

# Underlying factors that influence competitive sport withdrawal among youth athletes: A qualitative study.

A dissertation submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Sport, Exercise and Health degree.

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## **Abstract**

Competitive sport withdrawal among youth athletes in New Zealand is prevalent, so it is therefore important to better understand it. The purpose of this study was to (1) identify withdrawal factors and (2) explore how those factors are experienced. A qualitative method using semi-structured interviews was used to gather descriptive data from 10 youth athletes who had withdrawn from competitive sport. Using thematic analysis, an understanding of what withdrawal factors youth athletes experience and how they worked was identified. The five prominent withdrawal factors were 1) Transitions, 2) Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship, 3) Lack of Relatedness, 4) Less Enjoyment, and 5) Injury. These factors often interacted with each other to influence sport withdrawal. In addition, the factors seem to either manifest as a withdrawal accompaniment (experienced but doesn't directly initiate withdrawal) or a withdrawal trigger (linked directly to the withdrawal decision). The findings of this study can be used by sport coaches or managers to potentially identify withdrawal-risk athletes sooner and ultimately reduce overall incidence.

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**Attestation of Authorship**

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

Signed by student:

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

### **Background**

Competitive youth sport withdrawal occurs when athletes terminate their involvement prematurely before reaching top performance (Cervello et al., 2007). Sport withdrawal is a complex phenomenon having been studied for decades (Klint & Weiss, 1986; Orlick, 1974; Persson et al., 2020; Schmidt & Stein, 1991; Thomas et al., 2021). However, questions remain about what the most important factors are and how they are experienced. Sport delivery for youth is being reconsidered in New Zealand as many are walking away (Sport New Zealand, 2022).

Sport withdrawal is best understood using the structural model of leisure and outdoor recreation participation (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Early researchers explored constraints, suggesting that there were three main categories. These were intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Witt & Dangi, 2018). More recent research on sport withdrawal has framed it as the culmination of a disengagement process or journey of negative experiences such as conflict with coaches, or constantly being criticised by the team (Dias et al., 2018; Eliasson et al., 2021).

Numerous quantitative researchers have studied withdrawal attempting to establish underlying factors (Cervello et al., 2007; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Witt & Dangi, 2018). Factors include a lack of fun, perceived lack of competence, and too much pressure (Cervello et al., 2007; Fry et al., 1981; Kint & Weiss, 1986). Although these studies are helpful, gaps remain including a more nuanced understanding of how withdrawal factors are actually experienced. Most quantitative studies provided athletes with questionnaires which limited the depth that athletes could provide in conveying their withdrawal experiences.

Qualitative approaches have also been adopted to study youth sport withdrawal. Transitions as a withdrawal factor emerged from these studies (Coakley & White, 1992; Hirvensalo & Lintunen, 2011; Van Houten et al., 2019). Transitions are understood as a significant change in a person's life that causes them to adapt their behaviour, and habits to suit their new lifestyle (Van Houten et al., 2019). From studies in which interviews were undertaken, it has also been identified that the withdrawal experience varies depending on the age and gender



of the athletes. The significance of coaches has also identified as important in the context of youth athlete withdrawal (Dias et al., 2018).

The complexity of sport withdrawal and some underlying factors may have been overlooked by previous researchers justifies further study of the topic. Additional evidence from Sport New Zealand (2022) also help to justify the study of competitive sport withdrawal. Their findings suggest there are too many youth athletes walking away from competitive sport which can be harmful to their long-term health, and also limit their potential as future talents. Further research within the qualitative paradigm is needed to fully grasp the complexity of withdrawal (Coakley & White, 1992). Sport withdrawal will be best understood by asking athletes to describe their experiences with their own words.

A gap is apparent in the youth sport withdrawal literature. Although several studies have identified various withdrawal factors, it is not clear how they are experienced. Previous studies also fail to clearly show how factors lead to the withdrawal decision at the end of the disengagement process. For example, many athletes cite a lack of fun as a reason for withdrawal from sport (Persson et al., 2020; Witt & Dangi, 2018; Krauge & Pederson, 1999), but it would be helpful to know more about that experience and what other factors may intersect with it. Within the current study, the aim is to investigate this further and go beyond just identifying withdrawal factors. This study will focus on how various withdrawal factors contribute to a final decision to exit the sport. This will add to the body of current knowledge and potentially clarify the complex phenomenon which is competitive sport withdrawal. Reducing sport withdrawal amongst youth will have a positive impact on the health of adult New Zealanders as they are more likely to continue participating.

Research in this area has also not yet shed light on the way in which a withdrawal factor may directly or indirectly lead to a withdrawal or can be overcome. This gap is important to consider as it will help researchers identify underlying factors which could potentially provide sport coaches and managers with knowledge of athlete experiences and prevent the incidence of withdrawal. Preventing the incidence of withdrawal is important as sport participation seems to be declining within New Zealand (Sport New Zealand, 2022). Keeping youth in sport is important as it could be beneficial for their long-term health, but also it could increase the number of NZ winners on the world stage. Being able to identify underlying factors that influence sport withdrawal across an athlete's involvement in

competitive sport could be crucial to decrease the incidence of withdrawal. Literature has shown withdrawal tends to be a journey rather than a single incident which results in withdrawal (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021). Therefore, the researcher explored competitive sport withdrawal, and generated data to address this gap and contribute towards a deeper understanding of competitive sport withdrawal.

The current research used a descriptive qualitative approach to study competitive sport withdrawal among youth athletes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 athletes who have withdrawn from competitive sport. This helped to extract rich data in relation to athletes' personal experiences and reasons for withdrawal.

### **Aim & Research Questions**

The aim of this research is to identify and build an understanding of the factors that lead to competitive sport withdrawal in youth athletes in NZ. This knowledge can be used to potentially reduce the incidence of sport withdrawal among youth athletes. The following research questions are explored:

- What factors influence NZ youth athletes to withdraw from competitive sport?
- Why do these factors lead to withdrawal?

### **Structure of Dissertation**

The current dissertation is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 presents an introduction to the dissertation. A discussion of the research gap and the need for a deeper understanding of competitive sport withdrawal was provided as well as an overview of the aim and objectives of the research. Chapter 2 is a review of the current literature on competitive sport withdrawal. An overview of withdrawal in the context of constraints is provided as well as discussions of other important factors that relate to sport withdrawal. Chapter 3 outlines and justifies the methodology used within the current research. Chapter 4 is a presentation of the results of the current research based on data gathered from the interviews with athletes. In this chapter, the five most prevalent factors identified from the research are put forth as well as how they are experienced. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings and their relationship to current literature. Limitations of the current

research are also presented along with a set of recommendations which will be useful for practitioners as well as inspire future research in the area of competitive youth sport withdrawal.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature review**

### **Introduction**

Sport withdrawal has been studied by many researchers worldwide (Battaglia et al., 2021; Crane & Temple, 2015; Dias et al., 2018; Persson et al., 2020). It has been found that exiting sport can be very complex as it is determined by interpersonal, intrapersonal, structural and societal characteristics (Crane & Temple, 2015; Wilson et al., 2019). This literature review provides a critical analysis of related research undertaken although most studies have been quantitative in the area of sport withdrawal. The review is organised around intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. In addition, fear of failure, other psychological factors and Transitions are covered. Final conclusions point to studies employing qualitative methods of inquiry being more effective in helping to better understand youth sport withdrawal.

### **Intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints**

It is appropriate in the context of youth sport withdrawal to consider the structural model of leisure and outdoor recreation participation (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). The structural model proposed by Crawford and Godbey considers the types of barriers athletes experience that could interfere with their sport participation or leisure activity. In early research on sport participation and leisure activity, constraints (Buchanan, 1988; Searle & Jackson, 1985) were linked to non-participation (Jackson, 2005). These constraints were organized across three categories. Firstly, intrapersonal constraints described as factors internal to the individual. Secondly, interpersonal constraints that merge as a result of interaction with others and lastly structural constraints resulting from external conditions outside of the athlete's control (Crawford et al., 1991; White, 2008). Taken together, these constraints contribute to sport withdrawal and form a useful lens to consider a myriad of withdrawal factors.

A more recent study by Dias et al. (2018) closely aligns to this current research. Reasons for withdrawal were explored among a group of talented Portuguese and Czech athletes. Eight athletes from different sports between 18 and 22 years of age and who had participated in

national or international competitions, were interviewed. The actions of coaches and unpopular training methods, which can be interpreted as a combination of interpersonal and intrapersonal constraints were found to negatively impact intrinsic motivation. The athletes felt that their hard work was seen as inadequate with the coach neglecting to applaud accomplishments, while also criticising small mistakes. This resulted in athletes feeling underappreciated and highlights how coaches' actions can negatively affect athletes' perceptions of themselves.

Similar to many quantitative studies (Carlman et al., 2013; Gardner et al., 2017; Persson et al., 2020; Witt & Dangi) Dias et al. (2018) also found athletes withdrew from the sport because they were no longer having fun. In the context of constraints, this is best understood as an intrapersonal factor. Lack of fun was described as losing enjoyment, interest or pleasure associated with participating in the sport. Some athletes were unable to describe the feelings associated with this lack of fun, but simply felt like participating in the sport was no longer enjoyable. However, most of the athletes that withdrew for this reason mentioned it was because there was too much pressure from the coach to win. Furthermore, coaches pushed athletes to succeed even during training, to the point where they felt the sport held no enjoyment for them anymore. In addition, a number of athletes felt they no longer enjoyed the sport as much in comparison to when they first started playing and only continued playing as they felt this is what the coach wanted. Some quantitative studies have identified 'relationship with the coach' as a withdrawal factor but the design meant that the nuance of the relationship was overlooked. In contrast Dias et al. (2018) found athletes did not withdraw because of the pressure from the coach but rather because they lost interest in the sport as result of the coach's behaviour.

Other intrapersonal factors have been linked to withdrawal. For example, it was found that youth tend to leave sport because it is not only too competitive, but there is too much pressure to win (Persson et al., 2020). For example, participants pointed out trainings were becoming too strict and competitive as the coach had athletes keep track of the days and number of hours they train to prove their training volumes had increased. Furthermore, participants highlighted the coach's tendency to focus far too much on sport specific skills. One participant mentioned they were often teased and ridiculed for not having the same

skill level as others. This reduced the sense of fun derived from the sport, aligning to some extent with the findings of Dias et al. (2018). Participants were also left with the feeling they were not good enough and not able to meet the coach expectations. Similarly, when coaches prioritise winning and competition over fun this can lead (especially for youth athletes, 18 -22 years) to a loss of interest in the sport (Strube & Strand, 2016).

From Dias et al., (2018) and Persson et al., (2020) we know intrapersonal withdrawal factors can vary, based on gender, the sport, and the age of the athlete (Persson et al., 2020). For example, 10 percent of female participants in Persson's study reported withdrawing from sport due to lack of opportunities compared to six percent of male participants. Dias et al. (2018), reported gender-based facility and equipment allocation issues emerging were related to sport withdrawal. In this case athletes felt that sports club never had enough money for the girl's teams or coaches. These findings suggest sport withdrawal is a complex phenomenon best explored using a qualitative approach, so we can better understand the nuanced experiences of male and female athletes.

It is also important to consider interpersonal factors linked to youth athlete sport withdrawal. For example, in Dias et al. (2018), athletes felt the attitude of the team, often constructed by the coach, created a stressful and unsupportive environment making it hard to develop skills and enjoyment for the sport. A focus on interpersonal factors may help to shed further light on withdrawal, capturing the complexity of how an athlete engages with others in the sport environment.

Some athletes note they only continued playing for the coach and not themselves (Dias et al., 2018) which reflects an important interpersonal dynamic. Although Dias et al. were able to uncover underlying reasons that appear to influence athlete dropout, the study was undertaken with Portuguese and Czech Republic athletes. Therefore, further study across other contexts and populations would enhance our understanding.

In another qualitative study, Gatouillat et al. (2020) interviewed 100 teenagers. The focus was on experiences within the participant's family, social circle as well as physical activity levels throughout school where all were found to play a role in withdrawal. This study helps shape the present research as it identified multiple reasons that could have led to

withdrawal. Notably, the study suggests there tends to be underlying factors, such as poor relations with the coach or team, bad team atmosphere, or a lack of team cohesion, which are not necessarily the immediate reason for withdrawing, but are present and play a role, nonetheless. Athletes did not like it when competition is the focus of the team as it creates an atmosphere that is too serious and no longer a fun place to be. Furthermore, the authors suggest the environment is important when considering the aspect of fun and ongoing athlete participation. Setting up a friendly atmosphere for trainings, where coaches listen to and encourage players, and help maintain-a 'team spirit' may enable athletes to have fun and improve cooperation (Gatouillat et al., 2020).

In a New Zealand-based study by Wilson et al. (2019) it was determined if the team environment is negative, it will affect the athlete's participation. This occurs when athletes are not motivated by each other resulting in them not wanting to be part of the team. This is because relationships among the team create an environment that can positively or negatively influence the athlete to withdraw or participate. Participants suggested including friends in the sport to help each other succeed and emphasised the importance of positive relationships within the team. This aligns to the findings of Gatouillat et al., (2020) and suggests a fun environment is important for athletes of any age or competitive level. If an athlete feels the team atmosphere is negative it could also promote sport withdrawal. As one athlete in the study indicated the social bond forged within their team was a crucial aspect which motivated them to continue to play competitive sport. Consequently, athletes invited friends to join as they have positive relationships and motivate each other, which creates a supportive environment.

There has also been some research on youth sport withdrawal focusing on intrapersonal and interpersonal factors, although further research is required. The most important point to take from this research is athletes may withdraw from sport if they have negative interpersonal experiences. It was also noted that the reasons athletes withdraw from competitive sport are often related to the reasons why they originally participated in the sport. In other words, an athlete might participate because of their friends, but withdraw because they feel they are no longer getting along with others in the team. In order to better understand the intra and interpersonal constraints relevant to sport withdrawal

there remains a need to understand more about the psychological factors, such as Fear of Failure, as it impacts an athlete's sporting experiences.

### **Fear of Failure**

Fear of failure has been theorised as the motive to avoid failure associated with anticipatory shame, which means athletes predict failure and expect to feel shame when a mistake is made (Atkinson, 1957). Although not neatly aligned with either intra or interpersonal constraints, there are psychological factors such as fear of failure that are important to consider in the context of youth withdrawing from sport. When an athlete competes in a negative and unsupportive environment, it can influence the athlete to develop a fear of failure as they anticipate consequences, such as shame or being embarrassed by the team or coach (Gustafsson et al., 2017). Ultimately, fear of failure originates from within an athlete as they seek to avoid anticipated failure and the perceived consequences of failure. However, the actions, behaviour, and interactions of a coach or teammate can determine levels of fear of failure, which also makes it possible to consider fear of failure an interpersonal constraint (Sagar & Jowett, 2012).

When athletes identify a threat that could potentially increase the chances of failure within sport, it will impact their ability to perform tasks and achieve their goals (Gustafsson et al., 2017). This reflects a unidimensional view of fear of failure, being about avoiding mistakes and feeling embarrassed which ultimately leads to feelings of shame.

In another study, 81 English football players aged between 16 to 18 years completed a 'Performance failure appraisal inventory' while also taking part in semi-structured interviews which explored fear of failure (Sagar et al., 2010). The authors found fear of failure affects the well-being of athletes. Athletes who struggle with fear of failure tend to have negative feelings before competition which affects their performance. This is because it makes them feel less confident and less willing to take risks. Athletes in the study also revealed there are other dimensions that could trigger fear of failure. For example, fear of failure could also come from having too much pressure to consistently perform to a high standard at an elite level.



Another study found fear of failure is often related to pressure exerted on athletes (Gustafsson et al., 2017). Findings suggested competitive sport tends to be highly stressful for young athletes as they are consistently pressured to win. This can create both fear of failure and psychological stress for the athletes which could lead to burnout and eventually withdrawing from the sport (Sagar et al., 2010). Gustafsson et al. (2017) also used the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory developed by Conroy et al. (2002) to measure the athletes fear of failure. The results showed athletes with a reduced sense of accomplishment tend to have a higher fear of failure and higher levels of psychological stress. In addition, athletes with high levels of fear of failure also had higher levels of emotional and physical exhaustion which led to burnout and withdrawing from the sport. On the contrary, in some studies it has been argued that Fear of Failure is not unidimensional. Similar to the findings of Crane and Temple (2015) who reported interpersonal and intrapersonal reasons for sport withdrawal, Gustafsson et al. (2017) also contend that fear of failure and burnout is multidimensional. For example, the authors suggest experiencing shame and embarrassment in front of other people or their teammates is more significant than simply being unsuccessful when performing a task or skill.

According to Correia et al. (2018), when a coach expects athletes to perform consistently, athletes will doubt their ability with each mistake made which can cause fear of failure in future games and further psychological stress. This relates to the range of interpersonal constraints such as increasing level of competition or constant pressure from coaches and may be a significant underlying factor connected to athlete burnout seen to influence withdrawal from a competitive sport (Dias et al., 2018; Gustafsson et al., 2017; Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2016). There remains a gap in sport withdrawal research around fear of failure and how it affects athletes sport participation (Correia et al., 2017). A research design that allows athletes to articulate their experience of Fear of Failure could help bridge this gap.

Many qualitative studies have not specifically addressed fear of failure or how other psychological elements may act as underlying factors for sport withdrawal among youth athletes. However, some qualitative as well as quantitative studies have broadly covered

what could be understood as fear of failure using different terminology. For example, athletes can be influenced to withdraw because of external motivation factors such as a reliance on rewards or seeking to avoid punishments which may increase an athlete's anxiety to perform. This can result in athletes feeling they have expectations they need to meet resulting in low confidence to perform. Furthermore, they feel they must attain a specified outcome to avoid punishment or disappointment from the coach (Calvo et al., 2010), which can be interpreted as an interpersonal constraint. This may be understood as fear of failure even if it is explained in different terms. As shown in at least two quantitative studies (Gustafsson et al., 2017; Correia et al., 2018), fear of failure can relate to other factors previously discussed in this review.

If athletes are made to believe they need to perform perfectly, they are likely to experience fear of failure, impacting on their performance and enjoyment of the sport (Correia et al., 2018). This can affect the athlete's stress, anxiety, and lead to sport withdrawal at a young age (Correia et al., 2017; Orlick, 1974; Conroy et al., 2002). Correia et al. (2018) employed a quantitative approach to study the fear of failure and perfectionism in sport. The authors undertook a study of 350 athletes (aged between 15 and 17 years) who participated in a range of individual (e.g., athletics, surfing, tennis, swimming) and team sports (e.g., soccer, volleyball, basketball). Each participant completed the Portuguese version of the 'Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory' (Correia et al., 2016) to assess their fear of failure and sense of perfectionism. The results indicated athletes who worry what others are thinking of them following a mistake during competition tend to have higher levels of fear of failure, supporting the findings of other studies (see Conroy et al., 2007; Sagar & Stoeber, 2009). Although concerns about the opinion of others had the strongest correlation with fear of failure, the desire to be seen to be perfect and avoid mistakes was also significant, indicating a positive correlation with fear of failure. Both dimensions have a negative effect on athletes as it creates opportunities for athletes to negatively critique themselves and their ability to perform. This can often lead to burnout as they perceive themselves as subpar athletes which leads to sport withdrawal due to psychological exhaustion (Correia et al., 2017).

The findings of Correia et al. (2017) are important for coaches and athletes because the fear of failure comprises of many dimensions that can affect an athlete's participation and potentially result in withdrawal from competitive sport.

### **Other Psychological Factors**

Experiencing winning and competition is essential for some athletes, however, it becomes problematic when the coach critiques an athlete on their mistakes while emphasizing the importance of good performance – and the need to win (Gatouillat et al., 2020; Witt and Dangi, 2018). According to Witt and Dangi (2018), adolescent athletes can feel anxious when they are criticised by coaches as they are afraid of disappointing others and making errors. This reflects an interpersonal constraint as there is a coach and an athlete involved. This can result in the athlete having second thoughts about their ability and skill level, which also supports the findings of Persson et al. (2020). Athletes felt they were not a priority when they were not as talented or ambitious as the more skilled players. Coaches tend to focus on the talented athletes more and were especially motivated to improve their performance while neglecting those who made more mistakes.

Witt and Dangi (2018) suggest when athletes are being criticised by coaches they start to feel as if they are being controlled which may influence them to withdraw. This is supported by Rocchi et al. (2020), who looked at the longitudinal trajectories of competitive swimmers. A group of 413 competitive swimmers were asked to complete an early version of the 'Interpersonal Behaviors Questionnaire' in order to assess coach behaviours allowing for autonomy from athletes. Athletes had to rate 12 statements related to their perceptions of the coaches' interpersonal behaviour on a scale from 1 (Do not agree) to 10 (Completely agree). Results of the questionnaire showed 63% of the athletes that took part in the study had dropped out with reasons related to the coach's interpersonal behaviours towards athletes.

Furthermore, Rocchi et al. (2020), contends that the relatedness of the coach, which refers to the supportive behaviours of the coach and their ability to demonstrate warmth, and to allow athlete autonomy, can influence an athlete's decision to withdraw or continue with a sport. Rocchi et al. (2020) found lack of autonomy can lead to athletes exiting the sport and

argues promoting athlete autonomy can influence the athlete to continue participating the sport. In relation to the psychological need for autonomy, Dias et al. (2018) found a lack of athlete autonomy to be problematic for athletes, while further identifying what this meant for different athletes. Some athletes within the study suggested a lack of autonomy made them feel as if they were controlled by the coach and were prevented from making their own decisions. For other athletes a lack of autonomy resulted in them feeling the coach did not value their feelings or opinions as if they were not an important member of the team. Many athletes withdrew because of their relationship with the coach, the coaching strategy, or the behaviour of the coach (Dias et al., 2018; Gattouillat et al., 2020; Persson et al., 2020; Witt & Dangi, 2018). The impact of coaches on the underlying psychology of athletes comes through as an important factor to consider within the context of withdrawal.

Mirroring the findings of Rocchi et al. (2020), a study by Quested et al. (2013) showed athletes were more likely to withdraw if they did not experience autonomy support. In this case autonomy refers to the psychological need to feel a sense of volition, choice and decision making and an internal locus of control (Quested et al., 2013). The findings suggest the support provided, and environment created by the coach can determine the intentions of athletes in terms of them dropping out of the sport. These findings also support the principles of the Self-Determination Theory which suggests athletes will be more intrinsically motivated when they can make decisions for themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A study by Calvo et al. (2010) utilised Self Determination Theory as a theoretical framework to investigate the motivations of soccer players (13 to 17 years old) and their desire to participate or withdraw from competitive sport. The authors argue motivational characteristics shape the sporting experience of young athletes and can influence them to continue or exit a sport. Motivational characteristics are seen as factors that can increase or decrease an athlete's motivation to continue participating in the sport. This includes intrinsic motivation which refers to whether an athlete finds value in the sport. Autonomy is also a key motivational characteristic, as being able to engage in enjoyable activities freely could potentially encourage participation. In addition, the provision of rewards or other extrinsic motivational techniques may also motivate athletes to continue participating. Within the study an adapted version of the sport Motivation Scale developed by Pelletier et

al. (1995) was used to assess the motivational characteristics of 493 adolescent athletes in competitive soccer. The findings indicated both autonomy and relatedness were equally significant predictors of sport persistence. These findings support those of other previously discussed studies (Dias et al., 2018; Quest et al., 2013; Rocchi et al., 2020). They are also in line with the Self Determination Theory, which suggests providing athletes with autonomy, freedom to make their own decisions and playing for fun will positively influence sport persistence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The implication for coaches is that they should not seek to try to control the team as athletes consider experiencing autonomy essential for participation. An effective way to increase intrinsic motivation is to encourage athlete autonomy allowing for decisions to be made by the athlete and not the coach, who may seek to control the athlete (Witt & Dangi, 2018).

Calvo et al. (2010) found stronger feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are positively linked to continued competitive sport involvement, while amotivation was the strongest contributor to sport withdrawal. In reference to amotivation Ntoumanis et al. (2004), define it as the inability to regulate oneself with respect to their own behaviour. According to these authors, athletes with higher levels of amotivation tend to withdraw from competitive sport more than those with lower levels. This is problematic in terms of continued participation in competitive sport as an amotivated athlete has no intrinsically or extrinsically related motives for remaining in the sport (Calvo et al., 2010). As these authors contend, coaches should continue to provide opportunities for autonomy during games and training as a lack of motivation to continue may decrease their self-determination which could influence sport withdrawal, especially among younger athletes (13 to 17 years old).

Witt and Dangi (2018) have discussed how coaches can often be the underlying cause of many issues related to withdrawing. Many athletes from the reviewed studies who withdrew from the sport due to this reason, often mentioned that their coach would put too much pressure on the team to succeed, resulting in athletes no longer enjoying it as they are expected to perform at high levels and win at all times. This causes the coach to be an underlying factor in their withdrawal as their pressure led to athletes losing interest in the sport. An athlete's experience within the team will be determined by their relationships with their teammates and coach (Quested et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important to

consider the coach's role in any athletes sporting experience and their decision to withdraw, as a coach could negatively or positively impact their athlete's motivation to participate.

It is evident sport withdrawal is often difficult to understand without considering all intra, interpersonal and other psychological factors. It is also apparent that a qualitative approach is appropriate to better understand these factors. The most notable features are fear of failure and an athlete's psychological stress may increase due to pressure to perform and burnout. However, they may also increase due to a negative and unsupportive interpersonal environment which may in turn also impact on sporting enjoyment. Furthermore, having athletes participate in the sport without any autonomy support can also lead to fear of failure and psychological stress. Although it is essential to understand how the intra and interpersonal factors influence an athlete to leave a sport, it is also necessary to comprehend factors extrinsic to the athlete.

### **Structural constraints**

Moving beyond relational and internal factors of the athlete, external barriers are also a significant element that contribute to sport withdrawal. Developing a feeling of being physically incompetent, having more important commitments outside of the sport, or sport injuries were common "structural" reasons for sport withdrawal (Crane & Temple, 2015). Factors linked to sport withdrawal can sometimes be inside or outside of the athlete's control and these are often referred to as structural constraints. Structural constraints involve uncontrollable constraints such as injury, or the cost of the sport and have been identified as an underlying factor to sport withdrawal (Witt and Dangi, 2018). Structural constraints also include the feeling of not having enough playing time within the team or feelings of being used to fill the team and not necessarily because of what they add to the team (Strube & Strand, 2016; Witt & Dangi, 2018).

Although burnout was mentioned earlier in this literature review, it is worth digging deeper on it now. In competitive sport, an athlete often commits to a training regime which can lead to burnout. Burnout is experienced when athletes feel they are trapped in a sport and only play the sport because they feel they have to for the coach or their parents (Coakley, 1992). Sport burnout is considered one of the major factors of sport withdrawal (Dias et al.,

2018). However, there is debate as to whether burnout should be considered a structural constraint (Raedeke, 1997). One perspective suggests burnout among athletes is a response to chronic stress which cause the athlete to develop a negative view of their sporting abilities (Raedeke, 1997). This perspective categorises burnout as an intrapersonal constraint. However, from a commitment perspective, researchers, such as Schmidt & Stein (1991), have argued that stress is not the cause of burnout, instead it should be recognised as a sign.

Gustafsson et al. (2011) suggest the training load increases for athletes who are playing at a competitive level, which also increases the chance of burnout. In a study by Isoard-Gautheur et al. (2016), elite level handball players completed a questionnaire measuring athlete burnout. Isoard-Gautheur et al. (2016) explored the relationship between burnout and level of performance of each athlete, and the risk of athletes withdrawing from the sport. The results showed athletes with lower motivational and performance levels have a higher risk of burnout, which increases the risk of withdrawing from the sport. Therefore, it is suggested that pressure to win and increasing training days, especially at a young age, should not be emphasised with athletes (Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2016). According to Schlesinger et al. (2018) when training is increased it could influence drop out because it interferes with young players' time they have for themselves outside of the sport. Youth athletes begin to sacrifice their own recreational time to train more or play the sport more during the week which leads to mental and physical exhaustion.

Results from Witt and Dangi (2018) suggested athletes withdraw as they have other commitments more important than sport. This was also the case for some of the athletes in the Gatouillat et al. (2020) study as many athletes felt sport takes time away from their personal life. The athletes suggested their sport takes up too much time in the week with trainings, games, and sometimes other commitments such as prize giving or team bonding sessions. Commitment, although not the most common reason, does have a significant impact on sports withdrawal. This is because responsibilities outside the sport tend to become more important causing athletes to sacrifice sport to allow more time for these other responsibilities, especially older athletes who are exiting at high school. Even younger

athletes (13 to 16 years old) sometimes withdraw from one sport to stay committed to a new one they are interested in (Crane & Temple, 2015).

Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008a) employed retrospective interviews with 50 competitive swimmers aged between 13 to 18 years old to explore withdrawal. Results showed there are many physical and psychosocial factors contributing to sport withdrawal. Athletes who dropped out of competitive swimming received significantly less one-on-one coaching throughout their development compared to those who remained engaged in the sport. The authors also found the parents of athletes who withdrew from the sport forced them to switch clubs as a result of being dissatisfied with the coaches or the costs of playing. Furthermore, it was reported athletes who withdrew from competitive swimming had started training significantly earlier compared to engaged students who continued to participate (age 11 versus age 13). Although the authors suggested training from a young age may contribute to sport withdrawal, they were still unclear as to how exactly it affected each athlete during the withdrawal process. Importantly, in this their first of two studies on the topic, the researchers did not focus in on the coach and training as part of the structural environment.

In a second related study, the same authors used a qualitative approach to shed light on the athlete-coach relationship, fun environments and withdrawal (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008b). Ten swimmers who had dropped out and 10 swimmers who remained engaged in the sport were interviewed. Training patterns and the roles of coaches, parents, peers and siblings were discussed. According to the study, some athletes who withdrew from the sport cited coaches ignoring weaker swimmers and being poor communicators. Pressure from parents as a withdrawal factor also emerged in a study by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008b). Athletes that exited spoke of how their parents got involved at training sessions. These findings help shape the current research, ensuring the role of parents will be probed in terms of their influence on sport withdrawal.

Training patterns and pressure from others demonstrates how factors outside of the athlete's control can be influential in decisions to withdraw. Understanding what motivates athletes to play is important and should be the priority as athletes who find no value in the sport due to factors such as pressure or being underappreciated tend to consider



withdrawal at an early stage. It is also important to understand how other structural factors such as life Transitions impact on sport withdrawal.

## **Transitions**

A transition is defined as an “event or non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1981, p.4). According to the athlete transition framework developed by Taylor and Ogilviv (1994) transitioning out of sport involves five steps. The five steps are identified as 1) Causes of transition among youth athletes, 2) Factors related to adaption to transitioning, 3) Available resources for Transitions adaption, 4) Quality of adaption to Transitions, and 5) Intervention for athlete transition difficulties. These steps suggest that the causes of transition include the age of the athlete, injury, rejection from the team, or their own decision. Factors suggested to influence transition adaption include features of athlete identity and social support, whereas resources available to support transition include aspects such as personal coping skills (Defreese et al., 2021).

Athletes tend to participate in sport less as they come closer to the end of high school (Hirvensalo & Lintunen, 2011; Telama, 2009; Van Houten et al.; 2019). At this age, young people may take on more responsibilities like part-time work which reduces sport frequency (Van Houten et al., 2019). This is true for high school sport but also club-organised sport. In short, transition into adulthood is a major factor in sports withdrawal (Van Haouten et al., 2019; Borgers et al., 2016; Hirvensalo & Lintunen, 2011), but this would benefit from further in-depth exploration.

There are many different factors associated with competitive sport withdrawal which can be directly related to the transition to adulthood (Van Haouten et al., 2019). For example, athletes may withdraw because they have started a full-time job, university or entered an intimate relationship. When athletes engage in competitive sport in high school, their training and game times tend to be developed around their time in school. However, once the player leaves high school their free time might not be seen as suitable for prioritising trainings or games. Despite more opportunities to participate, athletes transitioning into adulthood may participate less (Wilson et al., 2019). Furthermore, athletes who withdraw

from competitive sport, may instead participate in individual physical activities such as working out in the gym.

It has been reported that as the athletes got older their academic studies became a priority and as a result being involved in a competitive sport was seen to hinder success (Battaglia et al., 2021). In the same study, athletes who transitioned into a full-time job reported there was just not enough time to commit to a sport. A coach in that study noted young athletes tend to re-enter the sport again at an older age or enter a different sport. Competitive sport does not appear to be a priority for athletes in high school. On the contrary Wilson et al. (2019) suggested life Transitions provide new opportunities for physical activity. As Transitions are seen to be important in the context of sport withdrawal, it is important to ask participants to describe their life course and its perceived influence on their decisions to withdraw. This may help ascertain participants perspectives on sport participation after high school (Engel & Nagel, 2011).

It has been suggested by others that the three main transition events linked to withdrawal are starting a full-time job, moving out from home, or getting married (Breen, 2005; Engel & Nagel, 2011; Pilgaard, 2013). Commitment to sport is challenging and may compromise one or more of the transition events. Indeed Van Houten et al. (2019) found starting work was the most prominent transition event.

When athletes are in school, there tends to be many opportunities for involvement in sport and it may become a part of the athlete's lifestyle. In another study, a sudden decrease in sporting opportunities when transitioning from school may result in reduced sport participation and possibly withdrawal (Nomaguchi & Bianchi, 2014). Similarly, when athletes start working it tends to lead to new social relationships with colleagues and therefore, sport participation is no longer as important which in turn influences withdrawal. Further results from the above study found when individuals move out on their own it brings with it a new social environment that creates new relationships and athletes may not have the same sporting opportunities and facilities available to them as they would have had previously.

From related research, it is clear life Transitions link to time commitments, and this contributes to sport withdrawal. These Transitions can be understood as structural constraints as well as underlying sport withdrawal factors. Although it is an issue for many, not all athletes necessarily exit the sport because they have work or university classes, but rather because they begin to have less and less time to take part. This often results in them withdrawing from competitive sport so they can allocate time to work and a social life.

### **Disengagement Process**

Recent research suggest sport withdrawal is a disengaging process consisting of interacting factors (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021). The disengagement theory developed by Ebaugh (1988) has been applied to many different contexts, but only more recently to qualitative research in sport withdrawal (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021). The theory suggests athletes experience the disengagement process by going through four key stages: initial doubts, searching for alternatives, the breaking point, and adapting to their new role without sport.

According to disengagement theory (Eliasson & Johanson, 2021) the first doubt an athlete has about their participation is usually from a negative sporting experience and initiates the disengagement process. This is where athletes will consider withdrawal and examine if further participation will be worth any future negative incidents. Any experiences from this point onward that support and confirm the athletes' doubts will further encourage the athlete to move to the second stage. The second stage is where the athlete looks for alternative options they could potentially commit to instead of the sport. Initially these options could be indefinite but eventually become clear with further negative experiences that influence withdrawal. The third stage is the breaking point, which is when the athlete decides to withdraw from competitive sport. The disengagement process theory suggests this decision is normally linked to the gradual build-up of many previous negative experiences which has led the athletes to this stage. The final stage is where athletes focus on their withdrawal from competitive sport and adapt to their new role to completely disengage.

## **Conclusion**

Competitive sport withdrawal is complex as a variety of underlying factors can influence it. This literature review has explored these factors and framed many as interpersonal, intrapersonal and structural constraints. Other psychological and transition factors are also seen as important. Specifically, it is known that teammates, coaches and parents influence withdrawal, and any further study of the phenomenon should also focus on their influence in the process. Findings from related research suggest it is usually multiple factors influencing withdrawal and it is usually triggered by negative interpersonal experiences early in the sport. It is useful to consider sport withdrawal as the endpoint of a wider disengagement process. Although numerous withdrawal factors have been identified, a more nuanced understanding of how the factors are experienced is still not well understood. It is also apparent from the body of related research and perceived gaps in our understanding of this phenomenon, that a qualitative approach is appropriate to further explore and better explain youth withdrawal from competitive sport. Studying sport withdrawal is important as it could prevent the incidence of withdrawal among youth in NZ.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology of this research project. Section 3.1 is an outline of the purpose and aims of the research. Section 3.2 outlines the methodology and identifies the philosophical standpoint and subjective worldview of the researcher as well as the methodology? used for the research. Section 3.3 summarises the participant selection procedure and provides an introduction to athletes in the study (see Figure 3.4.) This is followed by Section 3.5 which discusses the data collection methods, the interview questions (see Table 3.6) as well as a step-by-step description of the thematic analysis process. Finally, Section 3.7 covers the ethical principles considered and applied in the research project.

### **Aim and Research Questions**

The aim of this research is to identify and build an understanding of the factors that lead to competitive sport withdrawal in NZ youth athletes. This knowledge can be used to provide future athletes of varying competitiveness with a positive sporting experience, and potentially reduce the incidence of sport withdrawal among youth athletes. The following research questions are explored:

- What factors influence athletes to drop out of competitive sport?
- Why do these factors lead to withdrawal?

### **Research Approach and Research Paradigm**

The researcher used a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the experiences of youth athletes and their withdrawal from competitive sport. This involves an extensive and in-depth description for the purpose of summarising the real-life experiences of individuals or groups (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). Using qualitative description is appropriate for research on phenomenon that as of yet is not well understood such as sport withdrawal, for which we do not yet have a deeper understanding of personal experiences (Kim et al., 2017). This

qualitative methodology is especially appropriate for the current topic, as sport withdrawal tends to be researched using a quantitative approach, but this doesn't necessarily allow for elaboration on the athletes personal sporting experience (Persson et al., 2020). Using this qualitative methodology allows the researcher to explore the experiences and decisions of athletes further thereby developing deeper understanding around this phenomenon.

A descriptive approach differs from other qualitative methodologies as it is not focused on developing theory (e.g., grounded theory), rather it focuses on describing the experiences in a similar dialect to the participant as accurately as possible to answer the research question (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sullivan-Boylly et al., 2005). Qualitative research allows researchers to explore abstract knowledge through experiences that require the researcher's interpretation of the data (Bansal et al., 2018). This approach could be beneficial for exploring the topic further and help develop a deeper understanding of withdrawal factors. Furthermore, Bansal et al. suggest qualitative methodologies allow the researcher to view and understand phenomena through a different perspective based on the personal experiences of other people.

### **Research Paradigm**

A research paradigm establishes the beliefs and values that directs the design of the research, collection and analysis of data in a research study (Gemma, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm is appropriate here because it requires the researcher to examine various realities or truths. A researcher's worldview (paradigm) is important as it shapes the research. This will influence how sport withdrawal will be studied, and shapes how the researcher will interpret and analyse the data (Kivunja & Kuyin, 2017). According to Denzin & Lincoln (2018) all research is guided by our values and passions regarding our surroundings and by the methodologies we think are appropriate. For example, the paradigm will have an influence on questions posed during the semi-structured interviews that feature in the current research. Due to qualitative research being an exploratory methodology involving life stories to express meaning in people's lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), the researcher used an interpretivist paradigm as it is allowing for different answers subjective to the interviewee. Interpretivism suggests truth and knowledge is based on the experiences of individuals; therefore, the reality or truth is subjective (Gemma, 2018). The

researcher used an interpretivist paradigm within this study as it supports the multidimensional views on the topic of sport withdrawal, allowing for a range of understandings to emerge from interviewees (Witt & Dangi, 2018). Reasons for withdrawing from a competitive sport can be very personal to the athlete and come from within, so this paradigm is appropriate to capture these unique stories.

An interpretivist paradigm and a descriptive approach work well together, allowing the researcher to generate data rich in detail to develop an expressive and logical story through thematic analysis. This is because like the exploratory design of this research project, both these approaches rely on a semi-structured and an investigative research style to collect information that will comprehensively answer the research questions (Hill & Knox, 2021). Due to qualitative researchers being so immersed in the study, the description of results will be determined based on their interpretation of the data (Neegaard et al., 2009). Witt and Dangi, (2018) recommended the researcher should be accepting of diverse reasons put forth by interviewees explaining their sport withdrawal due to inherent variability. These various realities include external, or in other words, something that is true in the physical world, and internal realities which are personal to an individual (Bannister, 2005).

As an interpretivist researcher, it is important to recognise that what interviewees initially communicate is likely to be only part of the story and should be probed further. Through more probing questions allowing for further explanation the first answer tends to be different from the actual withdrawal trigger. The researcher prepared for this by having a variation of the same questions prepared as follow up to fully explore withdrawal. For example, the researcher asked the question “Can you tell me about the time you first thought of withdrawing from the sport?” This will cause the participant to talk about the time as well as some important accompaniments which may have potentially triggered this thought. Then later the researcher asked about the reason that made them finally decide to withdraw and how any other personal or interpersonal factors influenced their reasons. This is important as a deeper understanding for that reason will be had when exploring further through questions such as “why?” and “how?” (Carcary, 2009). Overall, a descriptive approach within the interpretivist paradigm is appropriate for the current research.

## **Research Design**

### **Sampling**

The researcher used a purposeful sampling technique as this is not only common in descriptive qualitative research, but it is also an appropriate technique for exploring withdrawal from competitive sport (Kim et al., 2017). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select athletes based on inclusion criteria (Bernard, 2006; Etikan et al., 2015). The researcher also used a snowball sampling technique, asking athletes to recommend others that could be subsequently interviewed.

The researcher interviewed ten athletes for the study. The first three interviews were with athletes from the researcher's extended network who were approached in person based on prior knowledge of inclusion criteria fit. However, the rest of the athletes were snowball sampled. This means the participants who were approached personally were asked to reach out to people they might know that fit the criteria. Similarly, the same technique was used with every other participant interviewed, their assistance helped the researcher find more participants. This is known as exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling where every recruited participant recruits another participant (Etikan et al., 2015). Ten is similar to, or exceeds the numbers interviewed in published qualitative studies of youth sport withdrawal. For example, in Dias et al. (2018), eight elite athletes were interviewed, and in Andronikos et al. (2016), only seven athletes were interviewed. The numbers in these studies were quite low since interviewees had to be either professional athletes or have participated in national or international sport competitions. In the qualitative study of Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008b), a total of 20 athletes were interviewed. Half were athletes who had withdrawn from sport and the other half were athletes who had remained engaged in sport. The number of participants were considered appropriate since they all fit the criteria and data tend to be in depth in qualitative interviews (Fraser et al., 2008). Therefore, the researcher used ten athletes to interview as many other studies have ranged within a similar number of participants. In the current study, the researcher came to believe any further collection of new data would not have generated substantively new ideas from what had emerged at that point. Finally, a sample of ten athletes was also appropriate considering the scope of this master's dissertation.



## **Inclusion Criteria**

Unlike social sport, competitive sport requires commitment from athletes often from a young age (Gatouillat et al., 2020) and may involve daily training and competition (Zhang, 2008). Withdrawal is therefore a big decision that can be complex (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021). So, the extent to which an interviewee's engagement in sport was "competitive" needed to be considered in order to ensure the phenomenon of interest was explicitly addressed. A buffer of time was also utilised, because athletes who have withdrawn from competitive sport for a short time tend to return again (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008a). Interviewing athletes who may yet return would have profoundly influenced the discussion. To be included within this study, athletes were of the age typical of high school transition and fit the following criteria:

- a) Age 19-22
- b) Regular competitive sport participant (club or representative level, at least one season)
- c) Withdrawn from sport for at least one year.

Athletes who had withdrawn from competitive sport but were still playing it at a social level are effectively still involved and could potentially return to a competitive level. Others may be withdrawn for more than a year but be *actively planning* to re-engage. The focus of the research was permanent competitive sport withdrawal rather than temporary, so therefore potential interviewees were excluded if they were:

- a) Currently playing the sport at a social level
- b) Planning on returning to the sport

## **Description of athletes**

Ten withdrawn competitive sport athletes participated in this study of whom seven were male and three were female. Athletes had played at varying levels of competitive sport as either an individual or as part of a team. Athletes participated at Provincial and Regional level (2), Premiere club level (4), Premiere club division one level (1), and Interschool level (3). These details, as well as pseudonyms, gender, age and sport are outlined in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.1 Interviewee Profiles**

<b>Name/Gender/Age</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Highest Level of Competition</b>
Jim/Male/22	Football	Premiere club Rep
John/Male/22	Football	Premiere Club Rep
Lilly/Female/19	Water Polo	Provincial (Regional) Rep
Lola/Female/19	Swimming	Regional Rep
Cam/Male/21	Rugby	Interschool Rep
Jake/Male/22	Rugby	Interschool Rep
Ronald/Male/22	Badminton	Interschool Rep
Anthony/Male/20	Football	Premiere Club Rep
Andy/Male/21	Football	Division 1 Prem Club Rep
Jessi/Female/21	Football	Premiere Club Rep.

### **Data Collection Methods**

As mentioned earlier, semi-structured interviews, along with an interpretive paradigm, were used to explore withdrawal as it will allow the researcher to explore and interpret the meaning of participants' answers, opinions, and expressions. Interviews are traditional within a qualitative descriptive approach as they can facilitate understanding (O'Keefe et al., 2016). This is because interviews allow interviewees the freedom to expand on answers by

talking about their personal sporting experiences (O'Keefe et al., 2016; Neergaard et al., 2009). Interviews also allow for any misunderstandings to be cleared up for the participant. With semi-structured interviews, the researcher has the ability to move the conversation to focus on specific topics they feel are important and relate to the research question(s). Based on the content of the answer given by the participant, the researcher can stay on topic or move in a different direction to uncover new information (Guested et al., 2013; Neegaard et al., 2009; Rynne et al., 2010).

Semi-structured interviews are based on a set of questions the researcher can use to elicit answers and stories about the topic (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). In a semi-structured interview, the withdrawal experience can be explored in an organised way, but it is still flexible enough to allow for elaboration from participants, emergent ideas and follow up questions (Choak, 2012). According to Rubin and Rubin (1995) there are many different types of qualitative interviews, and each have a different objective. The researcher chose to use a *topical* semi structured qualitative interview as this guides the conversation and helps the researcher and participant stay on specific themes related to the topic of sport withdrawal (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Qualitative topical interviews tend to focus on the experiences of individuals and the descriptions and process of how and why a certain decision was made. Topical interviews allow the interviewee to tell a story using their experience which usually focus on a specific theme or withdrawal factor that becomes clear as the story is told. This helps the researcher interpret what is more an accompaniment or a trigger (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). This means as athletes are explaining their journey to withdrawal, they tend to identify and explain reasons that were more influential on their decision to leave. Therefore, their experience develops multiple and consistent themes throughout their story.

The researcher conducted a pilot interview which was also recorded in a quiet and private place. Using pilot interviews can be useful for the study, especially for novice researchers (Majid et al., 2017). Pilot interviews allows the researcher to trial questions and determine their effectiveness towards creating rapport with the participant (Yeong et al., 2018). Following the pilot interview the researcher reflected and reviewed the interview questions with supervisors to make changes prior to the first interview of the study. Having pilot interviews can also help to identify flaws or limitations within the interview design (Majid et al., 2017) which allows the researcher to reflect and make necessary modifications.

Research quality can be further enhanced by applying a pilot interview and reflecting on the questions and conversation (Yeong et al., 2018).

The researcher utilised an interview guide consisting of seven focus questions with related follow-up questions (Appendix A). The questions were created based in part on previous studies of sport withdrawal (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Dias et al., 2018; Gatouillat et al., 2020) but also incorporated follow up on the athletes' personal experiences. For example, in Dias et al. (2018) athletes were asked "What led you to start thinking about leaving?" From related research it was also noted once an athlete first considers withdrawing, factors tend to build up to a point where athletes decide to withdraw. This led to the researcher asking the questions "What made you first consider withdrawing?", "Can you tell me about your relationship with your coach?" and often followed it up with "How did this impact your decision to withdraw?" for further elaboration. The researcher also designed the guide to include questions addressing other factors noted in related research. These included the athletes' perceived skill level and team culture. These were included as the researcher wanted to explore the athletes' entire sporting experience to help identify possible withdrawal factors that could help answer the research questions. All interviews were recorded by the researcher and were done in a quiet space which was private. After each participant's interview the researcher would listen to the recording to complete the transcription.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, researchers often seek to find similarities and differences across a data set in order to develop themes that can be used to effectively address research question(s) (Terry et al., 2017). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to effectively explore large datasets and draw diverse perspectives (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). In the current research, themes were sought from the answers given and the experiences that influenced athletes to withdraw from sport. Although it is important to be accepting of uncommon ideas and reasons for sport withdrawal, it is also important for the researcher to analyse the data and develop codes out of the unique individual experiences (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). According to Bernard and Ryan (2010) themes can come from both the qualitative interview as well as the existing theories and knowledge on the topic. A thematic analysis is

appropriate for this topic as sport withdrawal tends to be personal, resulting in different answers and stories. Furthermore, it allows the researcher to reflect on the data, compare the similarities and differences and develop themes to help answer the research question.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest there are many different techniques the researcher could use to help develop themes from the set and capture the experiences of individuals, however they are not all exclusive and are sometimes used simultaneously. The researcher used the repetition technique in which words or phrases which were used and repeated in multiple transcriptions were identified. The researcher transcribed and developed codes in a private and quiet space after each interview. The more similar ideas appear, the more likely it is to reflect a common theme (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The flexibility of this method mean themes are developed and determined by the researcher's judgement and interpretation. Therefore, the researcher could determine specific experiences, analogies, or examples as a single code and possibly end up with either too many or too few themes. As a result, this could create inconsistent data (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

The researcher used the six phases of thematic analysis developed by Braun et al. (2016) to identify key themes and subthemes within the transcripts.

#### Phase 1: Familiarisation

The researcher is required to familiarise themselves with the data and take notes as they do to develop ideas that could be used towards answering the research question. To achieve this the researcher read and re-read each of the transcripts thoroughly. The authors suggest this requires the researcher to be engaged with the data as they are to generate meaning from what the interviewees have said.

#### Phase 2: Coding

Coding is a strategy to help divide and categorise possible related subthemes to help develop themes. Within this stage the researcher identified codes for potential themes as this assisted in developing themes and subthemes beyond obvious meanings.

#### Phase 3: Theme development

Within this phase the researcher developed themes based on the identified codes and subthemes and arranged similar themes together. The similar themes were used to help answer the research question. As the authors suggest, the researcher has gone over the data multiple times to develop themes that capture rich diversity and are detailed in more than one idea.

#### Phase 4-5: Reviewing

This phase requires the researcher to evaluate the codes and themes to make sure they fit well with each other so the information used to answer the question is not false or misleading. The researcher evaluated the data and the themes multiple times to make sure there are enough themes to help answer the question through a compelling story. The researcher then distinctively identified the main themes, which are detailed in meaning around a certain concept, from the sub themes that could be used to answer the research question. The researcher engaged in several meetings with two other researchers to review codes, and evaluate data.

#### Phase 6: The write up

This stage involves analysing the data and describing themes, subthemes, and ideas within the overall report. However, the authors suggest researchers must balance their data and analytic commentary to ensure thick descriptive analysis.

### **3.7 Ensuring Rigor**

Qualitative research has been criticised for the lack of rigor (Hadi & Closs, 2016) so it is important to address it. As the authors suggest this could be because of the subjective nature of qualitative data analysis as it tends to be the same person who is both collecting and analysing the data which could lead to bias. Therefore, ensuring rigor is important in research as it is a way to create confidence and relevance in research data (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Rigor also provides an accurate portrayal of the athletes included (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Each person has beliefs about truth which is guided by personal experiences, cultures, and environments. Although there are multiple truths, it is still important to have confidence in the findings of research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

To ensure rigor within this research project, the researcher used Lincoln and Guba's model of trustworthiness. This model identifies four trustworthiness elements appropriate for qualitative research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). These elements are; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to the authenticity of the phenomena description (Beck, 1993). According to Krefting (1991) when research displays a precise and explicit explanation of phenomena or experiences of one person that can be related to the experiences of others, then it would be considered to be credible. In order to ensure credibility, the researcher used the strategy of reflexivity. Using this strategy allowed the researcher to self-reflect on their own knowledge and experiences regarding the studied phenomena and understand how their own perception could potentially affect the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Following every interview, the researcher reflected on feelings and thoughts which emerged during the interview in order to recognise personal bias (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This is because findings are subjectively constructed by the researchers using their own experience, knowledge and insights (Hadi & Closs, 2016). In addition to adhering to a self-reflective attitude, the researcher did not allow their own perceptions of phenomena to lead the participant towards answers during the interviews, rather, the researcher asked questions for clarification and further understandings of certain ideas (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This allowed the researcher to follow the participant throughout the explanation of their own experience without any input from the researcher to reduce bias and ensure credibility (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003).

According to Hadi and Closs (2016) thick description is also a way of ensuring credibility. This is because it helps to convey the actual situation and experiences explored specifically. Thick description requires sufficient details about the studied phenomena so the experiences of one participant can be rateable to others who may have also gone through the same situations. To ensure transferability, the researcher used thick description. Transferability refers to the extent to which the results of one study can be applied in different contexts or with different athletes (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Thick description is the strategy as the procedure of paying close attention to contextual detail and interpreting meaning when underlying qualitative research (Dawson, 2010). Details about the inclusion, exclusion criteria, sampling as well as data collection and analysis methods used in the study were provided (Hadi & Closs, 2016). This will help the reader analyse how the results and

procedure of the study could be applied in other settings, contexts, and with other participants.

Thick description is important for qualitative research as it points out the signature of analysing phenomena in depth (Dawson, 2010). According to the authors, thick description assists in achieving detail and can help to emphasise feelings, gestures, silence and provide the meaning behind these non-verbal communications. Without thick description, it can be impossible to completely have the reader understand the meanings of the participant as more in-depth meanings can sometimes be hidden. On the contrary, using thick description is believed to intertwine with the beliefs and knowledge of the phenomena. Thick description is also very subjective as there is no definition to measure if the description is thick enough. However, the goal of thick description is not to provide a conclusive narrative, but rather an idea regarding possibilities (Dawson, 2010).

Confirmability is a way of accurately verifying the understanding of a phenomenon from the interviewee's perspective and the meanings behind the experiences of others (Given, 2008). Many researchers believe the two most effective strategies for ensuring confirmability are reflexivity and the audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Shenton, 2004). Using an audit trail can be more effective as it requires an independent reviewer to verify the process of the research and the data, whereas reflexivity might increase bias as the same researcher could potentially refer to their own knowledge, affecting the objective verification of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher used an audit trail by regularly meeting with the supervisors to examine the entirety of the research process and outcomes through details of the interviewees sampling process, methods used in the study, data collection as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria. This also extended to the data analysis and examination of themes from transcripts.

### **This Ethical Considerations**

The safekeeping of interviewees through the application of appropriate ethical principles are essential in all types of research. Ethical considerations are particularly important in qualitative studies as the research style tends to be very in-depth and personal (Arifin, 2018). Therefore, the researcher sought and received ethics approval by sending a full application to the Auckland University of Technology's Ethics Committee and provided the



interviewees with an information sheet (Appendix B) that includes all the important information about the study (Arifin, 2018).

Interviewees need to be adequately informed about the research, understand the information and have the freedom to decide whether to participate or withdraw from the study (Arifin, 2018). The researcher provided each participant with an information sheet explaining what the research project was about and what it would include. The researcher also provided interviewees two weeks to familiarise themselves with the information sheet and respond. The researcher also asked the participant permission to include their experiences within the study and remained aware of the participants, beliefs, culture, or disabilities. Each participant had to sign a consent form (Appendix C) before taking part in the interview.

In order to minimise risk, the researcher clarified the participant did not have to share anything they didn't feel comfortable sharing, as well as clearly communicating the confidentiality of the information gathered from the interview and that it will only be used for the study.

With truthfulness in mind, the researcher remained honest about everything that was going to happen during the interview and with the information gathered as well as informing the participant about the use of their experiences. A clear explanation was given to each participant to ensure they understood they had the right to withdraw at any time.

It is also important to disseminate findings to interviewees and related communities. To this end, the findings of this research will be presented at local high schools as the results could benefit sport directors and coaches to modify the delivery of sport programmes and possibly prevent youth athletes from withdrawing from sport (Witt and Dangi, 2018).

## Chapter 4 - Findings

### Introduction

This chapter will present and explore a series of withdrawal factors that were identified from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The five prominent factors related to competitive sport withdrawal from the current research are: 1) Transitions, 2) Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship, 3) Lack of Relatedness, 4) Less Enjoyment, and 5) Injury. Factors often seemed to interact with each other which reflects the complex nature of competitive sport withdrawal. In addition, factors often took the form of what we have termed as either a withdrawal trigger or withdrawal accompaniment. A withdrawal accompaniment refers to a factor which made athletes consider withdrawal and complemented other factors in the lead-up to a withdrawal but did not on its own directly cause a withdrawal.

Accompaniments were observed in every case but do not on their own lead directly to a withdrawal. A withdrawal trigger on the other hand, is a factor that did ultimately (and directly) lead to an athlete withdrawing from the sport. The manifestation of these factors as either accompaniments or triggers is another highlight of the complex psychological nature of sport withdrawal.

Table 4.1 identifies the withdrawal factors for each participant, depicted as either triggers or accompaniments. The five emergent factors comprised all triggers and accompaniments for each athlete except in a single case. For Jim, it was a diminished perception of skill level which was his eventual trigger. This is not presented as one of the five prominent factors to be identified from the research as it did not come through as strongly as the others.

However, it was also described as an accompaniment by others, but closely related to their injuries. It is important to clarify the five factors presented are prominent (i.e., most common), but not exhaustive, as there are other factors which may influence an athlete's withdrawal.

**Table 4.1 Participant withdrawal factors**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Withdrawal Trigger</b>	<b>Withdrawal Accompaniments</b>
Jim	Diminished skill level perception	Lack of Relatedness, Transitions
John	Transitions	Injury, Lack of Relatedness
Lola	Transitions	Injury, Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship
Lilly	Negative coach relationship	Less Enjoyment, Lack of Relatedness
Anthony	Transitions	Negative Coach Relationship, Injury, Lack of Relatedness
Cam	Transitions	Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship
Jake	Transitions	Negative Coach Relationship, Injuries, Lack of Relatedness
Jessi	Transitions	Lack of Relatedness
Andy	Transitions	Lack of Relatedness, Less Enjoyment, Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship
Ronald	Transitions	Lack of Relatedness

**Transitions**

As expected, transitioning into work or university was identified by 9 out of 10 interviewees as linked to their withdrawal from competitive sport. Broadly, Transitions are the passing from one life stage to another and for the population of interest for this study, include

changes from adolescent to adult life stage. In this study, athletes often reported competing responsibilities linked to Transitions that kept them from participating and committing to training and games. The events featuring in these Transitions include finding a job, moving out and living on own or starting at university. Some participants were required to undertake placements as a part of their university studies and also worked part-time, which left no time for sport.

### **Transitions - Interactions with Other Factors**

The participants conveyed a complexity about their withdrawal. Indeed, many of the factors that were identified interacted and contributed to the withdrawal decision. As these factors merge, the risk of withdrawal tends to increase. This was noticeable for Transitions, which often seemed interact with other withdrawal factors. For example, participants going through a transition often thought carefully about their continued participation in competitive sport once they suffered an injury. This sometimes led to these athletes thinking about opportunities outside of their sport. This can be seen in the following quote from John who describes how he initially considered withdrawing during his time out of the sport after his first injury

*“I was out for six weeks, which led to me going down a weird path of contemplating football, whether I should still be playing.”*

He had thought about his future participation in light of the injury, but was still not ready to leave the sport. John went on to describe that he finished high school and was contemplating career options while also thinking about how the injury would impact on his performance. He was thinking about what he could do instead of soccer after high school and his recovery. His description of another injury really brought the transition and injury withdrawal factors together:

*“I did my other ligaments, my other ankle. And that’s when I thought to myself maybe I should take the rest of the year off... That’s when I started thinking I should probably look at plan B more... instead of just banking on myself making it as a professional football player”.*

This second serious injury motivated John to more actively look for other options instead of just considering them. The recovery time allowed John to focus on his transition into university. Other athletes' injury experiences also seemed to interact with their transition. For example, Anthony, like John, navigated a transition during an injury recovery.

*"I had a back injury. I was at a bit of a crossroads whether to continue to fight and come back...or do I just choose a different path and go to work".*

Anthony's back injury led him to consider withdrawing and focusing on work. Since he was at a stage in life where working became a priority, he was torn between playing again and risking reinjury or just working instead. Another athlete, Jake, also reported how an injury made him consider withdrawing in the midst of a transition to his new life working. Jake noted that

*"I felt like every time I did it (injured ankle) I was just a write off the next day. My body is so sore and the whole week I'll be limping... You can't be letting your ankle injury affect you making a living".*

As illustrated, Transitions sometimes interact with other factors such as injury, forcing an athlete to prioritise work or university which is less risky. As the withdrawal factors interact, a decision is made based on what the athlete feels is more important. All athletes felt sport was not really as important if you compare it to university or work. They felt it would be better to focus on their transition than to continue competitive sport in hopes of becoming a professional athlete.

### **Transitions as a Withdrawal Accompaniment**

Findings from the study shed further light on the nature of factor interactions, suggesting withdrawal factors can either manifest as an accompaniment or withdrawal trigger.

Although a transition sometimes initially emerged as an accompaniment, it often then morphed into a trigger, cited by athletes as the most proximal factor to the final withdrawal

decision. Transitions made athletes contemplate leaving the sport to go and work or attend university, but not always significantly enough initially to cause withdrawal. This is evident in the case of Ronald who initially considered withdrawal during his transition leaving high school. As he states,

*“First time I thought of withdrawing was at the end of high school”.*

This quote suggests transitioning out of high school was initially a withdrawal accompaniment for Ronald because he was thinking about it, but he didn't actually withdraw at that point. This seemed to be similar for Jim for whom his transition was also a withdrawal accompaniment. The athlete also considered withdrawing towards the end of high school and thought it might be more appropriate to focus on university rather than a career in football. This is evident in the following reflection from Jim:

*“So basically, at the age of 18. I had to look realistically into the future and where I'd be at... I had to find a job or start uni. That was my mindset at the time”.*

This quote helps us understand how Jim's transition out of high school led him to consider other options. When Jim thought about his transition, he considered withdrawal but ultimately didn't make the decision to, which suggests at this point it was only an accompaniment rather than a trigger.

### **Transitions as a Withdrawal Trigger**

Athletes made it known the transition into a full-time job or university studies resulted in less time to play sport. For most it eventually manifested as an immediate trigger for withdrawal. Participants citing Transitions as a withdrawal trigger often talked about how they had tried to continue while also attending university or working. This was evident for Lola who stated

*"...I think, for me. I was like heading towards the end of high school. And then going to into university... I went from doing multiple sports in high school to just doing gym and uni... I didn't have time to do that kind of stuff like I used to".*

Jessi seemed to highlight the same dilemma with regard to a lack of time to continue playing competitive sport.

*" I just didn't have the time...When I failed one of my papers at uni... To be fair, dropped out forever...You know, I'd rather work".*

As is evident for Jessi, once she noticed her participation was impacting her grades, she made the decision that sport was no longer a priority. This was often the dilemma athletes faced as their new responsibilities outside the sport took over which resulted in them making the decision to withdraw. For Jessi, university and work were more of a priority and as a result led to her withdrawal from competitive sport. Cam's experience was similar in terms of him attempting to commit to both competitive rugby and his full-time job, but eventually deciding to leave the sport.

*"... the real reason I left rugby was because I left school... Once you leave you get into that work life, and the workplace start consuming you".*

Cam also explained how difficult it can be to try and continue sport participation while working since it takes up so much time.

### **Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship**

The coach-athlete relationship involves communication and other interactions between the coach and athlete. All participants mentioned the importance of having a good relationship with the coach as it positively impacted their continued participation. This relationship can profoundly impact the athlete's motivation and when the relationship is negative, it comprises an important withdrawal factor. Athletes seemed to be more motivated and less likely to withdraw when there was mutual trust and respect for the coach. All in all, the

coach-athlete relationship is one of the most important factors to consider in the context of withdrawal including how it interacts with other factors. Andy explains how the coach relationship is one of the most essential parts of competitive sport which is why he left his original team. The following quote shows how the coach-athlete relationship influenced the athlete to not only leave the team he was familiar with but also move away to play for the coach he had a positive relationship with.

*“So, the coach that I already had a relationship with, He coached for Waikaraka. And that’s when I moved to Waikaraka and started playing for Waikaraka”.*

### **Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship - Interactions with Other Factors**

A Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship was sometimes experienced in connection with another withdrawal factor, Lack of Relatedness, which is touched on here, but also more fully in a subsequent section. Athletes recognised the importance of sport commitment but also maintaining friendships, especially since they were young and still in high school. However, athletes sometimes had to prioritise what was more important to them which highlights the interaction between and across themes. For example, Anthony discussed his coach would threaten to take away his position on the team if he was even a minute late to trainings or games which resulted in Anthony never spending time with friends on the night before their match.

*“We had a really strict coach, we would turn up like less than a minute late, that just sent you home, so we didn’t risk going out at all. It wasn’t until 17,18 (years old). I started hanging out on Saturday nights with mates because we’ve been at risk”.*

Here Anthony shows how his coach-athlete relationship interacted with his Lack of Relatedness. Anthony felt threatened by his strict coach which caused him to lose time with his friends outside the sport. The poor communication between himself and the coach led Anthony to purposefully neglect friends and miss social events so he could prevent staying out too late and potentially losing his position on the team.



## Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship as a Withdrawal Accompaniment

A Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship was a common withdrawal factor usually experienced as an accompaniment rather than a trigger. In other words, many athletes noted they had a negative relationship with the coach and it made them consider withdrawing, but it was usually something else that eventually led to withdrawal. Athletes clarified how the negative communication from coaches could make them feel anxious and often resulted in thoughts of withdrawal, especially since coaches were admired by the team. Athletes who described a Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship as a significant withdrawal accompaniment often talked about the unsupportive and discouraging behaviour of coaches. Negative experiences leading to a poor coach-athlete relationship resulted when the coach made athletes feel disheartened. Most coaches could not communicate effectively with athletes which created a strained relationship leading to athletes considering withdrawal. The following comments from Lola highlights this point.

*“The coach basically told me, to my face, that I could never be as good as I was...and he was just so negative about me. It amazes me how something like your coach can affect your mental health”. When asked about how this impacted her experience, she mentioned she “...questioned it (withdrawal) for a while”.*

Lola’s statement illustrates how important it is for coaches to communicate effectively as it can be harmful to the athlete’s confidence and motivation to participate. The statement also demonstrates how a coach’s discouraging communication can be demoralising and lead an athlete to contemplate withdrawal. Jake similarly described how his coach’s unsupportive behaviour angered him and made him want to leave.

*“We had a really bad coach...He wasn’t supportive... He’s just yelling and swearing and stuff like this...Hurt my confidence as a player...I was like, well I don’t want to play for this coach. It just made a lot of us really angry... but there were some kids, super gifted, super athletic, and scored tries, didn’t get yelled at”.*

It is clear from this quote how the coach's unsupportive behaviour discouraged Jake, made him feel frustrated and disrespected as he felt left out from others. This made him question his position in the team as he no longer wanted to play for this coach. Furthermore, it shows how it damaged the relationship as the coach's communication negatively affected his motivation.

Negative coach-related sentiments were also expressed in terms of prioritising star players or winning ahead of positive relationship among all in the team. The priorities of some coaches were detrimental to the coach-athlete relationship with some athletes experiencing a sense of rejection which slowly pushed these athletes out of the sport. Several athletes identified this type of behaviour from the coach as a withdrawal accompaniment. This was evident from the interviews, athletes talked about their coaches only focusing their time on winning or certain athletes leaving them to develop skills on their own. Lola described how this affected her relationship with the coach which made her consider leaving the sport.

*"There were definitely people that you could tell who are more favoured than others... The coach was kind of just choosing one person out of the whole squad to kind of put all his efforts into...I had like a few little arguments...I guess I like sort of looked into going to a different coach".*

This statement clearly demonstrates Lola's frustration with the coach's favouritism as she felt rejected and left out from others which resulted in conflict and thoughts of withdrawal. For Lola it was important to feel valued and the lack of appreciation resulted in a Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship as she did not feel welcomed by the coach and wanted to leave the team. Andy also highlighted how the coach's priorities negatively affected their coach-athlete relationship.

*"The new coach came in and pretty much, all they cared about was winning and not players... And that's when we started growing apart...He was about focusing on the club and not about the players... So, I was like he doesn't value me... so I thought I might as well just not play for the club".*

This shows how the priorities of the new coach were never related to the athletes which resulted in Andy becoming distant. The coach did not show much interest in him as an athlete which again illustrates how important it is for the athlete to feel valued by the coach. When such coach behaviours are demonstrated this can result in a Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship and thoughts of withdrawal.

### **Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship as a Withdrawal Trigger**

This section will demonstrate how a negative relationship with a coach, although often initially experienced as a withdrawal accompaniment, can eventually manifest into a trigger, causing the athlete to leave the sport. Only one participant from the study, Lilly, cited the coach-athlete relationship as a withdrawal trigger. However, this factor was initially just a withdrawal accompaniment for her too. The negative relationship first led to thoughts of withdrawal when Lilly started to perceive the coach as focusing attention on certain players in the team.

*“He was a good coach.... But there was a lot of favouritism. Sometimes girls would just make the team because they went to that school....and the rest of us were just pushed to the side... made me feel undervalued... I decided the effort I was putting into practices wasn’t worth the effort I was getting back”.*

Here Lilly explains how her coach’s favouritism made her feel underappreciated and rejected as she was ignored and pushed to the side. She explains that overall, she had a good coach, but this tendency to ignore certain athletes is what made her relationship with the coach sour. This was a withdrawal accompaniment for Lilly at first when she merely considered withdrawal but ended up persevering.

Lilly continued to disengage as a result of the coach’s behaviour. Eventually, the negative relationship manifested into a withdrawal trigger for Lilly. She explained how her poor relationship with the coach would continue to hinder her performance and negatively affect her experience. This was especially evident when the new coach took over the team since he did not have the same relationship with the players as the previous coach. According to

Lilly the new coach would always focus on the team's result and would never take time to get to know athletes individually. The following comments from Lilly highlight this fact.

*"They just had a goal to win. And they didn't really look at the individual...He didn't put me on, didn't even give me a chance to prove myself...I think I actually cried after the game... and I think that was my breaking point".*

This shows how important a positive coach-athlete relationship was for Lilly. This also clearly shows how a coach, simply through their actions, can influence an athlete to withdraw. Furthermore, this shows how important it is to create a positive relationship with the team since this incident impacted on Lilly's emotional well-being, which contributed to her withdrawal. It is evident from the athletes who were interviewed that coaches fostering a positive relationship through good communication can reduce the incidence of withdrawal.

### **Lack of Relatedness**

In this context, relatedness refers to connection an athlete feels with others in the competitive sport environment (William et al., 2013). For some athletes, this relatedness comes from competing alongside mates, school mates, those of the same nationality, or even those who share interests and other views. When relatedness is lacking or decreases in the context of competitive youth sport, it was evident from this sample of athletes that it becomes an important withdrawal factor. Some athletes reported seeking out relatedness elsewhere when it wasn't forthcoming through their sport.

### **Lack of Relatedness - Interactions with Other Factors**

As with other withdrawal factors already discussed, Lack of Relatedness also interacted with other factors as part of the wider youth athlete disengagement process. For example, Lack of Relatedness sometimes interacted with the withdrawal factor Transitions. This is because athletes wanted to take advantage of the independence coming with transitioning into adulthood and spend more time with friends. For these athletes, social life was more

important as they decided their commitment to competitive sport would eventually take up all their time which meant they had to decide which one to give up.

*“At the age of 18 I thought of dropping out because obviously, when you turn 18 in New Zealand, you're allowed to do other activities, like go clubbing. The social life was, things were changing. It was a different environment. And it was better”.*

Here John explains that although he was a skilled footballer with potential, it was not worth giving up his social life, especially at this impressionable age. This example demonstrates the interaction of John's transition into adulthood and his Lack of Relatedness contributing to his withdrawal from sport. John realised he will not be able to do all the things he hoped with all his friends if he were to continue competitive sport. This was also evident with Jake, for whom similar factors converged leading to his withdrawal.

*“You're like out every night till 6am with the boys. It's just the culture of youth at that level and age. That definitely affected my drive to play”.*

Jake conveyed how the freedom that came with his transition into adulthood interacted with his Lack of Relatedness in the team, he believes they came together to eventually lead him out of competitive sport. Jake suggested the amount of time he could spend with friends at that age (of 18 years) affected his drive to continue playing, meaning he lost interest once he realised the sport would keep him from constantly being with them. This appeared to be his priority at the time.

### **Lack of Relatedness as a Withdrawal Accompaniment**

In this study, participants described a Lack of Relatedness as a withdrawal accompaniment and never a withdrawal trigger. For example, athletes would often mentioned once their friends left, they would think of ways they could spend more time with them while still playing competitive sport. However, this led to athletes making plans around sport which usually did not match up with their friends' free time. This resulted in athletes considering withdrawing from competitive sport to spend time with friends and avoid missing out on

important social events. Ronald explains how he experienced a Lack of Relatedness and it became withdrawal accompaniment. When asked to discuss what it was that influenced his withdrawal, Ronald explained he lost interest in the sport and considered withdrawing when his friends left the team.

*“My friends lost their drive as well... And that was that. They don’t really play as much. And whenever I tried to invite them, it was always. I got work. I have to study. I have something on. Other commitments”.*

This quote shows how Ronald experienced a Lack of Relatedness after his friends left and how difficult it was to make plans with his friends while still being involved in sport. He went on to explain how he initially started participating because of his friends, and their departure is ultimately what made him want to leave *“There’s a rise. There’s a fall”*. This could imply the rise of his friends participating as well and eventually the ‘fall’, where they all lose interest resulting in him considering withdrawal because of the Lack of Relatedness.

Another participant that demonstrated how a Lack of Relatedness played a major role in making him consider withdrawal was Andy. He initially explained playing with people he knew motivated him to develop further. However, he goes on to describe below how a Lack of Relatedness was a withdrawal accompaniment once new players came into the team and his older teammates left.

*“I love playing with friends... winning with them is different feeling...The second reason was the teammates weren’t the same... It was totally different then what we had before...I was quite sad. Because it takes time to create that relationship with the team and you don’t want to lose it”.*

Here Andy exhibits how a Lack of Relatedness encouraged him to withdraw and how different it felt for him to be in a team without his friends. Even when he tried to stay in the new team, the Lack of Relatedness was enough to make him consider withdrawing. He further describes how he felt once he lost his friends and how he wanted to create a

positive relationship with the new players but found it difficult. It would have taken him a long time to get to the same level of trust he had with older friends and teammates.

Through their experiences, several athletes illustrate the importance of relatedness not only in participation within but also commitment to a competitive team. The importance of relatedness was significant for some athletes as they were worried about losing their friends they had in the team when they considered withdrawing. This was evident for John who states

*“I think you can say your friends can play a negative and a positive part in your development because they sort of sway you away from the sport... I could have been overseas... but I put them above my own goals and aspirations... I didn’t really see it as that at the time”*

Although he ultimately left to focus on university (a transition), the Lack of Relatedness he also experienced was present and profound. He noted he may well have sacrificed his social life and continued playing while also studying, as he could have been successful in football if he continued even without his friends in the team. This is quite compelling evidence of the trigger and accompaniment conceptualisation of sport withdrawal being advanced in this research project.

### **Less Enjoyment**

Less enjoyment as a withdrawal factor refers to a decline in the pleasure one feels participating in sport. Some athletes noted that they slowly lost interest in the sport and this contributed to their withdrawal. Most athletes acknowledged the importance of enjoying the sport as motivation to continue which makes Less Enjoyment an important withdrawal factor, even though it wasn’t reported by every athlete in the current study.

### **Less Enjoyment - Interactions with Other Factors**

Similar to others, Less Enjoyment also sometimes interacted with other factors to influence withdrawal. For example, Jake mentioned because he was injured, he had to take of a

couple of months to recover. However, he got so used to not playing that by the time he returned, he had lost interest in the sport, suggesting there was less enjoyment.

*“I missed half the season ... I was just like, I don't want to do this anymore”.*

### **Less Enjoyment as a Withdrawal Accompaniment**

Less enjoyment was mostly identified as a withdrawal accompaniment rather than a trigger. For instance, athletes often mentioned this was one of the earliest factors that they could remember as they first considered withdrawal. Less enjoyment made some athletes realise they were actually just playing the sport because they felt they had to, and not necessarily because they were having fun. For example, Lilly explains how she slowly noticed that water polo was becoming less fun.

*“When I started playing it seriously, it was for the fun. I think I got to a stage where I realised, I wasn't enjoying it anymore. I was just doing it. That kind of passion was gone. And Water Polo was by far my favourite sport... I realised, what's the point in doing it if I'm not having fun”.*

This example illustrates how important it is for young athletes to have fun even at elite level competition. Similar to Lilly, Ronald talked about how he was too involved in the sport as an athlete and a manager which caused him to grow tired of the sport and subsequently lose interest. As Ronald stated there were multiple times when he felt this way and wanted to quit badminton.

*“There's times I wanted to quit. I just wanted to play by myself... I don't want to manage because it's too much work”.*

Ronald suggested that although he was enjoying badminton less it was never enough to make him withdraw from the sport.



These examples show how experiencing Less Enjoyment causes athletes to consider withdrawing. The notion of athletes slowly losing passion they once had for the sport came through clearly, highlighting that what was once fun, was now less so and contributing to – but not directly triggering a withdrawal.

## **Injury**

Injuries emerged as a significant withdrawal factor among several athletes in the current study. After suffering injuries, athletes often considered their futures in the sport and had thoughts of withdrawal. However, because the way in which it was described was uniform across the sample of athletes, injuries are best described as a withdrawal accompaniment factor that interacts with others in this context. No athlete in the current study characterised an injury as the direct trigger for their withdrawal.

### **Injuries as an Accompaniment and Interacting with Other Factors**

Several athletes reported Injuries and Transitions as withdrawal factors being difficult to disentangle. The two factors, experienced together, led some athletes to thoughts of focusing on work or university instead of continuing the sport. Others returning after injury felt less confident about their skill level, a withdrawal accompaniment identified among some in the study, but not formally included within the five-factor withdrawal conceptualisation. Indeed, Lola explained that her time off from competition because of an injury resulted in her being mentally and physically affected.

*“You kind of go from knowing you can do it to kind of having this whole self-doubt really. I think it really impacted my performance”.*

Lola was not the only athlete who doubted herself after suffering an injury. Jake also explains that before his injury he saw himself a great player, but the injury made him think otherwise.

*“My confidence was a lot higher in my game but once I came back from that, I wasn’t that mobile. I couldn’t cut and move the same way. It’s like relearning”.*

The injury caused Jake to have low confidence in his skill level as a rugby player even though he made a full recovery. Although athletes often recovered from the injury, they felt less skilled which influenced thoughts of withdrawal. Most athletes that identified diminished skill perception as a withdrawal accompaniment often explained it was rooted within their thoughts about the injury and its effect on their self-belief.

John provided a further explanation of how an injury and increasing self-doubt came together leading to thoughts of withdrawal.

*“By the time I got my first injury, I felt it really affected me... It just feels like it’s affecting your movement and your feel for the game and the way you play... I thought to myself, if I can’t make it, I would really like to work in the sporting industry. I thought maybe I should drop out because injuries are becoming frequent.”*

In summary, unlike other withdrawal factors which are experienced as either triggers and accompaniments, athletes described injuries in a more nuanced way. Injuries have an important role in the context of withdrawal in that they always led to and interacted with other factors but never triggered withdrawal directly.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter was a presentation of the findings of the study including the five most prominent withdrawal factors which emerged from the thematic analysis: Transitions, Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship, Less Enjoyment, Lack of Relatedness, and Injury. Each factor and its significance has been presented as well as how they can interact with one another and a number of other factors that may be experienced by competitive youth athletes. Finally, evidence in support of the five factors often manifesting as either an accompaniment or trigger was also presented.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is a discussion of the findings of the research project. The findings of this research show the five key withdrawal factors: 1) Transitions, 2) Lack of Relatedness, 3) Less enjoyment, 4) Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship (NCAR), and 5) Injury. Broadly the five factors that emerged in here are consistent with related literature (Larson et al., 2021., Persson et al., 2020., Thomas et al., 2021., Van Houten et al., 2019., Witt & Dangi, 2018) although a more nuanced understanding of how they are experienced was novel. The four most common withdrawal accompaniments cited by athletes in the current study were 1) Injury, 2) Lack of relatedness, 3) Less enjoyment, and 4) NCAR. The most common withdrawal trigger for identified by the athletes was Transitions. It is important to note other withdrawal factors were identified, however they were not as common among other athletes. A discussion of these contributions in the context of related research is presented. In addition, a reflection on how a withdrawal accompaniment can affect the disengagement process of athletes is presented as well as the specific experience of a withdrawal trigger. Several of the most common withdrawal factor interactions are also investigated further. Also, recommendations are made as to how the findings of the research can be used by sport coaches or managers to potentially reduce the incidence of youth sport withdrawal. Following this, limitations are outlined and ideas for future research presented.

### **Withdrawal factors**

All five factors have a pedigree in related literature which will be discussed further in subsequent sections. Transitions was the most common withdrawal factor cited by athletes and mostly related to a shift towards work or university. The coach athlete relationship was influential as it contributed to an unpleasant overall experience and a Lack of Relatedness. Lack of relatedness was significant as it created feelings of isolation in the team which encouraged athletes to withdraw and spend more time with friends. Athletes who initially started participating as an opportunity to be with their friends reported that when this dynamic shifted it was significant to their withdrawal. Less enjoyment was simply described

as losing interest in the sport and was often associated with lack of friends to share enjoyment within the sport environment. The fifth factor, Injuries, was a bit different in the current sample of interviewees as it always interacted with other factors and did not directly trigger withdrawal. It is clear that a major injury could directly trigger withdrawal.

## **Transitions**

Transitions was the most common withdrawal factor as it was cited by all participants. It is best described as the passing from one stage to another and for this age group, represents changes from adolescence to adulthood (Van Houten et al., 2019). Transitioning into adulthood is also a common withdrawal factor in previous studies (Van Houten et al., 2019; Hirvensalo & Liutune, 2011; Telema, 2009; Borgers et al., 2016). Athletes from the current research only mentioned transition-related constraints into work or university, which may be a sample-specific nuance because other Transitions including getting married, starting to cohabitate, or the birth of a first child have been reported elsewhere (Arnett, 2007; Kilmartin, 2000; Raymore et al., 2001; Van Houten et al., 2019).

Athletes suggested Transitions tend to be significant withdrawal factors because of a sense of commitment to work, university or social networks. The risk of sport withdrawal increases when athletes transition into adulthood, not necessarily because they have left high school but because they tend to have less time to participate (Van Houten et al., 2017). This was evident in the current study as several students were still involved in their sport after high school while attending university and work. However, the workload became too much for athletes, especially for students, and it forced them to withdraw and create more time to study as they were failing classes. Some studies have shown Transitions, such as cohabiting, or getting into a serious relationship does not have an effect of sport participation (Hull et al., 2010; King et al., 1998). However, it is important to consider that these studies investigated different age groups than the current research, and also did not focus on competitive sport. Between the ages of 19-30 years, transitioning tends to be the biggest risk for withdrawal (Van Houten et al., 2017) and this is consistent with the current research.

As noted, transitioning into work or university leads to time pressure, making it difficult to participate in competitive sport which can be structured and inflexible (Van Houten et al., 2017). Starting work or university also fosters social relationships that could make sport participation less important (Van Houten et al., 2017). This was evident in the current study as athletes suggested even though it consumes all of one's time, going to work or university is preferable to playing competitive sport as new friends or connections offer new opportunity.

### **Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship**

Athletes cited a NCAR as a significant factor influencing sport withdrawal. This relationship is defined by the interconnected feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of a coach and an athlete (Jowett, 2007). Athletes in the current study extensively reflected on the importance of their coach-athlete relationships which is consistent with previous sport withdrawal studies (Gardner et al., 2017; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Dias et al., 2018; Persson et al., 2020). Findings from the current study suggest when coaches are not supportive and motivating, it creates a negative relationship with the athlete. This was supported by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008), who suggested a negative, poor communicating coach can lead to athlete withdrawal. Therefore, coaches should create a positive learning environment where athletes feel motivated and comfortable and establish good rapport with all athletes (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Related studies exploring this relationship as a significant withdrawal factor, suggest the pressure from coaches to win specifically influences withdrawal (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Persson et al., 2020; Gustafsson et al., 2017). However, in the current study it was not the pressure of the coach negatively impacting on the relationship and leading to withdrawal consideration, but rather unsupportive behaviour more generally. This type of behaviour included constantly criticizing a player's mistakes, neglecting athletes and making them feel alone, or having aggressive and poor communication with athletes.

## Less Enjoyment

As a withdrawal factor, Less Enjoyment can be understood as declining satisfaction and increasingly feeling bored with the sport (Witt & Dangi, 2018). Notably, Less Enjoyment was not the most common factor in the current study as it was in other recent and related studies (Witt & Dangi, 2018; Dias et al., 2018; Gardner et al., 2017; Persson et al., 2020). A few athletes in the current study mentioned increasing training sessions and games actually made sport less enjoyable. Athletes often pointed to the way competitive sport was organised and how this made them lose interest (Persson et al., 2020), where in other studies these changes are referred to as either the sport being too serious or competitive (Gatouillat et al., 2020; Safvenborn et al., 2018). Similar to Dias et al., athletes in the current research sometimes struggled to express this sentiment with much detail, rather simplifying it as losing interest or not having fun anymore. Some participants mentioned they felt as if they were just playing because they had to, not necessarily because they wanted to. Athletes describing their participation as a chore or something they were doing to please parents/coaches, is another way of conveying they were no longer enjoying the sport (Witt & Dangi, 2018; Persson et al., 2020; Dias et al., 2018).

Lack of relatedness is described as the absence of connection and opportunities to find common ground (William et al., 2013). It was identified by athletes in this study as a withdrawal factor here but perhaps not as often or meaningfully as it has elsewhere (Calvo et al., 2010; Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Perhaps this could be because these authors framed their research around motivation using Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) in which relatedness is central (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, much like the current research, more recent studies (Witt & Dangi, 2018; Dias et al., 2018; Rocchi et al., 2020) found a Lack of Relatedness did not directly influence withdrawal among youth athletes. However, it was found to be problematic for athletes, therefore making it relevant as a withdrawal factor. The results from a study by Rottensteiner et al. (2013) found that having no friends in the team or not being able to relate to the teammates or coaches leads to withdrawal, echoing the sentiments of athletes in this study. Few friends in the team leads to a Lack of Relatedness and ultimately thoughts of withdrawal.

Athletes in the current study reported a Lack of Relatedness influenced their withdrawal because it negatively impacted motivation and a sense of accomplishment, which is a sequence reported in related research (Wittenberg, 2018). Athletes explained that relatedness motivated them to continue participating in the sport. Having this motivation and encouragement from the team/coach increased their willingness to develop and made them feel like together they had done something worthwhile.

Athletes mentioned they engage in sport with friends to establish relatedness and a connection often extended outside the sport. Relatedness meant athletes were accepted by teammates and coaches (Wittenberg, 2018) which helps clarify why athletes from the current study mentioned the Lack of Relatedness made them feel isolated in the team. Having a lack of social support and feelings of loneliness in the team negatively impacted the athlete's motivation to participate and can result in complete disengagement from the sport (Pacewicz & Smith, 2017). Most athletes in the current study associated relatedness with feeling accepted. However, there were some athletes who talked about relatedness as a factor that improved their motivation and performance which is also consistent with previous research (Wittenberg, 2018). Also aligned to the findings of Wittenberg (2018), some athletes in the current study suggested relatedness promotes team cohesion which could reduce symptoms of sport devaluation. This suggests it is important to focus on creating a positive environment for athletes rather than prioritising competition. This could keep youth athletes involved in competitive sport as it seems to be what improves their motivation.

## **Injury**

Taking part in sport puts athletes at risk of injury (Almeida et al., 1999) and many of the participants in the study reported getting injured and the related fall-out in the context of withdrawal. The risk of injury tends to increase for competitive athletes due to the significant increase in training volume. In related literature, sport injuries are considered a structural constraint (i.e., out of athlete's control) and can lead to withdrawal (Crane & Temple, 2015; Enoksen, 2011; John et al., 1990; Witt & Dangi, 2018). Sport injuries have consistently emerged as a significant factor influencing withdrawal (Enoksen, 2011; Jayanthi

et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2021) and this was the case for athletes in the current study. Athletes who described an injury in the current study only considered withdrawing when it became serious and caused them to stop playing for a number of weeks or months, suggesting a fair bit of tolerance for more minor injuries. This was similar for athletes in the study by Enoksen (2011) as only serious acute Injuries forcing athletes to rest was a significant withdrawal factor.

Most of the athletes in the current study who identified Injury as a withdrawal factor noted progression to higher levels of competition and more strenuous sport engagement led to injuries and led to thoughts of withdrawal. This meant they were performing the same movements regularly in training and their competitions thereby causing injuries. Injuries in youth sport tend to result from repetitive microtrauma without sufficient rest (Friesen et al., 2018) and athletes in the current study seemed to be aware of this as they recounted stories about the role of injury in the withdrawal.

### **Interactions of Withdrawal Factors**

The previous discussion was an overview of the key withdrawal factors identified from the interviews. However, competitive sport withdrawal is complex and often factors are experienced together or in combination. Even though sport withdrawal has been studied for decades, there are still unresolved questions involving potentially interacting factors (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021). Findings from the current research suggests more than one withdrawal factor, from those that exist, usually combine for each individual and there is not just one factor influencing withdrawal (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021). These factors could be personal, interpersonal, or out of the athlete's control (Crane & Temple, 2015; Wilson et al., 2019; Persson et al., 2020). However, the current research not only identifies the key factors but also demonstrates how and with which factors they most commonly interact to influence athlete withdrawal.

Participants in the current research explained once thoughts of withdrawal related to one factor commenced, the disengagement process was underway and other withdrawal factors



came into play. This is supported by Eliasson and Johansson (2021) who suggest the first doubts often lead to others and the eventual decision to withdraw.

Athletes from the current study viewed relatedness as an essential part of competitive sport (Williams et al., 2013) but often interacts with other withdrawal factors when absent. Athletes who experienced a Lack of Relatedness in the team after their friends left would often look to find support or encouragement by creating a positive coach-athlete relationship. Previous studies have shown how critical a coach is in creating a positive, supportive learning environment in youth sport to prevent withdrawal (Larson et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 2017; Keegan et al., 2014). In the current study, it was noted that withdrawal thoughts were mitigated for athletes who did not have friends in the team but did have a positive coach-athlete relationship.

Athletes seemed to lack relatedness with new coaches, which again suggests these two factors interact and may together lead an athlete to withdrawal. Participants mentioned when a new coach took over, it was difficult to create a relationship as it takes a long time. They also mentioned they often had to adjust to the new coaching style which felt like they were starting from scratch to create a relationship. This developed into a NCAR, as the athlete had no one to relate to without friends or a positive relationship with the coach. Athletes need the connectedness regardless of whether the coach is skilled in the sport (Jowett, 2017). Coaching tends to be more effective with a positive coach-athlete relationship as it allows them to understand and trust each other, creating quality coaching fuelled by communication (Jowett, 2017). This seemed to be especially important for athletes searching for motivation to participate once their friends left the team.

According to recent research on sport withdrawal, injuries tend to hamper performance and then dampens motivation (Thomas et al., 2021). This points to another interaction among withdrawal factors. We also know injuries cause athletes to develop a fear of re-injury and lower perception of skill (Arden et al., 2013). These findings are consistent with the current research in which athletes mentioned injury caused them to play with a different intensity and was also related to lower confidence and perception of skill level. Support from coaches, parents, and teammates is therefore crucial as it can determine whether or not

athletes continue or withdraw. Coaches should be aware of the psychological impact injury has on the athlete and their performance (Maurice, 2019). Coaches can also convey a sense of faith in an athlete, promoting security, and facilitating strong and effective communication (Fryen & Pensgaard, 2014). This reflects the comments of athletes in the current study as they found athletes tend to develop a negative relationship with a coach after returning from injury because of coaches being unsupportive (Maurice, 2019). Athletes suggest coaches be more encouraging and try to motivate those coming back from injury as it will help the athlete gain confidence in their ability (Bernsten & Kristiansen, 2019).

### **Withdrawal Accompaniments and Triggers**

An important insight identified from this study is the way in which withdrawal factors often manifest as either accompaniments or triggers. The following section is a discussion of some examples of this.

### **Injury and Negative Coach-athlete Relationship**

It is worth digging deeper on injury as an important withdrawal factor. Previous research suggests injuries tend to be the key structural reason leading directly to withdrawal (Crane & Temple, 2015; John et al., 1990). This was inconsistent with the current research as Injury was never a withdrawal trigger, only an accompaniment that influenced thoughts of withdrawal. Injuries often paired with other withdrawal factors such as a NCAR, but it never triggered withdrawal on its own. This was similar to the findings of Koukouris (2005) who found injuries caused athletes to lose interest in the sport and also because their coaches would treat them differently after an injury. Some other studies have also reported interactions of injuries and other factors in the context of sport withdrawal (Enoksen, 2011; Koukouris, 2005; Thomas et al., 2021). Similar to the current research, these other studies suggest injured athletes tend to experience negative interactions with coaches when they return to the sport. This could be because of the time the injured athletes have been absent from the team which suggests they have not been able to develop or maintain a positive relationship. This is important to consider since positive coach-athlete relationships rely on time spent in each other's company (Foulds et al., 2019). Therefore, when athletes return,

depending on how long they were away, they are almost like a new player to the team which can lead to the less social support (Foulds et al., 2019; Hassan et al., 2017).

Participants reported their coaches tend to be less supportive of athletes returning from injury, sometimes no longer offering one-on-one coaching or reducing playing time. This is consistent with findings from a recent study by Kuhlin et al. (2019) who suggested an injury may lead to a coach paying less attention to them and this led to the athlete developing low self-esteem. An injury can damage the coach-athlete relationship to the point where neglected athletes were trying to play through their injuries to win back the approval of coaches. Similarly, athletes in the current study suggested after the injury, their coach would no longer focus on them and seemed to put all their effort into others. Unsupportive coaches may use an autocratic coaching style, provide less positive feedback and generally interact negatively (Jimenez et al., 2019). Athletes in the current study experienced this after an injury. Some reported their coach did not have any faith in them and made them feel underappreciated, further decreasing motivation. Therefore, social support from a coach is essential to help address their emotional, psychological and social needs (Yang et al., 2010). Recent research (Thomas et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2017) also found a lack of social support from teammates and coaches were significant withdrawal factors related to athletes with injuries. This could possibly also explain why athletes in the current study had such low perceptions of their skill level. Discouraging behaviour from coaches negatively affect athlete outcomes such as perception of skill level and motivation (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). This seemed to be the problem for athletes who returned from injury in the current study. They did not have the support from coaches which lead to them feeling as if the relatedness they used to have with the coach was no longer present.

Evidence from the current research suggests coaches play perhaps an even bigger role in athlete participation and withdrawal than might have been expected based on previous research. A few recent studies (Dias et al., 2018; Barcza-Renner et al., 2016; Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2016) align suggesting coaches are a key component of the social environment and have the potential to enhance development. As noted, the athletes from the current study reported a diminished perception of skill can result from injury. This seems to develop into a significant withdrawal accompaniment (Arden et al., 2013) but may

be mitigated by a positive coach relationship in which the coach encourages the athlete to progress and shows they believe in the returning athlete (Kuhlin et al., 2019).

Several athletes in the current study considered withdrawal during injury rehabilitation, fearing they would be less skilled when they return to the sport. This is consistent with previous studies of withdrawal reporting interactions between injuries and other factors (Enoksen, 2011; Koukouris, 2005; Thomas et al., 2021; Kuhlin et al., 2019). This finding is further evidence that factors can interact with each other and advance the disengagement process. In other words, athletes might face an array of withdrawal accompaniments before a trigger causes them to completely disengage. Some athletes might take longer to withdraw or reach a 'breaking point' as they usually search for the right time to withdraw since they would not prefer to withdraw in the middle of the season or might not have the confidence (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021).

### **Less Enjoyment and Lack of Relatedness**

Unlike previous studies on sport withdrawal (Dias et al., 2018; Gardner et al., 2017; Persson et al., 2020; Strube & Strand, 2016), a lack of enjoyment was not the most common factor influencing withdrawal among youth athletes in the current research. However, it was still important and the way this factor was experienced alongside another factor, Lack of Relatedness, is worth further discussion. Athletes mentioned they were more motivated when they had fun, and this was often linked to the relatedness they had with friends or relationship with their coach. Similarly, the findings of Brooks et al (2018) suggest when athletes are enjoying their experience as a competitive athlete it positively impacts the development of social skills and motivation for improving performance. Some previous studies (Strube & Strand, 2016; Gatouillat et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2019) suggested athletes tend to cite Less enjoyment as a trigger when coaches focus too much on competition and results. However, within the current study athletes identified Less Enjoyment most often as an accompaniment, rather than a trigger. The Lack of Relatedness they felt seemed to form from having no friends in the team or having a negative relationship with the coach. This again reflects the complexity of withdrawal from competitive sport.

Athletes in the current research mentioned they lost interest as soon as they had no one to relate to even if they knew they were otherwise enjoying themselves. Athletes often remain motivated and continue sport participation when relatedness is present and all participants are interested (Ryan & Powelson, 1991). At the time when athletes reported having lost interest in the sport, they often cited Lack of Relatedness as another withdrawal accompaniment that helped to rationalise their eventual decision. Once athletes stop enjoying the sport, this paired with a realisation that they were just playing to be part of a team, a finding alluded to in related research (Coakley, 1992; Dias et al., 2018; Witt & Dangi, 2018).

### **Athlete Identity**

Athlete identity theory refers to the extent to which one identifies with the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1968) and aligns with the findings of this research. Having a well-established sport identity increases motivation and ultimately the performance of athletes. However, identity could also make an athlete's transition emotionally and cognitively difficult (Defreese et al., 2021). This was the case for several athletes in the current study who felt their transition would completely detach them from the sport. Therefore, some athletes transitioned in to coaching roles to stay connected and make positive change and to ensure a better experience for younger players. However, for most athletes in the current study, their identity seemed to shift through the disengagement process since they focused more on new roles and responsibilities. Smith and Harden (2018) agree some athletes tend to lose their identity as they withdraw from their competitive sport. However, some can experience Transitions positively by transferring the skills from their sport to their career (Smith and Harden, 2018). Similar to athletes from Smith and Harden (2018), athletes in the current study also reflected on their athlete identity and how difficult it was to completely withdraw from sport. They mentioned it was almost like giving up something you have been working towards achieving since a young age. Athletes with difficult Transitions in the current study often mentioned they were not ready to withdraw and felt they lost their purpose and identity, as well as social support (Defreese et al., 2021).

## **Disengagement Process**

Evidence identified in the current study seemed to suggest a wider process of disengagement rather than a sudden withdrawal, and this led to further consideration of very recent emerging literature. The disengagement process refers to the interactions of withdrawal factors and the effect these have on the athlete's overall experience (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021). Within the disengagement process athletes will often go through four key stages. The first is doubt, which is when athletes identify a factor that made them consider withdrawing from the sport, referred to as withdrawal accompaniments here. During the second stage athletes will often look for an alternative role and this tends to be made based on emotion. For example, athletes in the current study who identified injury as their first withdrawal factor also talked about having a "plan B" since they did not believe they could play the same again even if they made a full recovery. Also, athletes who identified Lack of Relatedness as a withdrawal factor that made them consider withdrawal talked about possibly switching teams to play with friends, which was often a sudden thought based on emotion with little thought or rationale behind it. The third stage is when athletes experience a factor leading them to their breaking point and also withdrawal, conceptualised as a trigger here. During this stage athletes use their experiences and all the factors they have experienced up to this point to justify their decision to withdraw to themselves. The final stage is where athletes adapt to their new reality without sport. For participants in the current study this was mostly either a commitment to university or a full-time job.

## **Recommendations**

There are a variety of practical recommendations following on from this research project. These should be of interest to coaches and sport managers who are involved with youth sport. Fundamentally, the knowledge identified here can reduce the incidence of withdrawal, or at least some incidences of withdrawal which take place in unpleasant circumstances. The findings of this research have revealed four key accompaniments that influence thoughts of withdrawal: Lack of Relatedness, Negative coach-athlete Relationship, Injuries, and Perceived Skill Level. The three key withdrawal triggers identified here are

Transitions, Lack of relatedness and Less enjoyment. These learnings can be drawn on to inform coaches and sport managers as they endeavour to support youth athletes and prevent withdrawal.

It is important to address what can be done to mitigate these withdrawal factors. Some, like Transitions, tend to be inevitable. This means there is not much that could be done to keep athletes from withdrawing because of work or university commitments. However, most withdrawal factors are somewhat manageable, not just to prevent sport withdrawal but also to ensure a positive sporting experience for all athletes. Most athletes identified NCAR as a withdrawal factor and mentioned it was usually because of the unsupportive and neglecting behaviour. Coaches were discouraging and sometimes rude to players which caused them to feel unwanted in the team. Players who were injured felt they weren't cared for by coaches once they returned. This was also linked to citing Lack of Relatedness as a withdrawal factor. Therefore, these findings suggest coaches must ensure athletes have a supportive interpersonal environment, fostering a feeling of being valued through effective communication (Jowett, 2007). As previously mentioned, relatedness and a positive environment are the most important factors for sport participation (Larson et al., 2020) which suggests perhaps coaches should foster relatedness within their team so athletes will not have to find connections outside of sport.

Less Enjoyment as a withdrawal factor may be manageable, as athletes often lose interest in the sport based on structure, intensity and coaching that could be reimagined. Some athletes reported coaches overemphasizing winning and performance, resulting in them being benched. This suggests perhaps coaches could focus more on having fun during trainings to ensure athletes are still enjoying the sport and foster positive participation for all athletes. Even though it is a competitive sport, participation and enjoyment is still essential to ensure a positive experience for athletes (Witt & Dangi, 2018; Gatouillat et al., 2020).

Although injuries also tend to be outside of the athlete's (Crane & Temple, 2015; Strube & Strand, 2016; Witt & Dangi, 2018) as well as coaches' and managers' control, there might be ways to ensure sports are safer so less injuries occur. Most common injuries are experienced in the lower limb for football (Aman et al., 2017) and hockey players (Barboza et al., 2018), the upper extremity for swimmers (Trinidad et al., 2020), knee and ankle for

rugby players (Fuller et al., 2017), and the trunk and lower limb for badminton players (Phomsoupha & Laffaye, 2020). With this knowledge coaches could focus on creating training programs to increase strength of athletes, in areas that injuries are most common, and help reduce injuries (Amman et al., 2017; Phomsoupha & Laffaye, 2020).

### **Limitations and Future research**

The current research identified prominent competitive sport withdrawal factors and shed light on how they are actually experienced. The findings from the study have identified key withdrawal factors and showed they could either be experienced as withdrawal accompaniments or triggers. The complex nature of sport withdrawal can make it difficult to isolate which factor was “the final straw” directly causing the withdrawal. Therefore, future research should focus on each withdrawal factor explicitly to provide a deeper understanding.

Future studies are also needed for further insight on how the most common withdrawal factor interactions cause tension and/or might be overcome. For example, studying the affect an injury has on the coach-athlete relationship quality and how it influences withdrawal could be studied as the coach relationship seemed to be significant in the withdrawal of athletes and even more so for those returning from an injury. As noted, the coach seemed to be a significant factor that impacted the withdrawal of athletes in the current study outside of injury scenarios too. Therefore, conducting research focusing primarily on a coach’s impact on competitive sport withdrawal is also warranted.

The current study relied on athletes recounting their withdrawal experience, which meant athletes had to think back on their past sport experiences. These descriptions are almost certainly subject to memory and recall bias, which means it is uncertain how accurate their interpretations were and if their attribution of factors for withdrawal changed over time. Future research could focus on key withdrawal factors identified in the current study, but better capture the experiences as they occur. This could provide even more accurate interpretations of athlete’s withdrawal experiences.



Having a gender balance is important as it allows the researcher to demonstrate that their findings are generalizable to populations with similar characteristics (Dickinson et al., 2012). The researcher did not actively seek gender balance within the current study. However, no significant difference between the withdrawal experiences of male and females were noted. Since more male athletes were interviewed, it would be beneficial to focus only on the withdrawal experiences of female athletes as a deeper analysis could possibly identify significant differences

### **Summary**

Findings of the current research provide further evidence suggesting competitive sport withdrawal is complex. The findings of this study make three important contributions. The first contribution is further evidence of the five key withdrawal factors: 1) Transitions, 2) Lack of Relatedness, 3) Negative Coach-Athlete Relationship, 4) Less Enjoyment, and 5) Injury. It is important to acknowledge these are not the only withdrawal factors alluded to by athletes, but rather they came through most prominently. The second contribution is further evidence that withdrawal factors almost always interact with each other. The third contribution is a new insight suggesting withdrawal factors seem to manifest as either a withdrawal accompaniment or withdrawal trigger. These findings suggest factors such as NCAR can be mitigated better than others that tend to be inevitable, such as Transitions. The findings suggest creating an experience that is as fun and positive as possible is likely to reduce the incidence of withdrawal.

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## Appendix A - Interview script

### Verbal Consent script:

I am conducting research about the underlying factors that influence competitive sport withdrawal among youth athletes and I am interested in your experiences as an athlete who has withdrawn from competitive sport. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the underlying factors that influence athletes to withdraw from competitive sport. Your participation will involve one interview that will last between 30 to 60 minutes.

This research has no known risks. Please know I will do everything to protect your privacy. Your identity or personal information will not be used during any part of the study. Notes taken during the interview will be stored in a secure location.

Do you wish to participate in the study and begin the interview?

Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. Can you tell me about your experience playing competitive sport? Follow up questions:

Could you tell me about the training intensity?

Were there any times you had to travel for the sport? If yes, can you explain how this impacted your life outside of the sport?

2. Can you tell me about the reasons that motivated you to start playing competitive sport? Follow up questions:

What was the most important thing for you that made you continue to play competitively?

How did you perceive your skill level within this sport?

3. Tell me about the culture of your team? Follow up questions:

How did the team culture impact your decision to withdraw from the sport?

How was your relationship with your teammates and coach?

4. Can you tell me about the time you first thought of withdrawing from the sport? Follow up question:

How did you feel when you had this thought?

5. Can you tell me about the reasons that made you withdraw from the sport?

6. What, if any, personal and interpersonal factors influenced your reason(s) for withdrawing from the sport?

7. Are there any other points you would like to add that you feel may have been missed regarding your port withdrawal?

## **Appendix B - Participant Information Sheet**

### **Date Information Sheet Produced:**

**10/03/2021**

### **Project Title**

Underlying factors that influence competitive sport withdrawal in youth athletes. A qualitative study

### **An Invitation**

My name is Jayson Jooste and I am a postgraduate student completing this research project as part of my Master of Sport and Exercise degree at Auckland University of Technology. You have been invited to take part in a research project that will explore the underlying reasons that influence sport withdrawal in youth athletes. Participation in this study is optional and will neither advantage nor disadvantage the participants. You are free to withdraw at any time.

### **What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of the underlying factors that influence the reasons of youth athletes to withdraw from competitive sport. We hope that the information gained from this study will help coaches, sport coordinators and sport programme developers have a better understanding of the underlying reasons that influence youth to withdraw from competitive sport. This could potentially help prevent more sports withdrawal and increase youth sport participation.

### **How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

The researcher used an advertisement for the research project that also explained the inclusion criteria. You were identified because you expressed an interest in the project by reaching out to the researcher. You are invited to participate in this research project as you could meet the inclusion criteria. Your experience will contribute to an overall understanding of competitive sport withdrawal.

Participants in this study are required to fit the following criteria:

- a) 19-22 years old
- b) Played sport at a competitive level (Club level or representative level) for at least one full season.
- c) Must have been out of their sport and stopped participating in it competitively for at least a year.
- d) Not currently playing the sport at a social level.
- e) Not planning on returning to the sport.
- f) Have not been coached/taught by the researcher or any of the supervisors.

### **How do I agree to participate in this research?**

In order to agree to participate in this research you will need to sign a consent form for a face-to-face interview. The researcher will provide you with this form. However, if the interview takes place over a zoom call, you will need to provide verbal consent that will be recorded by the researcher. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

**What will happen in this research?**

This study involves the participant taking part in one interview session that will last approximately 30-60 minutes. This will take part in a public place (e.g. a Café). You will be asked 7-10 questions and invited to share your life experience as an athlete in competitive sport. The information given within the interviews of the study will only be used to answer the research question and written up in the thesis. As a participant you will not be identified in the report. You will also receive a \$20 Prezy card as a participant of this study.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

You may experience mental discomfort during the interview, if at any point you feel unwell, you may choose to stop and withdraw from the interview. If you would like to speak to a counsellor about your experiences, then please feel free to contact the following:

Auckland counselling and support services (09 376 7481), Lifeline counselling (0800 54 33 54).

**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

AUT Health Counselling and Wellbeing is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- drop into our centres at WB219 or AS104 or phone 921 9992 City Campus or 921 9998 North Shore campus to make an appointment. Appointments for South Campus can be made by calling 921 9992.
- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <http://www.aut.ac.nz/being-a-student/current-postgraduates/your-health-and-wellbeing/counselling>.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

As a participant your identity will not be used at any time during the write-up. All the information that you provide during the interview will only be used for the purpose of answering the research question.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

Participating in this research will only cost you 30 to 45 minutes of your time.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You will have 2 weeks to consider this invitation.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

Each participant has the right to review the information and final results of the study if they are interested in viewing it. A summary of the findings will also be emailed to each participant.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Michael Naylor, [mnaylor@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:mnaylor@autuni.ac.nz), 6627

Adrian Farnham, [adrian.farnham@aut.ac.nz](mailto:adrian.farnham@aut.ac.nz), 7594

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.



**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

***Researcher Contact Details:***

Jayson Jooste, [hkd7546@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:hkd7546@autuni.ac.nz)

***Project Supervisor Contact Details:***

Michael Naylor, [mnaylor@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:mnaylor@autuni.ac.nz), 6627

Adrian Farnham, [adrian.farnham@aut.ac.nz](mailto:adrian.farnham@aut.ac.nz), 7594

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on (31/03/2021), AUTC Reference number.**

## Appendix C: Consent Form

**Project title:** *Underlying factors that influence competitive sport withdrawal in youth athletes. A qualitative study*

**Project Supervisor:** *Michael Naylor, Adrian Farnham*

**Researcher:** *Jayson Jooste*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 10/03/2021.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature :

.....

Participant's name:.....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date :

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on (31/03/21) AUTECH**  
**Reference number**