demonstrated that athletes who focused on task-oriented goals (meaning athletes focus on the tasks and value the tasks that need to be achieved to meet such goals) had a greater purpose for participation in sport (Ommundsen & Roberts, 1996). Understanding why athletes participate in the sport they do is viable for future research (Ommundsen & Roberts, 1996). Athletes who place value and meaning on a sport, and provide themselves with goals, to improve their sport, have increased feelings of self-worth and increasing confidence within the sport (Morton, 2014). Establishing self-awareness and meaning of the sport can also help athletes go beyond identifying solely as an athlete and assist them in placing meaning on other aspects of life besides sport (Morton, 2014). Placing meaning and values, while understanding the purpose of participation and other aspects, can assist athletes in identifying with other aspects of life that can also hold meaning (Morton, 2014).

Valuing a sport, and understanding why an athlete values that sport, can lead to answers as to why they may hold a strong athletic identity, as well as why they may not explore other career options (Beamon, 2012). Another determinant that can be used to understand meaning is

through purpose of training and perspectives of goals (Ommundsen & Roberts, 1996).

Understanding perceived purpose of training can lead to a better understanding of the athlete, and how they will react to certain situations (Beamon, 2012). Conducting intimate and long term case studies on athletes to grasp a better understanding on what they value can be very beneficial to conduct (Balague, 1999). The underlying factors as to why athletes value certain things and what they place the most meaning on, can be very beneficial in understanding athletic identity (Balague, 1999; Beamon, 2012).

### **Athletic Identity Costs and Benefits**

Brewer et al. (1993) suggested athletic identity acts as either “Hercules’ muscle” or “Achilles’ Heel.” Some potential benefits of a salient athletic identity, or the ‘Hercules’ Muscle,’ could result in a salient self-identity or sense of self, better athletic performance, global self-esteem, and increased confidence (Brewer et al., 1993). The potential detriments or ‘Achilles’ Heel’ of athletic identity occurs when an athlete identifies only with the athlete aspect of self at the expense of other aspects of their lives and social roles (Brewer et al., 1993). One potential benefit is an athlete developing a salient self-identity or sense of self, meaning they are confident in who they are and know and understand their role (Brewer et al., 1993; McPherson, 1980; Symes, 2010). Holding a strong athletic identity can also be beneficial due to an increased salience to that identity (Symes, 2010). When an athlete strongly identifies with the athlete role, they can have increased commitment to the sport, motivation within the sport, as well as discipline within the sport because it means something to that athlete (Brewer et al., 1993; Symes, 2010). On the other side of a strong athletic identity, there can be an over commitment to the sport, which can lead to overtraining, burnout, anxiety or emotional distress when not training or involved in the sport as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993; Symes, 2010). This over

commitment places many physical and mental demands on the athlete which can be difficult to sustain over a period of time (Symes, 2010).

According to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (2012), preventative measures can be taken when dealing with athletic identity. There are ways to maximize the positive effects of athletic identity while minimizing the negative effects of a strong athletic identity and career sport transitions (IOC, 2012). For example, during athletic careers it is advised that such athletes expand their self-identity to other areas besides exclusively as an athlete, which can potentially relieve the pressures and stress of the sport as well as assist in career transition (IOC, 2012). With career transition, athletes should be actively pursuing career aspirations during their athletic careers to reduce the difficulties of the transition from athlete to non-athlete (IOC, 2012). Other recommendations are to acquire new hobbies outside of the sport, as well as practicing stress management techniques (IOC, 2012).

In a study conducted by Hawkins, Coffee and Soundy (2014), athletes who had a spinal cord injury and were comfortable talking about their transition to adaptive recreation were examined. Participants included six males and two females aged 20-50 years who were all a part of a badminton wheelchair league (Hawkins et al., 2014). These athletes had suffered a spinal cord injury in the middle of their athletic careers and had finished all rehabilitation (Hawkins et al., 2014). In this qualitative study, through an interviewing process, it was found that many of the athletes still hadn't accepted the fact that they would most likely not function the same way again (mean time since injury = 11.5 years) (Hawkins et al., 2014). Many however, still felt that they held that same athletic identity, which allowed them to identify with this role and continue to be involved in athletics (Hawkins et al., 2014). In this case, athletic identity was beneficial for the athletes because it allowed them to grasp onto something familiar when they felt that had lost

it all (Hawkins et al., 2014). Brewer et al. (1993), would define this as athletic identity serving as “Hercules’ Muscle” instead of the “Achilles’ Heel.” In some instances, athletic identity is used for athletes to find what they value and how they define what is important to them (Hawkins et al., 2014). For some athletes, injury can be devastating as well as frustrating, but continuing to hold an athletic identity and determining something else that can fit their new lifestyle can be beneficial (Hawkins et al., 2014).

### **Career Transitions and Athletic Identity**

As mentioned above, having a strong athletic identity can make it difficult for the transition to life without sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997). Coping mechanisms may be needed to assist with career transition and/or retirement from sport (Grove et al., 1997). There are some tactics that can be useful for athletes during sport to help aid in the career transition process, such as career exploration during athletics, and being involved in other activities outside of the sport (Beamon, 2012; Grove et al., 1997). Transition from sport can be highly unpredictable if unsuspected events occur, such as injury, being cut from the team, etc. (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Athletes who encounter a difficult transition after sport are more likely to be incompetent in anything they do as well as having difficulty when trying to cope (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). There is a need to assist athletes in adjusting smoothly from the transition out of sport and have a better life after sport (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

Grove, Lavalley and Gordon (1997), investigated 48 (28 females; 20 males) retired members of National Australian teams regarding their adjustments to retiring from sport. Athletes came from sports including basketball, cycling, diving, gymnastics, hockey, netball, rowing, squash, shooting swimming, track and field, water polo and volleyball (Grove et al., 1997). Most of the athletes were semi-professional and received some funding for training, but

also had to maintain a job outside of the sport (Grove et al., 1997). More specifically, the researchers examined coping with retirement from sport, athletic identity and adjustment to retirement, and coping as a function of athletic identity through questionnaires (Grove et al., 1997). Athletic identity was measured through the AIMS scale (Brewer et al., 1993). Coping strategies were measured through the COPE inventory (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). Researchers found that coping with retirement from sport is a complex process; many of the athletes had not accepted they were retired, and had emotional instability and were wanting social support (Grove et al., 1997). Based on the findings, the researchers also suggested career planning and coping strategies during the career transition process, as well as acceptance of the transition, can all be beneficial to the athlete, and prevent emotional stress (Grove et al., 1997).

As mentioned earlier, career transition and retirement from sport can also be difficult because society continually reinforces the identity of an athlete as solely an athlete (Beamon, 2012). This can be difficult in transition and athletes may tend to have lower levels of career maturity (Murphy et al., 1996). Brown and Hartley (1998), found that athletes at the Division I and Division II levels (114 football and men's basketball players) who pursued professional sports as compared to other vocations had much less career maturity based on a career maturity scale (Brown & Hartley, 1998). This means that those students who explored other career choices had greater career maturity and also identified with the student role as well as an athletic role (Murphy et al., 1996). These students did not have a very high athletic identity and were able to make career decisions that didn't involve athletics and have a better idea of career development (Brown & Hartley, 1998).

Most collegiate athletes are continually transitioning and dealing with changes in their lives (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). This is the result of being a student-athlete at the collegiate

level; there are increased time demands and restraints due to travel, missing school and the increased physical and mental demands of the sport (Clow, 2001; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). Research conducted by Harrison and Lawrence (2004) explored former athletes and their perceptions of career transition. Participants included 143 student-athletes (79 males; 64 females) at an NCAA Division II southeastern college with a mean age of 20 years (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). Participants partook in tennis, cross country, golf, volleyball, baseball and softball (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). Athletes took the Life after Sports Scale (LASS; Harrison & Lawrence, 2002; 2004) to examine career transition, academics and athletics (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). There were three major themes that emerged from the athletes. These themes included balancing both sport and academics, planning career paths during the time as an athlete, and having a positive role model, such as a coach, influences the athlete in a positive way (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). Participants also discussed how finding a job that fits their personalities and makes them happy is vital to their success in that field; for example, "I totally believe in getting a job that fits your personality because you will enjoy what you do" (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004, p, 495). This highlights some athletes' motivation pursuing sport because it makes them happy; thus it is important to aid athletes in pursuing careers that make them happy (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004).

### **Maintenance of Athletic Identity**

Athletes who stay involved in the sport after retirement (such as pursuing coaching) have maintained increased levels of athletic identity compared to those athletes who do not (Shachar, Brewer, Cornelius & Petitpas, 2004). Athletes continue to hold onto an identity and have a difficult time with the transition to becoming a non-athlete (Beamon, 2012). Why do athletes continue to hold onto this identity? There are many factors for why athletes may hold on to that

identity and continue careers in sport or have difficulty when not involved in sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Houle, Brewer & Kluck, 2010).

Wenner (1995) described how athletes being treated differently could be a factor as to why athletes hold on to that specific identity. Some athletes are able to miss classes due to competition, which puts athletes' minds on athletics more than class (Wenner, 1995). Athletes are also continually reinforced of their identity through society, friends and parents (Beamon, 2012; Wenner, 1995). Athletes at the collegiate level especially, are typically not employed, thus they have more time to focus on athletics (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). They are glorified by coaches and are primarily with their team, hold the social status of an athlete, and are consumed by their team as their primary social network (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Coaches are important influences in an athlete holding a strong athletic identity due to continuing to reinforce the identity of the athletes as well as spending a large amount of time with them (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). In season, coaches are allowed 20 hours a week with athletes, which include practice, games, weightlifting or any extra skill development (NCAA, 2012). This does not include hours spent traveling to and from competition, which consumes a large amount of time that athletes spend with coaches (NCAA, 2012). Coaches reinforce athletic identity through the recruiting process as well, due to pursuing the athlete for their athletic skill (Houle, Brewer & Kluck, 2010). As a coach, it is important to allow athletes to feel more than "just an athlete"; coaches should be concerned about personal growth outside of the sport and help maintain the well-being of the athletes (IOC, 2012; Symes, 2010). Coaches who can help athletes gain a better understanding of who they are off the field or court can benefit them and help athletes identify their strengths outside of their athletic abilities (Symes, 2010). The coach-athlete relationship is

revolved around the sport, thus coaches play a fairly significant role in reinforcing an athlete's identity (Stephan & Brewer, 2007; Houle et al., 2010).

During one's athletic career, pressure and stress from the sport can be reduced through identifying with other roles outside of the sport, as well as using stress management techniques (IOC, 2012). Maintaining a record of life outside of sport is also important and can keep one from holding on too strongly to athletic identity (IOC, 2012). All of these tactics will aid athletes in being able to switch "on and off", which allows for balanced identity, decreased stress and anxiety within the sport and an easier transition to retirement from sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Symes, 2010). These also allow athletes to explore other options and take their minds off the sport in order to realize who they are and who they want to be as a person (King, 2001; Symes, 2010). Counseling athletes through positive identity and helping them observe other strengths and interests outside of the sport will aid them in the long run and prevent emotional distress (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Athletes need to understand who they are and how they identify themselves when that switch is turned off of sport (Symes, 2010). An athlete becoming too emotionally involved in the sport all the time can result in distress and a strong athletic identity, which can ultimately hurt the athlete (Beamon, 2012; Symes, 2010). Ultimately, to promote long-term psychological health for athletes, they should be able to be the same person while holding certain identities that pertain to them (Symes, 2010). There are many interventions and practices that can be used to promote well-being among athletes and allow them to identify other strengths and interests (Symes, 2010).

### **Positive Psychology Interventions**

Positive psychology interventions (PPI) have been shown to increase well-being, meaning and happiness among people (Giannopoulos & Vella-Broderick, 2011; Park, Peterson,

Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Interventions can have a positive effect on people and produce positive changes (Giannopoulos & Vella-Broderick, 2011). Activities such as 'using signature strengths' have been shown to increase well-being and meaning for particular events (Park et al., 2005). This activity utilizes a way to track strengths through the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Park et al., 2005). Using signature strengths, held by one, refers to one acting and desiring such strength to lead to human excellence and achievements (Park et al., 2005). "Character strengths can be defined as positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings and behaviors" (Park et al., 2005, p. 603). Strengths are typically distinguished through one's individual abilities and certain talents (Park et al., 2005). The VIA Scale is used to classify strengths and receive feedback on their top five strengths. The scale consists of 240 items of self-assessment of 24 signature strengths measured on a 5-point Likert-scale (Park et al., 2005). Identifying such signature strengths can increase meaning and passion in athletes which can be used to better understand them and how they define themselves (Beamon, 2012; Seligman et al., 2005).

Understanding how to implement strengths can be beneficial for reaching goals and improving well-being (Linley, Nielson, Gillett & Biswas-Diener, 2010). Strengths can also be a factor in improving performance among athletes and aiding their well-being (Linley et al., 2010). In England, 240 second-year college students (49 males and 191 females) completed multiple scales measuring satisfaction, positive and negative affect, basic needs and signature strengths through the VIA-IS (Park et al., 2005). The participants completed the scales on three separate occasions over a period of ten weeks (Linley et al., 2010). Overall results support discovering signature strengths can assist in reaching goals and improving well-being (Linley et al., 2010).

The use of personal strengths can allow athletes to make attainable goals, which can lead to increase goal progress and improved well-being (Linley et al., 2010).

Counting one's blessings has been shown to potentially have interpersonal and emotional benefits (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). In one study, which examined 201 undergraduate students (147 women and 54 men) at a public university, participants were administered 10 packets of weekly reports (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Each week, participants were required to record their moods, coping behaviors, health behaviors, physical symptoms and overall life appraisals after completing different experimental conditions. The experimental conditions consisted of either hassles, gratitude listing (blessings), or neutral life events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). After the ten weeks, results demonstrated the group discussing their blessings felt better in their life overall and had less physical complaints, compared to the other groups (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude could potentially improve well-being and be a great strategy for helping people realize what they are thankful for (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Along with counting one's blessings, performing random acts of kindness can be a beneficial positive psychology intervention (Huffman, Mastromauro, Boehm, Seabrook, Friccione, Denniger & Lyubomirsky, 2011). The purpose of this intervention is to have participants perform three random acts of kindness for others in a single day, which could potentially improve the mood of the individual performing the acts. The individuals performing the acts are also required to record how they felt during the act, after the act and overall about the whole act (Huffman et al., 2011). Paired with other positive psychology interventions, performing acts of kindness can be a factor in improved happiness and mood (Huffman et al., 2011). Writing a letter of gratitude is also another positive psychology intervention that has

been shown to increase happiness and decrease depressive moods (Seligman et al., 2005). This exercise requires individuals to write a letter of gratitude to someone they have been helped by but may have never formally thanked (Seligman et al., 2005).

Another positive intervention which can improve well-being is imagining one's best self (King, 2001). In a study conducted by King (2001), participants were asked to spend some time writing a complete narrative describing their best possible selves. There were 81 undergraduate psychology students (69 women and 14 men and 2 with no report) involved in this study (King, 2001). Each of the participants wrote for 20 minutes on four consecutive days; one of the topics included writing about their best possible selves and other topics included writing about traumatic life experiences, both or a non-conventional topic (King, 2001). The purpose for this study and these particular topics was to determine if writing about traumatic events or one's best possible self or both were associated with decreased illness and promoting well-being (King, 2001). Two judges rated each of the prompts and essays written to determine how insightful and emotional the responses were to determine if they were positively or negatively correlated to well-being (King, 2001). The results demonstrated that writing about both traumatic and best possible events can improve well-being and health among individuals (King, 2001). The exact prompt for writing about one's best possible self is as follows: "Think about yourself in the future. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. Think of this as the realization of all your life dreams. Now, write what you imagined" (King, 2001). Writing out one's best possible self and self-regulatory topics can increase motivation, confidence, identity and life satisfaction (King, 2001).

### **Positive Psychology Interventions in Sport**

There is limited research on positive psychology interventions and improving overall well-being in athletes (Morton, 2014). There are avenues in positive psychology that can be used to implement a healthy perspective of sports and allows athletes to become their best selves (Ghaye, Lee, Shaw & Chesterfield, 2009). As athletes can relate to their best selves and determine what makes them who they are, they can become more engaged in the sport and perform at their best (Ghaye., et al., 2009). For some athletes, winning is not enough, they need to win with integrity and meaning (Ghaye et al., 2009). To win with integrity and meaning it is crucial to be true to oneself as an athlete and be able to reflect honestly on athletics (Ghaye et al., 2009). Becoming the best you can be through reflection and being honest with who they are can bring light to who they are and what they value (Ghaye et al., 2009). This reflection exemplifies a narrative of one's life with athletics to expose what is most important to them, and to allow them to understand where they come from and how sport has affected that (Ghaye et al., 2009).

In a phenomenological study examining 21 current and former female gymnasts (14) and volleyball players (7), ranging in age from 18-22 years, six positive psychology interventions were administered (Morton, 2014). In the first six weeks, the 21 participants were required to complete an intervention and during the seventh week, the athletes were asked to choose an intervention they identified most with and complete that exercise (Morton, 2014). There were also post-intervention interviews taking place 2-3 months after the interventions took place (Morton, 2014). The purpose of Morton's study was to describe and understand the athlete's perceptions and influences of the positive psychology intervention aimed to maximize well-being (Morton, 2014). The positive psychology exercises included: Using signature strengths through the *Values in Action Inventory Scale* (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2005), Three good

things (Seligman et al., 2005), Best possible self (King, 2001), Counting one's blessings (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), the gratitude letter (Seligman et al., 2005) and random acts of kindness (Huffman et al., 2011). The researcher found that implementing Positive psychology interventions can improve well-being among athletes (Morton, 2014). There was an improvement in relationships for athletes, discovering of meaning and purpose as well as individual growth (Morton, 2014). Athletes showed purposeful investment in the exercise, which allowed them to expand their interest and benefit received from the exercises (Morton, 2014).

Reflective practice in sport may improve self-awareness and can generate knowledge to enhance performance due to an understanding of ones' self (Cropley, Miles, Hanton & Niven, 2007). Cropley et al. (2007) conducted a case study on one participant (Cropley), who is a former athlete and sport psychology consultant, in order to gain further insight and "real-life" experiences to enhance professional development. The participant reflected on his experiences consulting four rugby players, over the course of a year, with whom he met with once a week (Cropley et al., 2007). The participant reflected on each of his sessions with the purpose of bettering himself and understanding what he valued in this profession (Cropley et al., 2007). He discovered reflecting on himself allowed him to understand what he was "actually" doing and found meaning with his consultations (Cropley et al., 2007). He also learned through experience, what works and doesn't work, and overall it seemed to, in his opinion, improve his professional development (Cropley et al., 2007). Reflective practices can assist in improving effectiveness of performance and learning from it to improve future actions (Cropley et al., 2007).

Gratitude has been shown to positively increase team satisfaction and well-being (Ghaye et al., 2009). Some athletes tend to base their well-being solely on their athletic experiences due to the increased demands of the sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Lundqvist, 2011). These athletes are

continually immersed in their sport and usually do not have an outlet or release from the sport, thus well-being and meaning always comes back to the sport (Lundqvist, 2011). Gratitude allows for these athletes to gain an understanding of what they are grateful for. This can potentially relieve some stressors of the sport as well as allow the athletes to see other aspects of life besides just sport (Symes, 2010).

There is a need to understand positive psychology interventions and their impact on athletes in terms of meaning and identity (Beamon, 2012; Lundqvist, 2011). Qualitative measures are also recommended to explore this topic in more depth (Lundqvist, 2011). Interventions such as the 'best self' and identifying strengths can be beneficial to understanding meaning and identity within athletes (King, 2001; Park et al., 2005).

## **Summary**

Due to potential costs of holding onto a strong athletic identity, more research is needed to understand this concept and prevent this from occurring (Brewer et al., 1993). More research is needed to better understand this concept in relation to athletes and sport (Beamon, 2012). Preventative interventions and in depth interviews can be beneficial to understand these athletes better, and to improve well-being and allow them to relate to other aspects and identities (Balague, 1999; Beamon, 2012; Lundqvist, 2011; Morton, 2014). There can be a great benefit for allowing athletes to expand their roles to other aspects of their lives, identify their strengths, and to understand who they are as a person outside of their respected sport (Beamon, 2012; Morton, 2014). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in a team of Division II Women's Basketball players, and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity.

## Chapter 3: Procedures

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in a team of Division II Women's Basketball players, and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity. Student-athletes have many demands placed on them in the classroom, in training and in competition. The amount of time student-athletes devote to their sport, in conjunction with the high demands of their sport may require some to adopt an identity as an athlete before exploring other possible roles (Beamon, 2012). This can result in identity foreclosure and can be costly to an athlete (Beamon, 2012). Unexpected events, such as being cut from the team, injury (season and career ending) and retirement from the sport, can negatively affect an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

### The Setting

Interviews and interventions took place in a closed off room, located in the gym at a small rural Division II university. The room was closed off and only the researcher and athlete were present.

### Population

This study examined current NCAA Division II Women's Basketball athletes at a small rural university from the 2015-2016 team (N=7). On average, the players have been playing basketball for nine and a half years. Of those who participated in this study, two of the athletes were returners from the program last year and five were new to the program. Two of the participants were third years, one was a second year and four of the athletes were first years. The athletes ranged in age from 18-21 years.

## **Instrumentation**

In qualitative research, the investigator serves as the instrument and thus it's important to clarify the background of the researcher so that any biases can be noted and attempted to be controlled for (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I, the researcher, am a white middle class 23-year-old female. I am currently one of the assistant basketball coaches for the women's team at the institution. I have been involved in this sport for almost 15 years, 13 of which were playing, and I am going into my second year as an assistant coach. I played four years at the collegiate level, which may help me as a researcher to develop rapport and possibly gain a better understanding of the athletes' experiences because I have been in the same position these athletes are currently in. Almost everything I did was centered on the sport and every decision seemed to come back to that aspect of me. I was involved in sport all year round and solely identified myself as an athlete.

The athletes know me as their coach and have hopefully built a trust with me, which was a benefit for me as the researcher in developing rapport. On the other hand, I as the researcher could be a barrier if they do not answer honestly due to them feeling it could affect how I treat them, playing time, etc. I myself was a collegiate athlete and understand how one may identify as an athlete and how that can affect you in life after athletics; because of this I must remain as unbiased as possible in what I am asking, and interpreting and analyzing how the athletes responded. I approached this research with an intent to uncover truth and meaning. I was aware of my views on the sport due to my experience as a player and familiarity with the sport, and allowed the athletes to explain their perspectives fully. My experience as an athlete and now coach have influenced me to partake in this exploratory study of athletic identity in NCAA Women's basketball players.

This study used quantitative methods in the form of questionnaires. The instruments used were the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993) (Appendix A) and the Public-Private Athletic Identity Scale (PPAIS) (Nasco & Webb, 2006) (Appendix A). The AIMS (Brewer et al., 1993) is a 10-item instrument to assess one's strength of athletic identity with statements requiring a response from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a 7-point Likert-scale (Brewer et al., 1993). Such statements include: "Sport is the most important part of my life," and "Other people see me mainly as an athlete" (Brewer et al., 1993). A composite score was calculated for an overall score to represent the sum of the 10 items. The PPAIS is also a 10-item scale with statements created to explore both public and private measures of athletic identity, including: "It is very important for me to succeed at my sport," and "I fear not receiving the recognition and attention I get from being an athlete when I retire (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The scale requires a response from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a 5-point Likert-scale (Nasco & Webb, 2006).

Another instrument that was used was the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths Scale (VIA-IS; Park et al., 2005). Strengths of the individuals are measured to identify the most prominent traits in them, and what they can best relate to (Park et al., 2005). The scale consists of 240 questions of self-assessment of 24 signature strengths measured on a 5-point Likert-scale (Park et al., 2005). Examples of strengths that are most commonly seen on individuals who partake in the survey are kindness, fairness and honesty (Park et al., 2005). This particular activity is performed online via a survey website. The participants must sign-up and register and then proceed to take the survey. When they finish, results will be sent to them with their top 24 strengths, ranking in order, as well as a brief description of each particular character strength (Appendix A). The athletes were then asked to email the researcher with their results. The

researcher then placed their top five strengths into the packet, so they were aware of them during the intervention.

### **Research Design**

This study used a mixed methods approach to investigate a single team of NCAA Division II women's basketball players in order to provide further insight of athletic identity (Beamon, 2012). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted for this research before any part of the study was conducted (Appendix B). Athletes were contacted in person by the lead researcher asking if they were willing to participate in the study. Volunteers were instructed to read and sign an informed consent form before any questionnaires were administered. A convenient time for both the researcher and each participant were decided on for the study.

The quantitative measures used to determine the participants who identify most with the athlete role in this study were the AIMS (Brewer et al., 1993) and the PPAIS (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The questionnaires were given to the participants after the consent forms had been signed and returned. Questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the top 50% that scored the highest combined on the scales were asked to further participate in the study. The top 50% will be chosen because they will have shown the strongest athletic identity of the group.

Interviews and the intervention made up the qualitative aspect of the research to gain more insight to the topic of athletic identity (Berg, 2004). The purpose of the qualitative measure was to capture the true meaning of events and lived experiences of the athletes, through the phenomenological approach (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson & McSpadden, 2011). The study consisted of an initial interview, a three-week intervention and a

follow-up interview. The study lasted a total of five weeks. The interviews lasted 5-10 minutes each and interventions lasted 20-40 minutes each.

In the initial interview, the athletes were informed of the purpose of the interviews and the intervention and the procedure and duration of events (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Demographics were also taken at this time, such as age, years playing basketball, and anticipated major. Initial interview questions were directed towards understanding the identity the athlete may hold, and reasons why they hold a strong athletic identity based off of the scales given (Table 1) (Beamon, 2012). Based on answers given by the participants, there may be further questions asked to shift focus and to follow-up the answers the individuals have already given. The researcher had the recordings, on two devices to ensure the interviews were captured, to refer back to. The questions were also used to determine how the athlete thinks and feels about being an athlete and their identity.

**Table 1. Initial Interview Questions**

<b>Initial Interview Questions: Athletic Identity</b>
How do you define yourself?
How do you think others define you?
What do you feel are reasons why you define yourself and others define you this way?
If tomorrow you found out you couldn't play basketball, how would that make you feel?

An intervention then took place, with the purpose of discovering self-identity in a positive way, through positive psychology interventions over a period of three weeks (see below) (Appendix C). Each of the participants had an individual packet consisting of the interventions and the researcher collected them and kept them in a locked desk after each of

the sessions (Morton, 2014). The researcher created the packet and the exercises included were defining strengths (Park et al., 2005), discovering one's best possible self (King, 2001), and a creation of the athlete's individual sport narrative through a reflective practice (Cropley et al., 2007; Ghaye et al., 2009). These exercises are all based on positive psychology and developing positive self-identity.

## **Intervention**

### ***Week 1***

Athletes used the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS) (Appendix A) scale online to determine their top five signature strengths (Park et al., 2005). A PDF version of their top strengths was emailed to the researcher. These strengths were recorded and then the athletes were asked to implement these strengths to the best of their ability without using basketball.

They were asked to write down each strength in an intervention packet and try to find meaning in how they can use this strength to the best of their ability (Morton, 2014).

### ***Week 2***

Athletes were asked to define their best possible self through a series of thoughts about how they perceive "the big picture" in their life (King, 2001). This allowed athletes to elaborate and use their imaginations and determine who they would be if everything in life went exactly according to plan (King, 2001). The best possible-self exercise can also assist in decision-making now, which can help in career transition (Grove et al., 1997; King, 2001). In some cases, one's best possible self may not reflect their current life; if this occurs, it will be advised for them to explore other goals and options to help them reach their best possible self (King, 2001).

**Week 3**

During this week, athletes had 30 minutes to write out their own personal sport narrative. This exercise was used for them to examine where they came from and where they are going in sport. The sport narrative was also utilized to examine how sport has affected their life throughout the years. This may in turn open up the athlete in realizing why they participate and give them value and meaning to the sport they play. The narrative will address the athlete's current outlook on sport and their future outlook on sport as well.

The follow-up interviews were used to investigate the athletes' lived experiences of the positive psychology interventions and their perceptions of the intervention (Table 2). All transcriptions and analysis from each of the interviews were performed by the researcher.

**Table 2. Post-Intervention Questions**

<b>Follow-up Interview Questions: Perceptions</b>
Describe your experiences with this packet
Did you find it difficult to talk about your strengths without using athletics?
Would you want your kids to play sports?
Do you still define yourself as an athlete?
Do you think you will still be seen as an athlete in your career or profession?

**Reliability**

This interview and interventions were face-to-face, with only the researcher and the participant present and the same kind of recording device was utilized. To guarantee the outcome of this study is reliable, the questions were consistent during each of the individual interviews as well (Thomas, Silverman & Nelson, 2011).

## **Validity**

The measures used in this study have proven to be valid for research purposes. The AIMS (Brewer et al., 1993) was introduced by Brewer and colleagues in 1993 to determine positive and negative factors of athletic identity and how strongly an athlete may be identifying with this role. The measurement was found to be a valid measure of athletic identity through an initial evaluation of the study on 243 participants and two follow-up evaluations (n=449 and n=90), (Brewer et al., 1993). The purpose of the PPAIS (Nasco & Webb, 2006) was to measure the link of a strong athletic identification through self-concept, well-being and commitment and effort in sport (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The total of the two measures of Public Athletic identity and Private athletic identity showed a correlation of .211 ( $p < .001$ ). Current athletes scored higher on the scales than retired athletes, determining the scale can be valid for current athletes ( $M = 33.19$ ,  $SD = 5.52$ ) (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The measure was found to be valid through the evaluation of over 1,000 athletes, non-athletes and retired athletes from the collegiate level ( $p < .0001$ ) (Nasco & Webb, 2006). The VIA-IS (Park et al., 2005) has been shown to assess most prevalent signature strengths through measurement based on answers and is a free online tool that can be used by anyone (Park & Peterson, 2006).

## **Trustworthiness**

Reflexivity will be used for this research. Reflexivity can be a tool used to focusing on underlying factors to the perceptions of the researcher and their personal experiences with the subject (Wertz et al., 2011). This research used qualitative measures in order to receive more information on athletic identity and perceived experiences of a positive self-identity intervention. These measures were interactive with the purpose of coming across meaningful for the way the athletes are feeling. Questions were open format to result in production of knowledge in the topic

of athletic identity. All questions allowed for open-ended answers to ultimately find meaning. I tried to keep my thoughts unbiased and use these interviews to further look into evolving ideas and themes for athletic identity.

### **Treatment of data**

This investigation utilized questionnaires, interviews and an intervention through a mixed-methods research design. The athletes were administered the AIMS (Brewer et al., 1993) and the PPAIS (Nasco & Webb, 2006); after completion the researcher totaled both of the scores for each individual. The top 50% of the participants were asked to participate in the study. The purpose of the top 50% was to capture and investigate the athletes that identified strongest with athletic identity in the specific population. Pre-intervention interviews were then completed for those participants, followed by an intervention and a post-intervention interview. The data was transcribed verbatim, by the researcher and placed into categories and analyzed and interpreted for content themes (Berg, 2004). The researcher took the data, and interpreted the interviews to obtain an overall reconstruction of what the athletes had said. Each of the athlete's responses were analyzed and studied independently to determine underlying themes. Content was analyzed by two separate coders to ensure reliability and accuracy of the emergent themes. The other coder, also a graduate student, was chosen for her interest in qualitative research. She performed line by line coding as well and aided the researcher with the finding of emergent themes, which was done to see which major themes have emerged (Beamon, 2012). Quotes were recorded under a number of categories in the form of rich narratives from the athletes (Beamon, 2012). Direct quotes were used to assist in analysis and theme search. This understanding of data was used through analytical narrative, which is a short description of the interviews (Thomas et al., 2011).

The purpose of the analytical narrative is to create a 'vivid reconstruction' of what was said during interviews (Thomas, et al., 2011). The interviews were coded to give meaning and interpretation to the data (Berg, 2004). The athletes were given confidentiality and names were not associated with their interview (Beamon, 2012). In turn, numbers were used during the coding of responses as "Subject #1 said..." I also assured the participants that these interviews were fully disclosed and recordings would be destroyed after transcription was performed (Berg, 2004). All interviews and transcriptions were stored in a locked desk, which only the researcher has access to.

The next step was a narrative vignette of the data, which allows for detailed description and validity of the interviews (Thomas et al., 2011). Details were mentioned to capture the true feelings and thoughts of the participants. The purpose of this study was to explore athletic identity in a team of NCAA Division II Women's basketball players and to determine if a positive self-identity intervention can alter their perceptions of their identity. After all the analyses and conclusions have been made, the researcher determined the transferability of the study in order to aid future research (Thomas et al., 2011).

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in a team of Division II Women's Basketball players and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing a positive self-identity. After initial questionnaires to determine the top 50% who identified most strongly with the athlete role, seven participants in this study completed two interviews and a 3-week positive psychology intervention. The first interview focused on identity development and the second interview examined their experiences of a positive psychology intervention. The data was analyzed and emergent themes and potential further research to the topic of athletic identity was discovered.

### **Analysis of Data**

#### **Pre-Intervention Analysis**

The analysis of the pre-intervention interview resulted in determining the number of participants to partake in the study. The AIMS (Brewer et al., 1993) and the PPAIS (Nasco & Webb, 2006) were administered to the entire 2015-2016 women's basketball team who were present at the time. Thirteen players completed the questionnaires as well as the consent form. The highest total score one could have achieved between the two questionnaires was 120, and the highest any of the athletes scored was 99. A higher score resulted in the athlete having a stronger athletic identity based on the questionnaires. The higher score can be a first step in the realm of understanding how strongly the individual may identify themselves as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). The higher the score the more likely they are to possibly be at risk for emotional disturbances and difficulty with career transition (Brewer et al., 1993). Then based off of the

scores, a preventative intervention can be administered to an athlete for exploring positive identity and finding competence in other activities (Brewer et al., 1993; Nasco & Webb, 2006). The scores from the original 13 athletes ranged from 75-99, but ranged from 81-99 for the seven participants, who were designated as the top 50%, which can be found in Table 3. The average score on the questionnaires was 87.7 (out of 120) with a standard deviation of  $\pm 6.6$ . After analysis, the seven athletes with the highest total score of both the questionnaires were asked to further participate in the study. Two of the participants tied in score, however one suffered a concussion before the initial interview and asked to opt out, thus only seven participants continued with the study.

**Table 3. AIMS and PPAIS Totals**

<i><b>Subject #</b></i>	<i><b>AIMS</b></i>	<i><b>PPAIS</b></i>	<i><b>Total</b></i>
<i><b>Subject #1</b></i>	59	33	92
<i><b>Subject #2</b></i>	56	34	90
<i><b>Subject #3</b></i>	52	29	81
<i><b>Subject #4</b></i>	55	33	88
<i><b>Subject #5</b></i>	60	39	99
<i><b>Subject #6</b></i>	49	33	82
<i><b>Subject #7</b></i>	50	32	82

Initial interviews were conducted and the analysis of the raw data resulted in a total of 144 themes based on line by line coding from the grouped research questions. They were then grouped into 24 general themes and finally, six emergent themes were discovered that related to athletic identity. The raw themes and emergent themes for the questions and both the pre- and post-interviews can be found in Appendix D. After complete analysis of the general themes, six emergent themes were discovered and are as follows, as well as a further analysis of these pre-intervention emergent themes:

1. Psychological need to be viewed as an athlete
2. Self-defined athlete
3. Highly invested in sport throughout life
4. Family influence
5. Lack of purpose outside of sport
6. Lack of balance outside of sport

### **Psychological need to be viewed as an athlete**

Across all the participants there was a need to be viewed as an athlete from society. Athlete number one, when asked how she felt others defined her she replied with “umm, I feel like hopefully the same way, I would say they would probably describe me as, you know, someone who is an athlete you know.” This need to be viewed as an athlete continued throughout the interviews, as well as emerging reasons as to why they felt the need to be viewed as athletes. One athlete in particular hoped that others saw her as an athlete and when asked why she stated:

Yes. I think that being a college athlete, it's like I have worked to get the scholarship, I have worked to come here, and I've worked to stay here, so it's kind of like, I feel like I worked and deserve my title. You know just like everybody goes to get their masters, in whatever they get, they go to get the title they have. Professors want to be called professors because they worked to get professing, like so they could be a professor. So same in our instance, like we worked as hard as we do, so that we can be whatever we are (Athlete 5).

This particular athlete felt that she deserved the title because she had put in the work and took the steps to become a collegiate athlete. Another athlete wanted to be viewed as an athlete because she takes pride in the sport and wants others to recognize her for her pride and dedication to the sport:

Because it's something that umm is, something that I love and I take a lot of pride in it, cause it's so much hard work and like, you know, kind of describes you as a person if you can stick with a sport for so long and then you know it kind of gives some character recognition, kind of, that's kind of how I think of it (Athlete 1).

Another participant felt that people only knew who she was because she played basketball or just "know that I am an athlete" (Athlete 3). Society can play an important role in how some athletes view themselves. These athletes felt that it was important to be viewed as athletes and they are very aware of how society views them. Athlete 2 enjoyed the fact that society viewed her as an athlete and believed that society would treat her differently if she weren't an athlete because society is there to live through them and their accolades as athletes:

I mean they actually do, like at the beginning of the season, like they were gung ho and like all about going to watch the games and now it's like I don't play so they are like eh and I don't talk to as many people now that they know I am not playing, so that was a low, that was hard. I mean those people just want to be there to share the glory with you and have them there (Athlete 2).

### **Self-defined athlete**

Six of the seven participants described themselves as an athlete. When asked to describe themselves and how they would introduce themselves, six of them said they described themselves as either an athlete or a basketball player. The sole participant who did not describe herself as an athlete described herself as someone who is athletic instead. "Uhh I'm very athletic, I love sports and friends..." (Athlete 7). When asked why she describes herself as athletic, she went on to say, "Just because how I grew up, I've always had all this energy and stuff, I'm just

everywhere and, umm I like the competitiveness and, umm I've always played all these different sports, like just have always loved it" (Athlete 7). Never at one point during this particular subject's interview did she define herself as an athlete. She described herself as being athletic and loving sports but not as her sole identity.

The other six participants defined themselves as athletes "umm, I would probably describe myself as an athlete" (Athlete 1). Another athlete stated she defined herself as an athlete and when asked if there were any other way she would define herself, she said "no." There is an underlying need to be described as an athlete. Whether it be the recognition for athletic accomplishments or hard work, it seems to be highly important to these athletes to be viewed as athletes in their respective sport.

### **Highly invested in sport throughout life**

All of the athletes have been playing basketball for at least five years and on average they have all been playing for nine and a half years. Due to the amount of time they have dedicated to the sport, most of them felt that basketball had become such a big part of them and their identity. Participation in the sport for so long seemed to be an underlying factor as to why and how these athletes identified themselves:

Umm I feel like it just umm well because since I have been doing basketball and sports for so long, it's what people know me as and so that's why I would describe myself as that because it's what I have been doing for forever...and it would be different if I was in like in music or something, you know, I would say that, but I feel that's how I describe myself (Athlete 1).

Basketball was described as being a significant part of many of the athlete's lives, which resulted in one of the reasons they felt that they defined themselves as an athlete. Another athlete when asked why she defines herself as an athlete, replied that it was due to her long participation in the sport and that is how her identity had been formed.

Basketball is such a huge part of my life, and it's been that way for 15 years so it's part of who I am, like going through things I like think...basketball is like a thing I think about daily, throughout the day, so it's one of those defining factors of who I am, because it's made me who I am (Athlete 2).

The athletes made it very clear that they had been participating in the sport for a very long time. Athlete 4 stated that she defined herself as an athlete because she has been her whole life. These athletes have invested so much time and energy into the sport. They have not had the time or energy to explore other options, thus defining themselves as athletes from the beginning without trying other things.

### **Family influence**

Three of the athletes felt that influences from their family was a factor in their athletic identity. One of the participant's identity as an athlete was reinforced because her dad had continually introduced her as his "basketball player" instead of his daughter (Athlete 6). She went on to say that he tends to brag about her and her athletic abilities, thus being reinforced as a basketball player and athlete from a family member. Another participant wanted to become a coach because her dad is a coach and her mom is a referee. She had grown up surrounded by the sport and basketball consumes her in all aspects of her life. Another participant stated that it was

how she was raised by her parents that contributed to her work ethic within the sport and how she held herself to a higher standard:

My parents were a huge deal, like they raised us, me and my brothers and sisters, to like hold ourselves to high, like expect great things, work to achieve more than you think you need, like hold yourself to the highest standards. So I mean it was an outside influence but seeing I have other family members that don't really like have any standards at all, I see how they turned out so personally I would rather hold myself to that higher standard, than not, you know (Athlete 2).

### **Lack of purpose outside of sport**

All of the participants said that they would be either depressed, very upset or have a difficult time without basketball. There was a lack of confidence in any other aspect outside of basketball. There was no conclusive answer to what the participants would partake in if they no longer had the sport. One of the athletes stated she would be stressed out without the sport as well as she would feel lost without her 'family':

I would be kind of like stressed out and, umm, if were talking about basketball particularly, it's a team sport, it's the environment and not being able to have those people and to have what you are a part of would be like taking the family away. And so now you are on your own and you are doing something you haven't done before (Athlete 5).

One of the participants stated that if she no longer had basketball, that she would try to think positively and think that it must have happened for a reason:

I'd be really really really sad, um I might be upset, but then I would have to probably think of like..., I would have to try to find a way to...depending on the reason I guess. I guess like help others try to succeed in their stuff, or just try to be like "there must have been a reason for this" because there is always a reason for everything, but I would be really upset mostly (Athlete 7).

Even if the sport was taken away for a reason, there was still no sense of what they would do without sport. They felt they would still be highly upset and feel lost and confused without the sport.

### **Lack of balance outside of sport**

Five of the participants when asked what they would do without basketball, said they would focus more on school and education. The participants showed a lack of balance and inferred that they were not putting the time and effort into their schoolwork as they should be. There were no other hobbies that the athletes participated in. They admitted to only having basketball as their main hobby and no other life activities that they partake in. One participant stated she would have to also find another hobby and focus on getting better grades.

I mean I would probably honestly have to find another hobby, and put my effort more into my school work, because I mean I have to balance my time, so I would probably just focus more on like classes and get better grades...to be honest (Athlete 1).

These athletes stated that they would focus more on education and try to find other things to do. They would need time to figure it out because of how much basketball is a big part of their lives.

Umm, I don't know I would have to figure that, cause it's been, I haven't had to think about that for years. I was five years old when I started playing...If I didn't have

basketball I don't know what I would do. I would have no clue what in the world I would do...probably would focus more on school and get a lot more school work done, take more hours, definitely would be at every game if I couldn't play (Athlete 2).

### **Post-Intervention Analysis of Data**

In the interviews following the intervention, that was used to gain the athletes' perceptions of the interventions, 108 raw data themes arose (Appendix D). Those themes were then broken down into 24 general themes (Appendix D) and finally into five post-intervention emergent themes:

1. Lack of understanding of strengths outside of sport
2. Intention to stay involved in sport
3. Sport has influenced career choices
4. Self-defined athletes
5. Intervention beneficial and enjoyable

#### **Lack of understanding of strengths without sport**

Five of the seven participants, when asked if they found it difficult to write about their strengths without using sport, said that "yes" they found it "very difficult." One of the participants felt that sports was one of her strengths and "how people view me is with sports and like trying to find other strengths that aren't with sports was a little difficult" (Athlete 1).

Other participants seemed to find writing about strengths without sport difficult because they had participated in the sport for so long that they didn't know how to relate to any other possible strengths, so they were required to think deeper:

Umm I think it will make me think about it deeper and what my strengths are and how to use them properly in the future. What my weaknesses are and work on those and stuff like that (Athlete 2).

### **Intention to stay involved in sport**

Many of the participants wrote about having kids in their best possible self (King, 2001) and in their sport narrative. When asked if the athletes would want their children to play basketball or another sport, all seven replied "yes." There was a mutual agreement that the athletes wanted their children to play sport, thus keeping them involved in the sport through their children. Three of the participants said they would want to coach basketball in the future. The participants intend to hold onto basketball in some form in the future.

I definitely would hope that my kids would play sports, I mean even if it's not basketball, hopefully sports would be a part of their life. And I mean I have kind of always thought about coaching maybe too, so hopefully it can stay in my life that way as well (Athlete 1).

Another participant mentioned that it is difficult to get rid of a 'label' as a basketball player, thus she concluded that she will probably always hold the sport with her, unless she is in a place she has never been before and isn't initially known as an athlete.

I don't know, like I think I'm always going to have that label. Like once you have that label, it's really hard to get rid of. But I don't plan on living anywhere that I have lived before so I don't think it's going to carry over with me. I think it'll just be a nurse, I don't think it will be...until people ask and figure it out then they will look at you as an athlete, different. But until then... (Athlete 2).

One of the participants had a difficult time writing about her life and goals because she intends to have sport later in her life and has always been a part of her life.

And I think it's just because I want to have sport later in my life and my life revolves around sports, so it's just kind of hard to think like without it. Just because it's become a part of me, yes it was hard (Athlete 5).

### **Sport has influenced career choices**

Four of the athletes had a general idea of their career aspirations: one wants to become a firefighter, three of them want to become nurses and then the others are undecided or think they want to coach and do elementary education. One particular athlete felt that sport carried over to her career choice of wanting to become a fire fighter, and she knew exactly what she wanted out of her career:

Umm I don't think so, maybe just because of what I am going to do. You know like, especially being a fire fighter, there's a lot of the same like things carry over I guess.... So I don't know I guess it's easier for me because I know exactly like what I want (Athlete 4).

Other athletes explained how sport could help them in the work force due to the hard work and dedication taken to participate in the sport. I asked one participant how she thought basketball could help her reach her career goal to become a nurse and she replied with:

Yeah cause it's going to take a lot of school to get through that, so like basketball and determination is going to help. Like determination and all that stuff is going to help over into that. And teamwork and honesty and loyalty and all that stuff is going to work out (Athlete 2).

### **Self-defined athletes**

All seven of the participants when asked for the second time if they still defined themselves as athletes said “yes,” they still defined themselves as athletes. One participant when asked if she still defined herself as an athlete stated, “I would say so, but I see that if I didn't have it, I would still be a person, if that makes sense. Like there is more than just basketball and being an athlete” (Athlete 3).

### **Intervention beneficial and enjoyable**

For the most part, the athletes enjoyed the intervention. One of the athletes enjoyed the intervention because she likes talking about things she is grateful for (Athlete 6). Some of the participants found it beneficial and enjoyable to talk about other aspects of life that aren't about basketball and helped them realize that they are capable of so much more. Athlete 3 appreciated being able to reflect on other areas of her life without basketball as well as seeing what else she is good at:

Umm, I think it gives me a way to see the stuff outside of basketball that I am good at. And then also how much of an impact sports have been in my life and how they will continue to throughout my life (Athlete 3).

For these athletes, it seemed that it was also enjoyable because they were able to see how much of an impact sport had on their lives and were grateful for that impact.

Umm the quiz about the strengths we took of our personalities and everything. I kind of like, well, looking, at that I kind of like saw that I feel like I care about people and laughing and having a joyful life. So I think that was very helpful. Just looking at life in

a broader perspective and just kind of finding the things you love. Even if it's not the athletics later... like I feel like I kind of have that going for me (Athlete 5).

Another athlete also liked that she was able to see how everything in life falls into place both with and without sport as well as where she can improve herself.

Umm it just made me think about like how everything fell into place kind of, like when I was talking about my sport narrative like all the different things that people do for me to get me to where I am now . Umm and then just like how it has helped me throughout everything in school and all of that. And then it has helped me see the person I want to be too. Like where I can probably do better and like my strength and weaknesses and make them stronger (Athlete 7).

The intervention seemed to expand these athletes' knowledge on what else they are competent at, as well as gaining a better understanding for where they want to be in life, with or without sport.

These emergent themes presented are the most prominent themes that arose from the raw data taken from the interviews. The emergent themes allowed for expansion of underlying factors on athletic identity, as well as perceptions for a positive psychology intervention. The emergent themes will be further discussed to expand on the topics.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Discussion of Emergent Themes**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better insight into underlying factors of athletic identity in NCAA Division II women's Basketball players, as well as to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity. During the pre-intervention interviews there were six emergent themes that will be discussed and further linked to athletic identity. The emergent themes in the pre-interviews were (1) psychological need to be viewed as an athlete, (2) self-defined athlete, (3) highly invested in sport throughout life, (4) family influence, (5) lack of purpose outside of sport, and (6) lack of balance outside of sport. There were five emergent themes in the interviews following the intervention to gain an understanding of the athlete's experience of the intervention. The five emergent themes were (1) lack of understanding of strengths without sport, (2) intention to stay involved in sport, (3) sport has influenced career choices, (4) self-defined athletes, and (5) intervention beneficial and enjoyable. The primary underlying factors to athletic identity found were a need to be viewed as an athlete, family and societal influences and a lack of understanding or purpose outside of sport. The positive psychology interventions led the athletes to a better perceived understanding of their lives outside of sports, as well as producing more insight to the topic of athletic identity.

### **Pre-Intervention Emergent Themes**

#### **(1) Psychological need to be viewed as an athlete**

Athletic identity is a topic that is rarely examined and more research is needed to better understand these athletes who may hold a strong athletic identity (Beamon, 2012). Through the

duration of this study, it seemed that there is a definite need to be seen as an athlete. The participants felt that they deserved to be seen as an athlete because they have earned and worked for the title. There should be reward for what they have done and that reward is through societal recognition. The reinforcement of society seeing them as athletes and recognizing them for their accomplishments coincides with Beamon's (2012) findings about continued reinforcement from outside sources to enforce this athletic identity.

This psychological need to be viewed as an athlete relates to competence, which is part of basic self-determination theory and relates to an athlete's motivation and needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Competence relates to an athlete's need to become a master of the sport and be able to control the outcomes of the sport (Deci & Ryan, 2008). This need also can be associated with relatedness, which is the need to be connected to something (Deci & Ryan, 1985). As one of the athletes had mentioned, she was connected to other students as fans at the games. She was connected to them through athletics and could relate to them through athletics, whether it be talking about the game or having them come watch the games. This need to be connected to others through athletics, relates to her need to be viewed as an athlete so she can communicate to others with athletics.

## **(2) Self-defined athlete**

There is a difference between stating "I am an athlete" compared to "I am athletic" or "I enjoy a certain sport" (Symes, 2010). Six of the participants stated that they would define and describe themselves as an athlete. Only one of the participants described herself as athletic and loving sports, but not solely stating that she is an athlete. This relates to the potential issues that can occur from holding a strong athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993; Symes, 2010). By allowing athletes to expand their knowledge to other aspects of life besides only sport, they are in a better

place for improving well-being (Symes, 2010). There would be benefits to allowing athletes to expand their perceptions of themselves not solely as an athlete and focusing on what else they like to do (Symes, 2010).

Even in their career, the athletes seemed to think they would one day be seen as an athlete. There was a need that even one day in their career, they would be defined as an athlete by their peers. They may not know it at first, but there was a general consensus that once a co-worker for example learned they were once an athlete, then they would see them in a new light as an athlete. The identity will continue to be held with them even in their career of choice, that doesn't involve sport, such as nursing. This relates to Beamon's (2012) study in which the former athletes were still seen as athletes in their career, whether it be due to physical characteristics or how they portray themselves. Society continues to play a great role in why these athletes hold on to their athletic identity. The athletes feel that they are labeled as an athlete, and cannot rid themselves of that label, whether it be because of themselves not wanting to let it go or other outside influences.

### **(3) Highly Invested in Sport throughout Life**

There are countless hours and dedication that come with participation in athletics (Clow, 2001). Games, practices and travel account for most of the hours for collegiate athletes (Clow, 2001; Danish et al., 1993). Even before one's collegiate career, they have typically already put in countless hours to prepare themselves to make it to the collegiate level. Typically, an athlete is invested in their sport from a very young age (Beamon, 2012; Houle, Brewer & Kluck, 2010). This investment in the sport typically results in a strong athletic identity and potentially identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012; Marcia, 1966).

Three of the athletes mentioned how dedicated they were to the sport. They described themselves as hardworking and dedicated to the sport. They described athletics as taking a lot of dedication, which leaves little room for spending time in any other aspects of their lives. They have become so focused on one task, and that is basketball. They have placed much of their focus on the sport, throughout their life, which has resulted in them valuing and placing significant meaning on the sport (Balague, 1999).

#### **(4) Family Influence**

Family members can play a significant role on athletes. Whether it be through parents or older siblings introducing athletes to sport, supporting athletes in sport, or their previous experience within the sport. Two of the athletes said that people may treat them differently, if they no longer were not an athlete, but their family wouldn't. This shows that family can stick by you no matter what and play a significant role in life's decisions. A reason why an athlete may identify with the athlete role could be due to reinforcement by their family members (Beamon, 2012). Family plays a role in potential identity foreclosure by describing them as athletes, even if they haven't solely identified as one yet. The family's reinforcement of the athletes as basketball players will typically strengthen their identity as an athlete more than just a human being (Beamon, 2012).

One of the athletes was raised by her parents who were either coaching or refereeing the sport. She grew up around the sport of basketball and has always loved the game. Her parents have been a factor in her identity as an athlete. Family has also shown to influence athletes by never-ending support and as parents, holding their children to higher standards. One of the participants described that her parents basically wouldn't let her settle for average, that she must

be held to a higher standard. Whether it be in school or athletics, she must keep herself in a standard that is parent approved and will make the parents happy.

### **(5) Lack of Purpose Outside of Sport**

There was a definite lack of confidence and assurance in any other aspects of life besides athletics. This correlates to athletes having a strong identity and suffering from emotional distress when their athletic career comes to an end (Beamon, 2012). Seven of the athletes described themselves as feeling depressed and extremely sad if basketball was taken away from them. They place so much of their focus on the sport that it is all they know and can identify with.

Athletes hold themselves to higher standards and put more effort into their sport than in their school work. Seven of the participants said they would focus more on school without athletics, which shows they don't necessarily hold themselves to as high of a standard in the classroom as they do in the realm of sport. When an athlete identifies with the athlete role strongly, they are more likely to have increased commitment and purpose for it (Brewer et al., 1993; Symes, 2010). Ideally, athletes should place more effort and commitment to other aspects of life, to find and hold a purpose in other aspects.

Learning to find purpose in other aspects of life can even help to relieve the stress of the sport (Symes, 2010). One of the ways to do this is through a positive psychology intervention, which may allow athletes to find what they are grateful for and discover other areas they can be successful with (Morton, 2014). Athletes, ideally would be able to transition from one aspect of life to another. They should have the ability to turn off and on the athlete switch as well as other switches that they can identify with (Symes, 2010).

Another way to do this is through reflection. Many of the athletes in the study appreciated and enjoyed being able to reflect on their life and discover other meanings that they never realized were there. Athletes who have greater meanings on certain aspects of their lives are more likely to identify with those things (Balague, 1999). Value and meaning can determine an individual's priorities and what they are most likely going to focus most of their time on (Balague, 1999). Identifying what an athlete values and placing meaning on those values, can benefit the athlete in having more of a purpose outside of their sport (Balague, 1999).

#### **(6) Lack of Balance Outside of Sport**

From a research question perspective, there was a lack of balance and purpose outside of sport. This contributes to an underlying factor as to why an athlete holds this athletic identity. There seems to be nothing else for these athletes to fall back on and relate to (Beamon, 2012). Without a fall back or another purpose in their life, they are forced to enforce and build this athletic identity. As the identity builds they become less likely to want to try other things. Some participants had experienced other things when they were younger such as other sports, gymnastics and clubs. As they grew older, however, they solely focused on the sport of basketball, which in turn solidifies this identity and may result in identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966).

Many of the athletes who participated had likely reached identity foreclosure, yet they did not have difficulty when it came to choosing a career which goes against the theory that athletes have a difficult time making a career decision when they have reached foreclosure (Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy et al., 1996). Four of the athletes were set on the career paths they wanted and the other three had a general idea of what area they wanted to be in for their career. Career development is highly dependent on exploratory behavior (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Jordaan

1963; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Athletes who participate in career planning and exploring career opportunities throughout the duration of their career are more likely to do better academically and better with the transition to life after athletics (Murphy et al., 1996).

Career transition out of sport can be a difficult process, especially with no career exploration or planning. Career planning, as well as discovering what the athletes are competent at outside of their sport, can benefit them in this process (Grove et al., 1997). Six of the seven participants described the intervention as beneficial and how it could either help them in their respected career or with the transition to the career. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of an athlete can aid them in discovering the career path they may want to pursue.

### **Post-Intervention Emergent Themes**

#### **(1) Lack of Understanding of Strengths without Sport**

When asked if it was difficult to talk about strengths without using basketball, six of the participants felt that it was difficult. There was a lack of understanding of how they could use their strengths without their sport. Without an understanding of what they are competent at outside of sport, they are at an increased risk for difficulty with life after athletics (Beamon, 2012). By relieving the pressures of the sport by expanding knowledge to other aspects of life, they are going to relieve some of the pressures and demands of the sport (IOC, 2012). For athletes, gaining a better understanding of strengths and other aspects of life, could benefit them in career transition and life after their athletic career (Beamon 2012; Symes, 2010).

This process of discovering strengths forced the athletes to expand their knowledge on themselves as individuals and not solely athletes. By discovering strengths, athletes can get a better understanding of what they like (Park et al., 2005). With this, they are more likely to be

motivated in those areas which can allow them to become more successful in those aspects. Athletes, when pursuing a career, or other areas of life, should do things that make them happy (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). They are more likely to be happy when they are doing something they are good at and have identified as one of their strengths (Symes, 2010). They then will potentially attribute more meaning to those strengths and work to apply them and utilize them in their life, which can allow for an understanding of other identities they can relate to (Balague, 1999; Symes, 2010).

## **(2) Intention to Stay Involved in Sport**

There was a general theme that included the athletes continuing to be involved in sport. They wanted their kids to be involved in sport and play basketball. Two of the participants wanted to potentially coach. They want to keep themselves somewhat connected to the sport, which is based on relatedness, one of the three basic needs of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The athletes want to stay connected to the sport because it is what they are comfortable with and used to. There is a need to stay connected and comfortable with what they know. There is uncertainty when this need of relatedness is not reached and there is nothing else they can grasp onto, because they have never faced this transition before.

Athletes are very likely to continue to hold onto their athletic identity after their athletic career is over (Beamon, 2012; Shachar et al., 2004). Due to this, it is usually difficult to let go of themselves as athletes and transition to another identity. Being a college athlete means you are treated differently. Students are always asking about the games and how the season is going, and they are continually reinforced as athletes through their peers and the community (Wenner, 1995). Typically, a college athlete loves what they do and places a great meaning on solely being

an athlete. Thus when they transition out of sport, the feelings and glory of the sport are taken away. This results in the athlete wanting to stay connected to that identity (Wenner, 1995).

There is a need to stay involved in the sport in some way to continue to feel related and connected to the sport, which can fulfill some of the athlete's basic needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985). There are many ways these athletes are planning on staying involved with the sport. Whether it be through their children, coaching or even just watching games, these particular athletes are intending to stay involved with basketball throughout their entire lives.

### **(3) Sport has Influenced Career Choices**

Many of the athletes had a general idea of the career path they were on and wanted to pursue. This contradicts much of the research, which shows that athletes have difficulty with career choices and career transition after athletics (Beamon, 2012; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). There would be a benefit to continue to allow athletes to expand on these career choices and allow them to explore options while playing college athletics (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). This can be done through a coach or mentor and taking time away from the sport to explore these options (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004).

There are many factors as to why these athletes could potentially have their career choices already determined. Most research has shown that athletes have a difficult time with career transition and have not determined a career path (Beamon, 2012; Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy et al., 1993). However, four of these individuals interviewed were certain in their career path and knew exactly what they wanted to do. This could be due to already having planned for a career either in a previous school or other setting. There could also be family influence, as one of the athletes wanted to be a coach, and her dad was also a coach. For these individuals, I would

continue to reinforce their career plans to assist them in keeping on track and solidifying their interest in such careers. There is still a need to assist these athletes and continue to keep them accountable in their journey to their preferred career.

There was a definite need to reflect on other aspects of life from these particular athletes. They found it enjoyable and nice to reflect on other aspects of their lives. Taking time to reflect on career exploration during one's athletic career can be very beneficial for the athlete. This exploration can potentially help the athlete relieve stress from the sport, promote a better transition to a career choice, as well as promote the use of athletics within their career ( Beamon, 2012; Symes, 2010).

Even though many of the athletes felt they wouldn't be seen as an athlete within their career, they thought that once a new member of society knew they were a basketball player, then they would see them as an athlete. This shows that potentially the athlete will still hold onto the identity in their career. They will still identify themselves as once being an athlete, which can change society's view of them. Society will still play a role in their identity, even when in their professional careers. Two of the athletes thought that they would always just "look like an athlete" so they will always be seen as one. Sport can influence career choices through how you must work hard and be dedicated to something to get what you want and deserve. Thus, sport will most likely be a part of one's identity for most of their lives.

#### **(4) Self-defined Athletes**

Athletic identity plays a major role in athletes and is the degree to which an athlete may identify as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). Student athletes face many demands and challenges that are not necessarily faced by other students (Watson, 2006). Seven of the participants, after

the intervention, still defined themselves as athletes, which can be both beneficial and costly (Brewer et al., 1993). There is not necessarily a "cure" for someone who holds a strong athletic identity, but there are ways to allow athletes to explore other options. There is also a need to transition from stating "I am an athlete" to "I enjoy athletics" or love the sport (Symes, 2010). Assisting athletes in this process of changing their perception of how they define themselves can be both beneficial to them and their athletic careers, by relieving some of the stress of the sport (Symes, 2010).

Two of the athletes described themselves as being athletes through their appearances. One of them wanted to continue to look like an athlete, which translates to her still defining herself as an athlete. She wants to always look and be defined as an athlete and maintain that identity throughout her life and career (Wenner, 1985). Staying in athletic shape is a reason that these athletes will continue to see and define themselves as athletes.

### **(5) Intervention Beneficial and Enjoyable**

There is a general need to get to know and understand athletes off the court. There is a lack of research in the area of athletic identity and positive psychology interventions. The fact that all of these participants found it beneficial and enjoyable to participate in an intervention based on positive self-identity, could be a bridge to other aspects of understanding athletic identity. There is a definite benefit to allowing athletes to self-reflect and being honest with who they are (Ghaye et al., 2009).

The intervention allowed athletes to realize what is important in their life, besides just athletics. One of the participants described her experience as realizing she is a person also rather than just an athlete. She had gained a better understanding of herself as a person, which can

benefit her in both athletics and life after athletics (Cropley et al., 2007). This can assist in professional development and allow athletes to grasp a better understanding of themselves during their athletic careers, to assist in better transition after their athletic career is terminated.

The intervention also placed a greater meaning on other aspects of their life. The athletes realized that there is more to life and more to themselves than just being an athlete and just basketball. There was a definite lack of understanding of how to use strengths and talk about themselves, which required a more meaningful thought process. The athletes perceived this intervention as enjoyable and thinking about these kinds of things, because they have never been challenged in this way before. The fact that they had to write things down and partake in an intervention, resulted in more thoughtful responses. This study, that shows how a positive psychology intervention can be beneficial and enjoyable, coincides with findings in another research study (Morton, 2014). Athletes benefitted in this study in terms of personal growth and discovering meaning outside of sport. Both of these were themes discovered in previous research that examined athlete's perceptions on a positive psychology intervention (Morton, 2014).

There were many options for the athletes to expand on their knowledge of themselves through the interviews and interventions. The interventions provided the athletes with knowledge of themselves that overall benefitted them for a better understanding of themselves. King (2001) supports these findings, suggesting that athletes who can focus on themselves and gain a better knowledge of who they are, may be more successful in their pursuits. The more successful they are in their pursuits, means they will most likely enjoy what they are doing (Symes, 2010). This intervention could be a step in the direction of the athletes enjoying what they do and benefitting in the long run, with identifying who they are (King, 2001; Symes, 2010).

## Applications

With this research, there appears to be a benefit to administering positive psychology interventions and exercises for athletes. There is a need to assist athletes in discovering something else important in their life besides athletics. This allows them to become connected and related to some other aspect of their life, which can result in easier transition to life after sports (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hawkins et al., 2014). Allowing athletes to reflect on their lives and their future lives can assist athletes in understanding who they are outside of athletics.

Taking the time during one's athletic career to explore other career opportunities and understanding strengths was found to be very beneficial to the athletes in this study. As coaches and mentors, taking time to get to know athletes outside of the sport and who they really are as a person can benefit the athletes and ultimately result in a better performance from those athletes (Symes, 2010). Even talking to the athletes about what they enjoy doing outside of the sport can be very beneficial to them. Taking the time to allow athletes to reflect on their lives can go a long way and potentially promote other identities besides being an athlete.

Discovering strengths seemed to result in the most positive feedback from the participants. That was the exercise they seemed to enjoy the most because it made them expand their thinking and understand themselves as individuals and not just as an athlete. Overall, taking time to work with athletes and understanding their needs can be very beneficial. These athletes are unique individuals that require time to allow them to expand their knowledge of themselves, and to help them understand who they are outside of their respected sport.

This research found that the primary underlying factors to athletic identity were a need to be viewed as an athlete, family and societal influences, and a lack of understanding or purpose

outside of sport. The intervention did not alter in any way how the athletes viewed themselves in terms of their identity. The positive psychology interventions led the athletes to a better perceived understanding of their lives outside of sports, as well as producing more insight to the topic of athletic identity. There is still a need for future research on the topic of athletic identity.

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## Chapter 6: Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in a team of Division II Women's Basketball players, and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity. The questions for this study aimed to discover underlying factors of athletic identity, as well as an athlete's perceptions of a positive psychology intervention. Athletic identity can be both beneficial and costly for an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). An athlete can use his/her identity to relate to other aspects of their lives and they are continually reinforced of this identity (Beamon, 2012).

Overall, the underlying factors for athletic identity found were based on a lack of understanding and purpose outside of sport, family and societal influences, as well as a psychological need to 'be viewed as an athlete.' The positive psychology intervention led the athletes to a better understanding of their life outside of sport. The athletes gained a better understanding of their strengths without sport and also realized that sport has had a huge impact on their lives. They also were able to expand their understanding of how sport has helped them in their life and how that can translate to helping them in the future and finding a career. The athletes enjoyed talking about what they are grateful for and how to use their strengths in other aspects of life, such as helping people.

This particular positive psychology based intervention did not alter in any way how the athletes viewed themselves. The seven participants all still considered themselves to be athletes. However, one of the participants said the intervention helped her realize that she is an athlete but still a person as well. She saw herself in a different light, through participation in the

intervention. The majority of the athletes perceived the intervention to be beneficial to them and they enjoyed expanding their knowledge to other aspects of life.

This study contributed to the continued research of the topic of athletic identity. The researcher was able to gain further insight into the topic of athletic identity. The research is very limited, and only examined a small population of seven women's basketball players at the NCAA Division II level. There was positive feedback from the intervention to expand the athlete's perspective into other aspects besides one identity. There is a need for further research in this topic and expanded knowledge on positive psychology and its relation to athletic identity.

### **Future Research**

In future research, there could be benefits to utilizing positive psychology for helping athletes understand and see themselves in new light, and not solely as an athlete. There would be a great benefit to holding such interventions with larger groups of athletes across multiple sports. There could be different results based on gender and type of sport played. There could also be a benefit to holding such interactions and interviews with athletes across all levels of sport such as high school, collegiate and elite, with the intention of trying to find themes across the multitude of different levels of athletes.

This research can be used to build a better and more sport specific positive psychology intervention. More interventions could be used to determine which produce the best results for specifically looking at athletic identity. There are many interventions and interview questions that could be used to produce results on factors of athletic identity. This research presented could be a first step in understanding athletes' identity and factors of that identity and their experiences with positive psychology interventions.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**QUANTITATIVE MEASURES**

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**AIMS SCALE (Brewer et al., 1993)**

	Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree	
<b>1. I consider myself an athlete.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
2. I have many goals related to sport.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>3. Most of my friends are athletes.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
4. Sport is the most important part of my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>5. I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
6. I need to participate in sport to feel good about myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>7. Other people see me mainly as an athlete.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>9. Sport is the only important thing in my life.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
10. I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

**PPAIS (Nasco & Webb, 2006)**

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
<b>1. Athletics help me express my emotions and feelings.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
2. It is very important for me to succeed at my sport.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>3. My popularity with others is related to my athletic ability.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
4. I obtain personal satisfaction from participating in athletics.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>5. I only participate in sports because I am good at them.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
6. I often fear people will not like me as much if I do not compete well.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>7. My primary reason for competing in my sport is receiving awards and recognition.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
8. Being an athlete is an important part of who I am.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>9. I fear not receiving the recognition and attention I get from being an athlete when I retire.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
10. I would feel a great sense of loss if I suddenly were unable to participate in my sport.	1	2	3	4	5

### The VIA Classification of Character Strengths

#### 1. Wisdom and Knowledge – Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

- Creativity [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
- Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
- Judgment [critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
- Love of Learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
- Perspective [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

#### 2. Courage – Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

- Bravery [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
- Perseverance [persistence, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks
- Honesty [authenticity, integrity]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
- Zest [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

#### 3. Humanity - Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

- Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
- Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
- Social Intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

#### **4. Justice - Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life**

- Teamwork [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
- Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.
- Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the time maintain time good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

#### **5. Temperance – Strengths that protect against excess**

- Forgiveness: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
- Humility: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
- Prudence: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
- Self-Regulation [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions
- 6. Transcendence - Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning
- Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
- Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
- Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
- Humor [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
- Spirituality [faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

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**APPENDIX B**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

## **RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

Exploring Athletic Identity in NCAA Division II Women's Basketball Players

Katelyn Smith

Adams State University

Department of Human Performance & Physical Education

### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of the research is to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in Division II Women's Basketball players and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity.

### **Procedures**

If there is an agreement to participate in this study, you will answer a series of questions pre and post a positive psychology intervention to gain an understanding of identity development.

### **Duration of Participation**

Interviews and interventions will take place over a four week period. Interviews and interventions will not last longer than one hour.

### **Risks to the Individual**

There are no risks associated with participation.

### **Confidentiality/Use of Records**

All information received in this study is confidential and will only be disclosed with your written permission as required by law. Participant information will be kept in a secure location. No names will be associated with any of the transcriptions.

### **Contact Information**

Primary Investigator

*Name:* Katelyn Smith

*Email:* smithkm9@grizzlies.adams.edu

*Phone:* 360.701.0328

### **Voluntary Nature of Participation**

"I understand that I can withdraw my participation at any time and will not suffer a penalty for doing so."

"I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT."

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

Exploring Athletic Identity in NCAA Division II Women's Basketball Players at a Single  
University  
Katelyn Smith  
Adams State University  
Department of Human Performance & Physical Education

**Purpose of Research**

The purpose of the research is to explore the underlying factors of athletic identity development in Division II Women's Basketball players and to understand their experiences of a positive psychology intervention focused on developing positive self-identity.

**Procedures**

This research utilizes mixed-methods procedures in both quantitative and qualitative measures. If you are asked to participate in this study it is because you are a member of the 2015-2016 Adams State Women's Basketball team. If there is an agreement to participate in this study you will fill out an Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993) and a Public-Private Athletic Identity Scale (PPAIS, Nasco & Webb, 2006) to receive a baseline understanding of athletic identity. The questionnaires will be analyzed through SPSS for statistical analysis and the top 50% of the highest scores will then be asked to continue participation in the study through an interview and intervention process. The interviews will take place in Plachy hall in the Hall of Fame room. Only the researcher and participant will be present.

There will also be an intervention based on discovering self-identity that will take place in the Hall of Fame room as well. Post interviews will be conducted after the intervention is complete to gain an understanding of the athletes' perceptions of the intervention.

**Duration of Participation**

Your participation in this study will include one to two hour sessions once a week for four weeks. I will expect to have all of the interviews and intervention completed by January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016. You may stop participation in this study at any time.

**Benefits of the Research**

If you agree to participate in this study, there is no guarantee there will be any benefits to you as the participant. However, you will be contributing to future research in the topic of Athletic Identity. You may also find that you benefit from the positive self-identity intervention and interviews.

**Risks to the Individual**

There are minimal risks or discomforts associated with participation in this research. I am asking questions based on Athletic Identity and self-identity. The interviewer is one of the current coaches, with whom the participants know and are comfortable with. If at any time, you are uncomfortable with a question, you do not have to answer and can withdraw from the study.

**Confidentiality/Use of Records**

All information received in this study is confidential and will only be disclosed with your written permission as required by law. Participant information will be kept in a locked desk and only the researcher will have access to interviews, interventions and questionnaires. No names will be associated with any of the transcriptions.

**Human Subject Statement**

If you have any questions in regards to your right as a participant in this study, or have felt pressure to participate in this study or concerns about this research please contact the Adams State Institutional

Review Board Chair Beth Bonnstetter. You may also ask any other questions you may have to Primary Investigator Katelyn Smith or Committee Chair Brian Zuleger.

**Primary Investigator****IRB Chair****Committee Chair**

*Name:* Katelyn Smith

*Name:* Beth Bonnstetter

*Name:* Brian Zuleger

*Email:*

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[smithkm9@grizzlies.adams.edu](mailto:smithkm9@grizzlies.adams.edu)

*Phone:* 719.587.7494

*Phone:* 719.587.7404

*Phone:* 360.701.0328

**Voluntary Nature of Participation**

I understand that I can withdraw my participation at any time and will not suffer a penalty for doing so.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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APPENDIX C  
INTERVENTION

**Week 1: Discovering Signature Strengths**

**Week 2: Best-Possible Self**

**Week 3: Sport Narrative**

**Week 1:**

**Signature Strengths**

Signature Strength #1: \_\_\_\_\_

How will you implement this signature strength?

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Signature Strength #2: \_\_\_\_\_

How will you implement this signature strength?

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Signature Strength #3: \_\_\_\_\_

How will you implement this signature strength?

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Signature Strength #4: \_\_\_\_\_

How will you implement this signature strength?

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Signature Strength #5: \_\_\_\_\_

How will you implement this signature strength?

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APPENDIX D  
RAW AND GENERAL DATA THEMES

## Pre-Intervention Interview Questions

### Question 1: How would you define yourself?

#### Raw Themes

1. Outgoing and works hard
2. Dedicated to the task
3. Self-defined athlete
4. Likes and interests to define identity
5. Outgoing, active, funny and sweet
6. Tall and healthy
7. Self-described athlete, based upon looks
8. Can tell they are athletes by appearance
9. Athlete by appearance
10. Motivated and organized
11. Does whatever it takes to get things done
12. Describes self as a basketball player
13. Self-identified as an athlete, but not solely, just a big part
14. Usually just says I play basketball when introducing self
15. Self-defined athlete
16. Nothing else to be defined as
17. Comes off as mean at first
18. Self-defined athlete and dedicated to working hard
19. Works hard in school, basketball or any activity
20. Dedicated nature
21. Self-defined athlete
22. Can describe self as a foreigner but nothing really else
23. Goofy, outgoing and friendly
24. Blonde hair and blue eyes
25. I am very athletic and love sports

#### General Themes

- a. Likes and interests help to define identity
- b. Outgoing personality
- c. Can't think of anything else to be described as other than an athlete
- d. Appearances portray athlete and identity
- e. Dedicated in nature and hard working

### Question 2: How do you think others define you?

#### Raw Themes

1. Wants society to see her as an athlete

2. Be seen as an athlete
3. Based on interests and takes pride in the sport
4. Long commitment labels a person
5. Society recognizes identity based on what you partake in
6. First thing said is athlete
7. Great person in general
8. Graceful
9. Peers know athlete because she plays basketball
10. Society knows she is an athlete
11. Society also sees athlete as a good student
12. Tall, athlete by appearance, known for basketball in high school
13. Affiliated as an athlete
14. Wants people to know she is an athlete
15. Defined and seen as an athlete
16. Seen as an athlete because of dress and people she hangs out with
17. Primarily hangs out with teammates
18. Wants society to see her as an athlete as well as studious
19. Wants to be seen as caring and helpful
20. Seen as nice to the people she meets
21. Wants to be seen as an athlete because she has worked to becoming a collegiate athlete
22. Put in work and deserves to be called an athlete
23. Earned and worked for her title as an athlete
24. Labeling others in what they have worked to become, like a professor
25. Should be seen as an athlete because have put in work for the title
26. Others see her a basketball player
27. Always been on the basketball team and that is how people know me
28. Wants to be seen as a hard worker and never gives up
29. A leader by example and someone to look up to

### General Themes

- a. Wants to be seen by society as an athlete
- b. Society knows them as athletes and basketball players
- c. Long commitment to the sport and it's what they participate in
- d. Athlete by appearance and because they hang out with teammates and dress like an athlete
- e. Have put in the work and dedication to earn the title as athlete from society

### Question 3: What do you feel are reasons why you define yourself and others define you this way?

#### Raw Themes

1. Long commitment in the sport
2. Labeled from the outside

3. Participation in anything allows for labeling from the outside
4. Can't think of being described as anything else other than an athlete
5. Been doing basketball for so long, huge part of life
6. Basketball huge priority in life, think about daily
7. Defining factors of identity because it has shaped her as a person
8. Parents influence on identity
9. Family standards of working for what you get
10. Family influence
11. Holds self to very high standard
12. Big part of life
13. Been an athlete whole life
14. Self-described to be an athlete
15. Plays basketball well and is a contributing factor
16. Many factors and traits to being an athlete
17. Continuing to better herself as an athlete
18. Only extracurricular activity participated in
19. Never done anything else besides basketball
20. Always played just basketball
21. Parents introduce her as a basketball player
22. Parents bragging about players abilities
23. Trusted by peers
24. Always try her best to get things done
25. Will give all even if it doesn't work, at least she gave her best effort
26. Always had a lot of energy and all over the place
27. Loves competitiveness of sport and has played multiple sports her whole life
28. Always loved sport

### General Themes

- a. Athletics being huge part of life and participated in for so long
- b. Factors and traits of being a good player, playing the sport and continuing to improve skills
- c. Parents and family influence identity as a basketball player and athlete
- d. Holds self to high standard and gives best effort in everything done
- e. Basketball only thing that they have participated in so it's all they know

### Question 4: If tomorrow you found out you couldn't play basketball, how would that make you feel?

### Raw Themes

1. Hard transition
2. Psychological disruptions and depression
3. Never experienced life without basketball
4. Would continue to remain active
5. More effort into school without basketball

6. Be a better student and focus on education
7. Emotionally taxing
8. Uses basketball as an outlet and sport as relief
9. Devastation
10. Very upset
11. Does not want to be seen not playing
12. Avoiding explaining why not playing
13. People excited about beginning of season when she was a player
14. Social acceptance as an athlete decreases, and peers not excited about games, playing, etc.
15. Does not talk to as many people when not playing
16. Peers want to share the glory of the game with athlete
17. Wouldn't know what to do with life without basketball
18. Been playing entire life
19. No clue what to do with life
20. Focus on school and get more work done
21. Would still go watch the games
22. Very difficult without basketball
23. Very terrible without basketball, take a long time to get over
24. It must happen for a reason, but it would be life changing
25. Would affect choice of college and how she is seen by society
26. Focus more on education without basketball
27. Might still be seen as an athlete
28. Couldn't relate to athletes anymore
29. Has another sport to fall back on in track
30. Would feel lost with no sports at all
31. Focus more on school and education
32. Friends and family would treat her the same, but maybe a few people differently if no longer an athlete
33. Cry without basketball
34. Stressed out without basketball
35. Devastated to have the team aspect taken away
36. It's like losing your family and all on your own
37. Would have to adapt to a new environment
38. Treated differently if not an athlete
39. There are many athletes in this school
40. It's cool to walk around as an athlete, you want to be an athlete here
41. Wouldn't want to walk around this school only as a "student"
42. Topics of conversation would not be about basketball
43. Not being an athlete would change everything
44. Wants to become a coach
45. Difficult to not have any kind of sport in life
46. Difficulty not being active in general
47. Wants to be competitive
48. Would make a competitive environment without sport
49. Depressed without basketball

50. Injury has set her back already, didn't finish on a good note
51. At end of career, wants to be satisfied with play
52. Focus on school without basketball
53. Wouldn't be known without basketball, because peers know people on the teams
54. Won't be treated differently, just not as a basketball player
55. Would be very upset without basketball and sad
56. Find an alternative to sport
57. Would want to help others succeed in their stuff
58. Must be a reason for everything but would still be upset
59. Might be treated differently by team if not involved with the sport
60. Would be awkward because used to be a part of the team
61. Could be treated differently by peers depending on the reason
62. Would feel more depressed

### General Themes

- a. Depressed, sad and devastation
- b. Have no clue what to do with themselves or with life if basketball was taken away
- c. Would have to adapt and learn something new to do
- d. Put more focus into school and education
- e. Would be sad without the team aspect, and would no longer have team dynamic
- f. Society would not see them as an athlete and they would not be known
- g. Would find ways to create a sport and competitive environment
- h. Difficult transition from life without athletics
- i. Topics of conversation with peers would not be the same and peers would not be as excited to see them

## Post-Intervention Interview Questions

### Question 1: Describe your experiences with this packet

#### Raw Themes

1. Sports relate to professional career path
2. Knows future plans
3. Knows what career plans are
4. Still withhold sports in career
5. Sports have helped make career choice
6. Difficult to write about intervention
7. Thinking deeper about life
8. Difficult to write about
9. Felt intervention expanded thinking on other things than just athletics
10. Basketball big part of life and hard to relate to other aspects of strength
11. Thought it was good to reflect on other areas
12. Shows that there are other areas still in life besides just basketball

13. Found packet difficult, made her think
14. Good to reflect on other aspects
15. Good to see narrative and thinking about other aspects
16. Packet to give way to see what else she is good at besides basketball
17. Seeing how sport has impacted life and how it will continue to impact life
18. Packet made her think a lot
19. Difficult to write it all out, so more thought process was used
20. Evaluate life on a deeper level
21. Once she figured out how to write with life without basketball, was easier, but overall difficult
22. Intervention will help utilize and understand other strengths besides basketball
23. Learned also about weaknesses

### General Themes

1. Helped with seeing future plans
2. Sport have helped shape career paths
3. Difficult to write this packet
4. forced to think about other aspects of life besides just basketball
5. made athletes think and actually process the packet
6. good to see other areas besides just basketball
7. finding other strengths they can use besides basketball
8. realizing how much of their lives revolve around the sport
9. decisions made revolving around the sport

### Question 2: Did you find it difficult to talk about your strengths without using athletics?

#### Raw Themes

1. Found intervention interesting
2. Tried not to use basketball in packet
3. Tried not to relate to basketball
4. Enjoyed intervention, likes talking about things grateful for
5. Intervention helps make things in life easier because you realize what you have
6. Discovering strengths, realized she cares about people and having a joyful life
7. Found it beneficial to look at life in a broader perspective
8. Found talking about strengths without sport very difficult
9. Been participating on sports for so long
10. Never thought of having to talk about strengths without sport
11. Everything about sport life fell into place
12. How people have helped get her to where she is now
13. How sports have helped through school also
14. Helped see the person she wants to be and where to improve also
15. How to make strengths stronger

16. Did not find writings about strengths difficult
17. Without using sports in strengths difficult because life revolves around sport
18. Hard to talk without basketball because has become a part of her
19. Not using sport as a strength was difficult, people know her with sports as a strength
20. Finding additional strengths was difficult

#### **General Themes**

1. Enjoys talking about what they are grateful for
2. Difficult to write without basketball
3. Strengths revolve around sport, difficult having to find other areas of strength
4. Seeing where they are and where they want to be in life
5. People have helped get to where they want to be

### **Question 3: Would you want your kids to play sports?**

#### **Raw Themes**

1. Wants family to be involved with sport as well
2. Participation in sport from kids
3. Thinks basketball helps with everything
4. Would want kids to play sports as well
5. Would want kids to play sports
6. Would want sports as a part of kids' lives
7. Maybe involved in coaching as well
8. Coaching and kids to keep sports in life
9. Society would know if coaching one day or had kids playing sport
10. Wants kids to play sports
11. Wants children to play sports as well

#### **General Themes**

1. Wants future children to be involved in sport
2. Coaching to stay involved with sport

### **Question 4: Do you still define yourself as an athlete?**

#### **Raw Themes**

1. Will always define self as athlete
2. Thinks will always define self as an athlete
3. Athletics big part of her
4. Others still see her as a basketball player
5. Society may change perception when no longer an athlete
6. Still defines self as an athlete
7. Still defines self as athlete, but sees other aspects of life and knows she is still a person

8. There is more than just basketball and being an athlete
9. Society would know she was an athlete if talked about it
10. Thinks will always have label as athlete
11. Still defines self as an athlete
12. Would not be seen as an athlete when a nurse
13. Be someone who says they used to play basketball
14. Still defines self as an athlete
15. Intervention made her realize she does revolve around sport
16. Revolves around sport more than she originally thought
17. Never realized how much is determined in her life by the sport
18. Decisions are made revolving around the sport
19. If known by people, would still see her as an athlete in the future
20. If someone new saw as teacher and not athlete
21. Seen by people in how they know you at that point in time
22. Still defines self as an athlete

### General Themes

1. Still define self as an athlete
2. Society still places athletic identity on them
3. Sees there is more to life than just basketball and seen as a person also

### Question 5: Do you still think you will be seen as an athlete in your career or profession?

#### Raw Themes

1. May still be defined as an athlete after sports career because plans to still work out and look like an athlete
2. Wants to look tough/athletic in profession
3. Able to be aware of strengths and how to use them elsewhere in profession
4. Would want people to know her as her career profession or mom when no longer an athlete
5. Height may affect how society sees her as a basketball player
6. In career, doesn't think will still be seen as athlete, because not a part of life at that moment
7. Aspiring to be a nurse
8. Sports can help with career goals through determination
9. Determination and teamwork learned from sport can help
10. Honesty and loyalty learned from sport can help with career path
11. New location could affect how society sees her
12. Will be seen as a nurse, until others know she was an athlete
13. Will be seen as an athlete when society knows past
14. Does not know career goals, just wants to help other people
15. Maybe wants to be. A nurse, but not sure
16. Wants to help people
17. Intervention could be helpful with career planning

18. If coaching not an option and be involved in sport, could have ability to do something else
19. Could decide on a career if had to
20. Wouldn't have specific career, but career options not involved in sport
21. Have prepared self for back up if basketball doesn't work
22. Chose nursing for aspect of helping people
23. Basketball as a side career not the main one
24. Family influence on becoming coach and career choices
25. Discovering other loves helps for future, besides just basketball
26. Does not know career goals or aspirations yet
27. Career may involve sport at one point
28. Emphasis in elementary education and PE, may become a coach
29. School classes have influenced career choice
30. Intervention helped think about future goals and plans
31. New friends see as your profession and not an athlete
32. Doing something and they find out she is actually athletic and must have been an athlete

### **General Themes**

1. Plans to continue to look like an athlete even in profession
2. Would want to be identified as profession and not an athlete in career
3. Very dependent on society and if they know you as an athlete or not
4. Sport helps for career through honesty, loyalty, hard work, dedication etc.
5. If sport related career doesn't work, have helped find a backup plan and what they are also good at