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# **Life as a Carded Athlete**

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## **Abstract**

### ***Life as a Carded Athlete***

In 2001 the Ministerial Taskforce for Sport, Leisure and Fitness presented the *Graham Report* to the New Zealand government. The authors of this document had been invited to assess the state of sport within New Zealand and provide recommendations for the future direction of wider sport initiatives. One of these initiatives involved restructuring the process for developing New Zealand's elite athletes, which led to the establishment of the New Zealand Academy of Sport (NZAS) and the carded athlete system. This research project investigated the impact that the carding system has had on both the career and identity development of New Zealand's elite athletes. In particular it examined athletes' perspectives of this system as they explored how being part of the carding system has impacted their lives, both in and outside of the sport experience. Additionally, it addressed the impact that athlete carding has had on individuals' role identities. In so doing, this investigation has allowed for a previously silenced, yet growing population of elite athletes to share their experiences of life as a carded athlete.

Semi-structured interviews conducted with a purposeful sample of 17 male and female carded athletes from eight different sports were used to explore these insights. The interviews revealed that while athletes experienced increased levels of funding and support upon becoming carded, they were also subjected to decreased levels of autonomy and perceived increases in external pressure as a result of their

involvement within the carding system. Furthermore, the potential for participants to become engulfed within the athlete role was evident throughout each of their narratives. These results suggest the carded athlete system it is not currently meeting its potential of developing world class 'holistic' athletes. As such, it is important that individuals working within New Zealand's elite sport environment explicitly encourage carded athletes to explore a more balanced approach to their daily lives. Differences in athlete readiness to embrace activities outside of the sport context however, suggests that career development programmes may also need to consider the stage of an athlete's career in order to best meet individual athlete needs and motivation.

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## **Introduction**

Sporting culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is significantly different from that of yester year. Bolstered by technological advances and ever-increasing financial resources, sporting feats have become an increasingly sought after and expected occurrence. While the desire for sporting excellence is not a new phenomenon, the expectations associated with this quest have grown exponentially. At the centre of these changes are the athletes themselves. In contrast to their historical counterparts, modern day athletes are increasingly being asked to commit wholeheartedly to the elite sport lifestyle. This total absorption into the athlete role has become so etched within our sporting culture that it is now the expected norm. While some sporting organisations have embraced career development pathways which aim to ensure the long term well-being of their athletes, many have not. This is significant as the long term impact of these increasing demands remains relatively unexplored.

The career development needs of athletes in New Zealand, and the insufficiencies of currently available development programmes, recently gained front page exposure in a national newspaper. According to the article, more than twenty professional cricket players are seeking mental health support for issues ranging from depression, anxiety and panic attacks to low self-esteem and self-worth, with many other athletes “waiting to be seen” (Cleaver, 2012, p. A1). The article also cites a recent survey by the New Zealand Rugby Players’ Association (as cited in Cleaver, 2012) that revealed 35 per cent of recently retired players had “feelings of despair or depression”

(Cleaver, 2012, p. A1). In response to such statistics and anecdotal evidence, Heath Mills, Manager of the New Zealand Cricket Players' Association, makes the case for more funding for support and career planning for all New Zealand athletes: "we have a responsibility to ensure we are not harming young athletes through their involvement in sport and that we leave them in a position to contribute to their families and communities when they are finished" (Cleaver, 2012, p. A1). Continuing, he admits, "I dread the day when I wake up and read that one of our players, former or current, has killed themselves" (p. A3).

With the career development needs of elite athletes gaining such public visibility, it is important that those in charge of sport environments consider how their actions influence these individuals' sport experiences. Specifically, as the global requirements of elite sport have become increasingly more demanding, there has been a corresponding increase in expectation of athletes' time and energies (Archer, 2010; Aquilina, 2013). This shift has significantly altered the lives of athletes at the centre of the elite sport model. However, as noted in Cleaver's (2012) article, these changes may not have always been in the best interests of the athletes themselves. This research project therefore set out to explore life within New Zealand's elite sport development programme, the carded athlete system, and identify how involvement within this system has impacted on athletes' lives both in and outside of the sporting context.

The global importance of modern day sport has become increasingly evident since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, there has been mounting government involvement in the regulation and direction of sport policy over the last 100 years (Green & Collins, 2008). Whether it is as a regulator, provider or exploiter, Governments from around the world have seen sport as a powerful political instrument. As such, sport has been used to: promote increased national health and general fitness (Zhouxiang, 2011); enhance international contacts and gain international recognition (Hong & Xiaozheng, 2002); increase economic prosperity (Girginov & Sandanski, 2004; Hong, 2011; Houlihan, 1997); foster national identity, build a collective national heritage, and alleviate ethnic, cultural and class tensions (Doczi, 2011; Girginov & Sandanski, 2004; Green, 2004; Hong, 2011; Horton, 2012; Houlihan, 1997; Viita, 2012; Zhouxiang, 2011). These unique and varied functions have been heavily influenced by the prevailing ideologies and political agendas of the last century (Green, 2004; Green & Collins, 2008).

In recent years, national sporting policy has had a tendency to align with one of two competing ideologies. These differing positions focus either on making sport and physical activity a priority for all citizens, i.e. 'sport for all', or developing a strong elite sport system targeting only the nation's most promising athletes. Countries have long debated which ideological basis of sport should prevail within modern society (Hong, 1999). Proponents of 'sport for all' promote mass sporting participation as a way to enhance public health and develop broader social goals such as co-operation, leadership, self-esteem, and self-worth (Murphy & Waddington, 1998). This

inclusive model was created as an alternative to the growing focus on elitism and emphasises participation for the purpose of personal and socio-cultural development over winning and the search for sporting excellence (Green, 2004; Hylton & Totten, 2001). Over 100 countries have initiated 'sport for all' based programmes since the early 1970s (Dacosta & Miragaya, 2002).

Despite this widespread uptake, some academics contend that the biggest societal benefits come when resources are focused on an elite few. They argue that winning and international achievement promotes unity and instils national pride (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Horton, 2012; Viita, 2012). Likewise, elite sporting success has been touted to increase physical activity levels amongst non-athletic populations by inspiring the general populace to become more active (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). Many sporting communities have therefore turned away from community-based sport in favour of the more hierarchical and performance-based focus of the elite sport system (Green, 2004; Krawczyk, 1992). This cultural shift has meant that nations (and private sponsors) now spend increasingly more money championing elite sport than they do 'sport for all' (Green, 2004; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Ingham, Chase, & Butt, 2002). Subsequently, modern day sport has become increasingly focused on identifying, selecting and eliminating individuals on the basis of their athletic potential (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). Although many people within the sporting community argue that elite development programmes provide much needed support for our emerging talent, others question the cost to athletes' personal, emotional and social development. These conflicting perspectives highlight

a number of matters that warrant further attention and therefore form the focus of the current research project.

The growing trend towards emphasising elite sport mirrors wider societal changes. As stated previously, sport often reflects the prevailing economic-political ideologies of the time. Consequently, elite sport, with its emphasis on measuring, ranking and comparison to others, closely resembles the neo-liberal values which have dominated Western culture since the early 1980s (Andon & Houck, 2011; Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Green & Collins, 2008; Grupe, 1985; Hemphill, 1992; Tannsjo, 2000). In the sporting context these ideals translate into the optimisation of athletic performance. Commitment to performance enhancement permeates throughout Western culture and aligns with the competitive underpinnings prevalent within capitalist society (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Gibson, 1993). In fact it is the principle of competition which ultimately forms the backbone of modern elite sport policy. Here, the overwhelming message is that only first place counts (Collins & Cruickshank, 2012). As such, we have come to accept the unequal distribution of resources based upon the idea that people who display excellence are more important, and subsequently deserve more, than those who do not exhibit such abilities (Ingham et al., 2002; Tannsjo, 2000).

By drawing resources in terms of facilities, funding and personnel, elite sport marginalises the opportunities of those less talented (Donnelly, 1996). Capitalist ideology, however, espouses that competition for resources is both natural and good

for society. Specifically, it proclaims that people should be rewarded on the basis of their own individual merits. This idea of meritocracy purports that every citizen has the ability to succeed, and therefore by association has access to community resources, should they put their mind to it (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Donnelly, 1996; Gibson, 1993; Ingham et al., 2002). In accepting these ideals people are taught that they have an individual responsibility to work hard and exert themselves in order to achieve their respective goals. For athletes, this means participation in extensive training regimes and sacrificing for the good of athletic competition. However, Butt and Molnar (2009) suggest that this view of egalitarian upward mobility is quickly lost once athletes discover the lack of places available in the top tier of sport. In fact, rather than experiencing the joys of developing their athletic talent, individuals often find their sporting performances have reduced them to the great achievement principle: 'citus, altius, fortius' (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; MacAloon, 1996; Volkwein, 1995).

In some ways, elite sport has replaced the ancient Greek ideal of producing a harmonious balance between mind and body with the capitalist need to create optimally functioning human machines (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Lammer, 1992). In so doing, competitive sport has become marked by the need for rational-scientific organisation and administration, emphasising training thresholds, workloads, selection, and other such quantifiable measures (Gibson, 1993; Green & Collins, 2008; Hemphill, 1992; Tinning, 1997). Similarly, sporting performances are now conducted in controlled environments in order to compare feats across time and

space, while the extensive use of statistics allows an athlete's progress to be intently monitored and analysed (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Tannsjo, 2000). Such changes reduce individual performances to specific qualities that can be thoroughly manipulated by modern science and medicine, the influence of which can be seen in all aspects of game preparation, performance and recovery (MacAloon, 1996; Tannsjo, 2000). The search for efficiency has led to what has been described as the 'dehumanisation' of the entire elite sport process.

Compounding these issues is the increasingly international and political focus which has controlled the direction of elite sport policy over the past 60 years. Athletes are now global entities, recognised worldwide for their sporting feats (Levermore & Millward, 2007; Maguire, 2011; Volkwein, 1995). As such, governments have realised, and embraced, the national exposure and prestige that can be generated via elite sporting success (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Doczi, 2011; Green, 2004; Hong, 2011; Iowerth, Jones, & Hardman, 2010). In particular, politicians have been increasingly interested in the feelings of pride and solidarity that emerge when a nation's athletes excel on an international sporting stage. Such feelings have coined the phrase 'sportive nationalism' and are so powerful that many governments have placed sportive nationalism ahead of sport's other key social and economic virtues (Girginov & Sandanski, 2004; Houlihan, 1997; Monnington, 1993). One of the primary motives for governments to champion elite sport policy over sport for all is to acknowledge, and exploit, the feeling of national euphoria associated with winning athletic performances. It is these moments that politicians use to project positive national

imagery, reinforce cultural communities and, in some cases, proclaim ideological superiority (Doczi, 2011; Girginov & Sandanski, 2004; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Maguire, 2011; Riordan, 1999).

The exploitation of sport is not a new development. In fact, after World War II (WWII) the Soviet government strategically targeted sport, in particular the Olympic Games, as a way to demonstrate the physical prowess and ideological dominance of the communist regime. Soviet politicians felt that global sporting success would not only unite the diverse group of nations that made up the USSR, but also reveal the superiority of the communist way of life (Doczi, 2011; Monnington, 1993; Riordan, 1977, 1991). As such, they began to invest heavily in the promotion and development of Soviet sporting talent. Those individuals who displayed a potential for sporting aptitude were readily identified and placed within environments specifically structured to foster their unique abilities (Lou, 1995; Riordan, 1999). This centralised model of athlete development was so successful at generating athletic champions that it was soon imitated by nations around the world.

Another country that orchestrated sport as a form of foreign policy is the People's Republic of China. After years of increasing international isolation, sport became a vehicle for China's global political realignment and acceptance back onto the world stage (Hong, 1999; Jiang, 2012; Zhouxiang, 2011). Specifically, elite sport was targeted as a way to promote friendship and establish positive international

relationships. In fact, following the Cultural Revolution of 1966, Chinese sports teams were instructed to lose to other socialist countries in order to strengthen China's underlying political friendships (Hong, 1999; Riordan, 1999). This period of "ping-pong diplomacy" enabled Chinese communists to systematically oppose the ideals of western imperialism, while at the same time reach out to these same imperialists in an attempt to promote a more positive image of China abroad (Hong & Xiaozheng, 2002). When Den Xiaoping took power following Mao's death in 1976, he too used sport as a tool to improve China's image abroad; however, under Den's leadership, the focus of elite sport became competition first and friendship second (Luo, 1995). Individual achievement and winning was again important as Den aimed to promote China as a leading world powerhouse, capable of competing alongside its Western counterparts (Jiang, 2012).

In contrast, sport in Western countries was seen to have very little political importance until the early 1960s (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). Specifically, it wasn't until nations such as China and the USSR started to use sport as a social and political agent that Western governments took a more proactive role in the governance of national sport policy. The past 50 years have, however, since seen increasing government involvement across all aspects of the sporting domain. Like the USSR and China, most western governments have chosen to become involved in sport policy in order to meet specific political agendas. For instance, Canada developed its national sport policy with the explicit focus of creating national unity above all else. By investing heavily in elite sport development, the Canadian government hoped that

sporting success, and the corresponding feelings of sportive nationalism, would help its citizens overcome the sectarian and ethnic differences evident within its community (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Hoberman, 1993; Houlihan, 1997). Likewise, Australia, Ireland, Malaysia and the United States have all used elite sport as a vehicle to promote social integration amongst the various cultural groups within their respective borders (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Houlihan, 1997; Silk & Manley, 2012).

Elite sporting success has also enabled smaller nations to assert themselves away from the political arena. By capitalising on exhibitions of sporting prowess, these smaller, or less powerful, countries have been able to stamp their mark on a wider global stage (Doczi, 2011; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Hoberman, 1993; Hong, 2011; Silk & Manley, 2012). For example, during the 1960s and early 1970s, international interest in Australia was compounded by its success on the international sports field (Jacques & Pavia, 1976). The Australian government utilised these successes to develop a strong national and cultural identity. The image of the tall, tanned and athletic Aussie was perpetuated, boosting tourism and promoting Australia as a growing world powerhouse (Horton, 2012; Jacques & Pavia, 1976). Such images, however, can easily become threatened if sporting success does not continue. Maguire (2011) states; “given the role that sport plays in personal and national identity formation, defeats on the playing field become... a kind of litmus test for the nation’s decline” (p. 1007). A disappointing effort at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, where Australia finished 32<sup>nd</sup> overall on the official medal tally, therefore resulted in

a full review of that country's elite sport structure (Daly, 1991; Green & Collins, 2008; Green & Oakley, 2001).

An over-reliance on philanthropic funding was seen to have placed Australia out of step with countries providing athletes with generous amounts of public monies (Magdalinski, 2000). In order to ensure the on-going benefits of sportive nationalism, the Australian government therefore believed it needed to invest in the development of Australia's elite sport community. The establishment of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in 1981 highlighted the government's commitment to this new direction (Green & Collins, 2008). Mirrored on the Soviet model of elite sport development, the mandate of the AIS was made very clear - put the brakes on Australia's ailing international sporting reputation (Eggins, 1998). Consequently, AIS funds were directed towards the training and development of Australia's future sporting stars. Government funding for elite sport increased from A\$5.7 million in the year prior to the establishment of the AIS to A\$31.2 million in 1984 (Magdalinski, 2000). By 2008, A\$143 million was spent on elite sport development prior to the Beijing Olympic games (Taylor, 2008). The Australian government credited this significant increase in investment with Australia's move to sixth place on the medal table at this event.

Following the success of centralised elite sport systems like the AIS, the New Zealand Government similarly sought to increase its own investment into high

performance sport. Despite the critical role that elite sport was said to play in society, governmental reviews in 1985, 1995 and 2001 all acknowledged that elite athletes had been markedly underfunded by successive New Zealand governments (High Performance Sport Review Committee, 1995; Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001; Sports Development Inquiry Committee, 1985). Instead, previous New Zealand sport policy had typically focused on encouraging regular sport and physical activity participation for all New Zealanders (Collins & Jackson, 2007). Shifting global trends had, however, seen other nations invest increasingly large amounts of money into the development of high performance sport. As such there was a growing belief that New Zealand athletes were being left behind. With mounting public concern over the performances of New Zealand athletes, the Government commissioned a taskforce to assess the current state of sport within New Zealand. This taskforce was asked to provide recommendations for future sport initiatives. Released in January 2001, the *Getting Set for an Active Nation* report (Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001)—more widely known as the *Graham Report* in honour of Sir John Graham, the chairperson of the Ministerial Taskforce responsible for its publication—has had (and continues to have) major implications for the funding of New Zealand's high performance sport programmes.

Prior to the release of the *Graham Report*, Government involvement in sport and recreation in New Zealand had been marked by four major Acts of Parliament. The first of these dated back to the Physical Welfare and Recreation Act of 1937. This Act established the Physical Welfare and Recreation branch of the Department of Internal

Affairs, the main role of which was to ensure every citizen's right to recreation (Gidlow, Cushman & Perkins, 1995). Concerned about New Zealanders' low levels of physical fitness, the Act provided the New Zealand government with the power to allocate funds for building regional sport facilities (Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). Unfortunately, the onset of WWII, and a lack leadership within the organisation, meant that the government lost enthusiasm to further pursue the Act's agenda (Cushman, 1989).

It took until the early 1970s before politicians rekindled their interest in New Zealand's sport policy. During this time, participation in sport and recreation had been linked to a host of both social and economic virtues (Gidlow et al., 1995). Consequently, the Labour Government adopted the Recreation and Sport Act in 1973. This Act saw the establishment of both the Ministry and Council for Recreation and Sport. These organisations were tasked with promoting, encouraging, initiating and, in the case of the Ministry, funding sport and recreation programmes for the benefit of all New Zealanders (Cushman, 1989). While most people considered these organisations to have been effective during their 15 year reign, two government-orchestrated reviews in 1985 identified some crossover in their roles and responsibilities (Community Services Institute/Ministry of Recreation and Sport, 1985; Sports Development Inquiry Committee, 1985). As a result the government established the Hillary Commission for Recreation and Sport, in 1987. This independent and statutory body, or quango, replaced the two previous organisations

and took sole charge of the administration and operation of sport and recreation in New Zealand.

The Hillary Commission assumed the mandate of developing and encouraging sport and active living for all New Zealanders. In order to achieve this objective it set two major goals: to increase participation rates in sport, leisure and fitness, and to ensure New Zealand athletes achieved a high level of international sporting success (Hillary Commission, 2000). This focus on sporting achievement was a first for New Zealand sport policy. The *Sport on the move* report (Sports Development Inquiry Committee, 1985) had suggested that a significant financial investment would be needed to ensure that New Zealand remained a significant force on the international sporting arena. While New Zealand athletes had traditionally relied upon raw talent to get them to the top of their sport, increases in funding by other nations had meant that future chances for international sporting success were in jeopardy.

Prior to the Hillary Commission, private funding had been trying to fill this resource gap. In 1978, a group of New Zealand businessmen established the New Zealand Sports Foundation (NZSF) to assist and support New Zealand's elite athletes competing on the global stage (Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). As an independent entity, The NZSF provided grants to selected high performance athletes in order to assist their preparation and training for international sports events (Sports Development Inquiry Committee, 1985). The impact of this funding became

evident at the 1984 Olympic Games where New Zealand athletes won an unprecedented eight gold medals. Based on this success, *The winning way* review (High Performance Sport Review Committee, 1995) suggested that a partnership be developed between the public and private sector to best fund New Zealand's elite athletes. The Hillary Commission therefore began working in conjunction with the Sports Foundation to support New Zealand's elite athletes to achieve further sporting glory.

New Zealand politicians justified this expenditure by claiming that elite sporting success helped to create a more active and healthy nation, whilst also contributing to a strong sense of social cohesion and collective identity (Pringle, 2001; Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). Additionally, by the late 1980s the New Zealand government had started to recognise sporting success as a growing economic commodity. The *Sport on the move* report (Sports Development Inquiry Committee, 1985) had highlighted the potential of our top athletes to 'put New Zealand on the map', suggesting that sporting performances inspired international investment and increased tourism opportunities. The New Zealand government touted its expenditure of public money as being for the good of the nation and the general public appeared to agree. Several surveys conducted by the government revealed that sport, and elite sporting success in particular, was important to everyday New Zealanders, with as many as 94% of the population indicating they were involved in and/or interested in sport (CM Research, 2000; Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001).

In contrast to larger and wealthier nations, however, New Zealand's budget for supporting athlete development continued to be limited. Recognising the increasing costs associated with high performance sport, the *Sport on the move* report (Sports Development Inquiry Committee, 1985), and its later counterpart *The winning way* review (High Performance Sport Review Committee, 1995), highlighted the need to be strategic when funding elite sport in New Zealand. While other nations were able to offer widespread support for their athletes, such funding and investment was not considered viable within the New Zealand sport model. Instead, these reports called for tactical funding, suggesting that resources be targeted specifically towards those sports with the highest possible prospect of success (Sam, 2012). Arguing that the possibility of achieving success across all sporting disciplines at any one time was highly unlikely, the reports urged the New Zealand government to concentrate its resources on those sports with the highest potential for producing winning performances (High Performance Sport Review Committee, 1995; Sports Development Inquiry Committee, 1985). This rationalisation was again called for by the Ministerial Taskforce of 2001.

Lacklustre performances by athletes at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, and public scrutiny over the allocation of funding to elite sport, meant that the support, selection and preparation of New Zealand's athletes became the focus of a Ministerial Taskforce of Sport, Leisure and Fitness in the latter part of 2000 (Sam 2012; Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). The previously mentioned *Graham Report* set out to further restructure and centralise New Zealand's sport and recreation

environment. Specifically, it aimed to ensure that there was ‘one major voice’ leading all future policy direction in this area (Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001, p. 68). The organisation tasked with providing this voice was Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC). SPARC was established as a Crown entity under the Sport and Recreation Act of 2002 and was formed following the merger of the Hillary Commission, the Sports Foundation and the policy arm of the Office of Tourism and Sport. The *Graham Report* had suggested that such a merger was necessary as existing structures within the sport and recreation sector appeared to be fragmented (Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). With the establishment of SPARC sport policy, strategy development and delivery became the function of one central entity (SPARC, 2002).

SPARC’s aim was not only to make New Zealand the most active nation in the world, but also a country whose athletes consistently won on the international sporting stage. This latter goal was to become the focus of the New Zealand Academy of Sport (NZAS). As SPARC’s high performance sport arm, the NZAS was established to provide leadership and accountability for elite sport policy across New Zealand (SPARC, 2002). One of the key recommendations of the *Graham Report* was to restructure New Zealand’s athlete development and support programmes. Upon its establishment, the NZAS was therefore tasked with developing a national high performance sport system. With the help of a \$16 million dollar payment from the New Zealand government, the NZAS established high performance sport centres in Dunedin, Wellington and Auckland. These centres became bases from which to

coordinate the integrated delivery of world leading coaching, training and support services (Sam 2012; Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). This structure was further refined in 2007 when the NZAS moved to a two region model with a centre in the North and South Island (SPARC, 2006).

Each centre became responsible for the care and development of the ‘carded’ athletes and coaches based in their dedicated region. Athletes and coaches became carded after being identified by their national sporting organisation (NSO). Every year, SPARC allocated selected NSOs with predetermined amounts of funding specifically for developing elite athletes in their respective codes. NSOs then decided how this money would be assigned across the three levels of the NZAS carding system; level one being for world class athletes, level two being for national athletes and level three being for emerging athletes. In the year leading up to the London Olympic Games, around 600 athletes were part of the NZAS carding system (Carded athlete list, n.d.). Each of these athletes was provided with varying levels of access to the NZAS’s coaching, career education, sport science, and medical services. A proportion of these athletes were also provided with direct financial assistance. For instance, those athletes ranked within the top three in the world for their respective sports were awarded Performance Enhancement Grants (PEGs) of up to the value of \$40,000 (Taylor, 2008). These grants were established to help cover the cost of athletes’ living and training expenses.

The athlete carding system was designed after an extensive review of elite sport systems from around the world. It was proposed that a centralised intervention, offering a wide range of support services to both elite athletes and their coaches, would be the most cost effective way to improve athlete performances (Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). However, the *Graham Report* highlighted that for this initiative to be successful the New Zealand government needed to provide adequate financial resourcing. Research conducted by Hogan and Norton (2000) had revealed a linear relationship between government sport expenditure and gold medal performances; therefore, it seemed that no improvement would be possible without significant government backing. Although the Government, through SPARC, agreed to a substantial cash injection in order to get New Zealand's new integrated elite sport system up and running, it again acknowledged that previous efforts to fund elite sport had been spread too thin (Sam & Jackson, 2004).

Like previous reports, The *Graham Report* highlighted New Zealand's inability to successfully compete at the international level across a wide variety of sports. Instead, SPARC proposed to narrow investment to just a few selected sports, embracing a 'less is more' approach (Sam, 2012; Sam & Jackson, 2004). This meant prioritising depth over breadth, where SPARC would purposefully target those sports with multiple medal opportunities and/or so called 'achievable medals' (NZAS, 2005; Taylor, 2008). SPARC justified this strategy on the premise that New Zealand had a much smaller talent pool and lower levels of elite sport-based funding than most of its international competitors. The difference in this funding was highlighted when

comparing the \$34 million dollars that the New Zealand government invested into high performance sport during 2007 with the \$184 million that the Australian government invested over the same period of time (Taylor, 2008).

As a consequence of this significant funding gap, SPARC believed a targeted strategy would enable the maximum potential for a return on their investment (NZAS, 2005; Sam, 2012). SPARC therefore identified seven 'priority' and ten 'performance' sports which became the funding priorities of the NZAS (SPARC, 2004). These sports were chosen on the basis of their 'perceived importance' to the New Zealand public, as well as their potential to achieve results at events of national significance (e.g. World Cups and/or Olympic and Commonwealth Games). Athletes or teams that displayed the greatest likelihood of success at these events were provided with the highest levels of support. A contestable fund of further monies was also made available to those sports that fell outside of the 17 selected sports. This performance-based funding meant that athletes who improved their sporting performances were likely to be offered further levels of funding and carded services the following year. However, individuals whose performances failed to meet SPARC's required standards were at risk of having any, or all, of their support revoked or reduced.

As with many athlete development programmes, the New Zealand carding system has been implemented by administrators who, while purporting to want the best for their athletes, continue to see them as 'assets' requiring careful investment, management

and surveillance. In so doing, such organisations rarely provide athletes with a voice to question or critique these very initiatives. While the carding programme has been in place for more than a decade, researchers are yet to comprehensively explore carded (and non-carded) athletes' experiences within its system. This is perhaps surprising given the impact that such policies can have on the lived experiences of those they affect. In this instance, SPARC's funding policy has the potential to impact the sport experience of all New Zealanders by prioritising elite, high performance sport over recreational and community-based activity programmes. Performance-based funding also restricts access and/or the availability of support to a few select athletes in particular sports. Researchers have acknowledged that limiting funding in this manner can have real consequences at the operational level of an NSO (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013; Sam & Jackson, 2004). For example, with funding reassessed on a year to year basis, NSOs can struggle to engage in long-term strategic planning. Perhaps most significantly, however, is the control that the carding system exerts over New Zealand's talented athlete population. Once part of the carding system, athletes are confronted with various external pressures and performance expectations which impact on their daily choices. Despite this, SPARC and the NZAS have ignored the significance of such decisions beyond their influence on an individual's athletic potential.

New Zealand's elite athletes therefore appear to be a previously silenced population, with little effort having been made to discover what these individuals actually experience as part of the carded athlete programme. In order to gain authentic

representations of athletes' experience, researchers are encouraged to explore participant interactions from the context in which they occur (De Fina & Perrino, 2011; Neale, Henwood, & Holland, 2012). This approach enables researchers to gain an insider's understanding of what life is actually like within the particular social environment. It is, after all, only individuals within this context who can tell their story with any real degree of accuracy.

The silenced, in becoming producers, analysts and presenters of their own narratives, cease to be the objects of their histories and knowledge. They are instead enabled to become agents of the stories which are produced and consumed about them, and the agents and instruments of their own change processes (Lincoln, 1993, p. 43).

Exploring a previously silenced population in this manner, therefore, creates a more complete and detailed picture of the individual realities of participants' lives. In so doing, researchers are then able to address the meaning behind actions from the perspective of those who actually produce them (Pope, 2007). Consequently, as I wished to uncover life within New Zealand's carded athlete system, it was important to do so from the perspective of the athletes themselves. The current research project therefore sought to examine athletes' individual experiences from within this system, thereby giving voice to those who lie at the heart of the NZAS carding model.

## **Literature Review**

The journey to sporting greatness is far from a simplistic rite of passage (Marthinus, 2007). In fact most elite athletes insist that their sporting talents stem more from hard work and planning than innate gifts or physical characteristics (Stevenson, 1990a). Subsequently, individuals typically credit their sporting success to perseverance and personal sacrifice as opposed to foregone inevitability. However, as the standard of elite level sport has increased, so too have these sacrifices. Elite athletes are now required to invest huge amounts of time and energy in order to achieve the level of results expected of them (Price, Morrison, & Arnold, 2010). Such efforts can significantly impact on an individual's career development and personal identity. This chapter will present a focused and selective review of current literature in the area of athlete career development. It will also address the consequences of choosing this career path, on the formation of one's identity.

### ***Athlete Career Development***

During their careers, elite athletes go through a period of general, and then specific, training as they are recruited, selected and socialised into the sporting role (Hodge, Pierce, Taylor, & Button, 2012; Salmela, 1994; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). An athlete's career is therefore typically represented by a succession of stages, which can present at any moment, and reflect the individual's development over time (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a). These stages indicate periods of adjustment within the athlete's career and are thought to be common, regardless of the athlete's sport, nationality,

experience or gender (Cote, 1999; Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004). The successful negotiation of each of these stages ensures that an individual reaches his or her full athletic potential. The process by which this negotiation occurs therefore describes what is commonly known as an athlete's career development.

A number of researchers have examined the developmental steps required to foster a successful athletic career, resulting in the creation of various models depicting the athlete career pathway. Since the 1990s, however, a shift in understanding around the development of sporting talent has seen many of these models move away from an emphasis on the innate parts of talent development to instead focus on the more acquired parts of the developmental process (Durand-Bush & Samela, 2001; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). Consequently, recent theoretical frameworks examining athlete career development have highlighted the lengthy process through which talent is eventually realised. In so doing, these models emphasise a 'life-span', or 'whole career', perspective to athletic involvement (Stambulova, 2010; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Similarly, this shifting focus has also acknowledged how transitions, both from within and outside of the sport environment, can impact upon an athlete's life (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009).

Seminal work by Bloom (1985) was one of the first pieces of research which utilised this more inclusive theoretical framework. Examining the process of talent

development in an assortment of world class performers (scientists, artists, mathematicians, musicians, swimmers and tennis players), Bloom uncovered consistent approaches to talent development across these varied and diverse fields. In particular, Bloom recognised that each individual's career appeared to involve three distinct stages of learning: the early years, where individuals were introduced to their respective domains and were then recognised as being talented; the middle years, where they became dedicated to their talent domain through increased training and specialisation; and then the later years, where they reached their highest level of skill proficiency. Each stage represented a specific period of adjustment for the talented performer, where increasing levels of commitment, practice, energy, and time were invested into their particular area of expertise. Bloom's stages have gone on to form the basis of other career stage models of talent development such as the developmental model of sports participation (Cote, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009; Cote & Schwartz, 2002), the model of expert athletic performance (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002), the analytic athletic career model (Stambulova, 1994, 2000), and the development model of transitions (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004).

Cote's (2002) developmental model of sports participation stemmed from an in-depth analysis of the family conditions surrounding young athletes striving towards elite sport participation. Interviews conducted with athletes, their parents and siblings identified three distinct stages of participation as athletes moved through early childhood to late adolescence. Cote called these phases the sampling years, the specialisation years and the investment years. Although similar to the stages in

Bloom's model, each of Cote's stages was attributed to a particular age range. As such, Cote suggested that his model was more representative of talent development in sport than was Bloom's more generic talent model. Additionally, Cote's model acknowledged the accompanying shifts from deliberate play to deliberate practice as one moved through the model, a change he considered to be necessary if one was to become an elite sporting performer. For instance, the sampling years, which occur between the ages of 6 and 13, consisted of voluntary involvement in a wide range of enjoyable physical activities with a focus on deliberate play. The specialisation years, occurring between the ages of 13 and 15, marked the period when athletes gradually reduced their involvement in a range of extra-curricular activities in favour of one or two more specific sports. Lastly, the investment years, which are said to begin at approximately 15 years of age, heralded an increased commitment to deliberate practice in one single activity.

With each of these three stages occurring before the athlete reaches the age of 18, Cote (1999) suggested that there was also possibly another stage, coined the 'perfection' or 'performance' years, whereby athletes maintained and perfected their skills following their investment years. Research examining the careers of double Olympic and/or world champions, conducted by Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002), found similar evidence to suggest the possibility of a fourth developmental stage. These authors proposed the existence of a maintenance phase to explain the stage of an athlete's career where he or she had reached the pinnacle of their sport and yet still continued to train and compete in order to further develop their athletic performance.

This phase was also where athletes attempted to deal with life after reaching the highest level in their sport, including the increased performance expectations often associated with this level of achievement (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002).

Rather than just focusing on the specific stages attributed to an athlete's career development, other researchers have chosen to examine this concept in terms of the normative transitions associated with involvement in the sporting domain (Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a). Stambulova (1994, 2000) saw the athlete career as a series of predictable and anticipated transitions occurring both in and outside of one's sport environment. Her research examining the career transitions of over 200 Russian athletes, from a range of sport specialisations, revealed six specific crossroads that athletes went through as they progressed along their sporting journey. These transitions included the beginning of sport specialisation, the transition into more intensive training, the transition into high achievement and adult sports, the transition from amateur to professional sports, the transition from culmination to the end of the sports career, and the end of the sports career. Stambulova (2000) felt that a transition occurs when an athlete leaves one stage and successfully enters another. She attributed a failure to cope with any of these transitions with an inability to balance sport goals and other life goals or challenges (Stambulova et al., 2009). These authors therefore advocated for the need to balance one's sporting career with other aspects of one's life including school, work and interpersonal relationships.

Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) suggested that coping difficulties may also arise due to the possibility of numerous life transitions occurring at any given moment. Specifically, while they supported Bloom's idea of three talent development stages, these authors recognised the stages and transitions occurring in an athlete's individual, psycho-social and academic-vocational environments. They argued that progression through each of these transitions was closely linked to whether an athlete continued along their sporting path. Consequently, these authors felt that it was important to examine athletic careers alongside other transitions that may be occurring across the athlete's life. Embracing this approach, Wylleman et al. (2004) therefore crafted a talent development model that consisted of four interacting layers. The top layer of the model represented the three stages of talent development identified by Bloom (1985), as well as a discontinuation stage proposed by Taylor and Ogilvie (2001) which reflected the transition out of the competitive sporting environment. The second layer of the model depicted the developmental stages associated with psychological growth (childhood, adolescence and adulthood), while the third layer represented the psychosocial developmental changes that occur as one continues on the sporting journey. For instance, the shifting interpersonal relationships and connections an athlete develops with family, parents, peers, partners and coaches. Lastly, the final layer of the model represented the athlete's transition through academic and vocational training, such as moving from primary to secondary to tertiary study, before entering the workforce.

By incorporating this more balanced view of an athlete's life, Wylleman et al.'s (2004) model recognises the interactive and interrelated nature of transitions, both in and outside of the athlete's sport environment. Erpic et al. (2004) suggested that these aspects seem mutually interdependent when considering the topic of career transitions. For instance, athletes moving from a senior to an elite sport environment may also concurrently be making the psychological transition from adolescence to adulthood, as well as moving into tertiary education. The potential for multiple transitions occurring at any one time can, however, lead to increased levels of stress being placed upon the athlete (Park, Tod, & Lavallee, 2012; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). As such, Wylleman et al.'s (2004) model proposes that an athlete should be viewed as a person doing sports and emphasises the importance of developing the athlete career in conjunction with other spheres within an individual's life. This more holistic focus suggests that sport psychologists should tailor their approach to "reflect the developmental, interactive and interdependent nature of transitions and stages faced by individual athletes" (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, p. 517).

Sport psychologists have long recognised the need to help athletes prepare for and negotiate potential career transitions (Mateos, Torregrosa, & Cruz, 2008; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b; Stambulova et al., 2009). In fact, such challenges have been the driving force behind many of the career assistance programmes established across the globe. Shifting theoretical views have meant that these programmes are increasingly trying to address service provision from a 'whole person' perspective, emphasising

individuality and focusing on athletic participation as well as lifestyle support and educational/vocational training (Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Park et al., 2012; Stambulova, 2012). In so doing, career assistance programmes now help athletes to find ways to balance their sporting careers around demands associated with other areas of their lives. Consequently, these programmes work to ensure that athletes can successfully cope with the varied and diverse transitions that they may face over the course of their careers.

### ***Athlete Career Transitions***

The term transition has been defined as “an event or non-event [which] results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Although this definition was developed to describe the concept of life transitions, a number of sport researchers have adapted this definition to fit within the athletic setting (e.g. Baillie & Danish, 1992; Debois, Ledon, Argiolas, & Rosnet, 2012; Wylleman et al., 2004). While Schlossberg’s original definition still holds favour, transitions in sport are now viewed in terms of being part of a process of coping rather than a response to one singular situation, event or non-event (Stambulova, 2012; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Similarly, researchers have advocated that as sports career transitions are influenced by both athletic and non-athletic factors, they should be considered alongside transitions occurring in all spheres of the athlete’s life (Debois et al., 2012; Erpic et al., 2004; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a,

2013). These important developments in the body of athletic career research have meant that athletic transitions are now considered to be part of a multi-dimensional, multi-level and multi-factorial process.

The majority of early transition research within the sport context focused on the impact of elite athletes' transition out of sport (e.g. Baillie & Danish, 1992; Mihovilovic, 1968; Ogilvie & Howe, 1986; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Changing developmental perspectives, which emphasise the whole person lifespan perspective of athlete career development, have, however, led to a departure from this exclusive focus (Bruner, Erickson, McFadden, & Cote, 2009; Cosh et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2009). Consequently, there has been an increased push for research focusing on within-sport transitions, including those transitions occurring both in and outside of the sport environment (Debois et al., 2012; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b, 2013; Stambulova, 2010; Wylleman et al., 2004). Pearson and Petitpas (1990) felt this new focus was especially important due to the high number of transitions that athletes have to negotiate throughout the course of their careers. These transitions can often create conflict between 'what the athlete is' and 'what the athlete wants to be'. As such, learning how to adjust and navigate through these sometimes challenging situations ensures that an athlete is able to maintain an on-going successful career within their sport (Stambulova, Stephan, & Japhag, 2007).

This coping process depends not only on the individual but also the social resources available to the athlete (Debois et al., 2012; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2013; Stambulova, 2010, 2012). As transitions are inevitable and often unpredictable, Abbott and Collins (2004) suggested that as an individual moves through the various stages of their talent development, effective support must be on offer to enable successful transitions across these various junctures. Consequently, career assistance programmes work to develop both individual coping strategies as well as social resources to ensure athletes are able to make the necessary adaptations throughout the transition process (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2013; Stambulova, 2010; Stambulova et al., 2009). Of particular focus within these programmes is the development of transferable skills that athletes can adapt into their sport retirement (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003). Stambulova et al. (2009) found that helping athletes actively cope with career transitions during their sport involvement enabled them to more effectively adjust to a post-sport career lifestyle upon their retirement. Similarly, Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte (2004) suggested that athletes who spent time developing and planning their careers throughout their sport participation were better able to utilise available resources than athletes who had not spend time contemplating their futures. When examining athletic careers, however, it appears that different resources are required at different stages of an athlete's sporting involvement. It is therefore important to examine athletic careers on the basis of these distinctive life and career stages.

### *Athletic Career Initiation*

As noted earlier, the majority of athletic career research has previously focused on transitions out of the sport environment. A pivotal transition period that has, however, received far less attention occurs when an aspiring athlete enters into the elite sport environment. This is a critical phase in an athlete's career development as it sets the scene for an individual's future sport involvement (Cosh et al., 2013). In order to gain a complete understanding of an athlete's career, one therefore needs to account for this early exposure and experience within the sport environment (Baillie & Danish, 1992). Eccles and Barber (1999) acknowledged that choosing to engage in an activity, such as sport participation, is part of a much larger system influenced by both psychological and social forces. In particular, these choices are impacted upon by what is considered to be appropriate by significant others within the individual's life (Callero, 1985; Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavalley, 2009). Athletes perceived the social support on offer from significant others within their environment as one of the most important resources impacting on their athletic careers. Specifically, athletes attributed their initial participation in sport to the involvement and interest of family, friends and coaches (Coakley, 2006; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Harrison & Narayan, 2003; Keegan et al., 2009; Lau, Fox, & Cheung, 2005; Palomo-Nieto, Ruiz-Perez, Sanchez-Sanchez, & Garcia-Coll, 2011; Proios, 2012; Stevenson, 1990a; Videon, 2002).

Families also provide important practical support once athletes become involved in their sport (Bloom, 1985; Coakley, 2006; Cote, 1999; Hodge et al., 2012; Keegan et al., 2009; Palomo-Nieto et al., 2011). For instance, it is most often family members who provide transport to training and events, cover the financial costs of equipment and coaching and offer emotional support and encouragement. In fact, Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, and Spink (2008) referred to the familial commitment required during these initial stages of an athlete's sporting involvement as being somewhat daunting for many parents. As well as family, coaches and teachers provide an additional form of support during the early stages of an athlete's career. Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen's (1993) research, examining the development of 200 talented high school students, found that athletes were required to develop a disciplined personality in order to deal with the opportunities and challenges they would face as their career evolved. The athletes in Csikszentmihalyi et al.'s study believed that these skills were fostered and nurtured as a direct result of their involvement with supportive teachers, coaches and parents. Subsequent qualitative investigations examining the lives of Olympic medal winners (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002) and former elite equestrian riders (Pummell et al., 2008) have further identified the important role that adults play in the sport environment. As athletes move into their adolescence, the influence of one's peer group also becomes increasingly important. Elite Australian athletes interviewed by Abernathy, Cote, and Barker (2002) reported that their passion for sport grew from having their friends involved during the early stages of their career. Similarly, elite athletes interviewed by Hodge et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of being surrounded by likeminded peers.

Regardless of who, or what, first encouraged elite athletes to begin their athletic participation, individuals who go on to succeed in this domain quickly come to internalise an athletic identity (Haggard & Williams, 1992; Pederson, 2001). Lally and Kerr (2005) felt that the strength of this identity is compounded by the fact that it forms during one's developmental years. Committing to the elite sport role early in one's life can create a potential site for personal struggle (Marthinus, 2007). Specifically, as the majority of athletes embrace this role during their adolescence, they are concurrently faced with changes occurring in other aspects of their daily lives. As mentioned previously, the potential for multiple transitions places a high demand on an athlete's personal resources and leaves them vulnerable to stress and emotional disturbances (Park et al., 2012; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Each of these transitions therefore requires an athlete to cope and move forward with their sporting participation, or alternatively cease their involvement at this level (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Collins & MacNamara, 2012).

### ***Transition into Elite Athlete Retirement***

A common characteristic of all athletic careers is that it must eventually come to an end. Athletic career termination is therefore thought to be a normative, and typically predictable, sport transition (Stambulova, 2010; Stambulova et al., 2007). The termination of an athlete's career can result from a multitude of reasons. For some athletes, retirement stems from the inevitable decline of their physical prowess (Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). This natural part of the

maturation process often coincides with a corresponding loss of motivation, as well as a shift in one's values and priorities (Erpic et al., 2004; Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Each of these changes means that athletes eventually move away from competitive sports participation to focus on other aspects of their lives (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Sport retirement therefore becomes a time for considerable adjustment, reasoning and decision making (Park et al., 2012; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wippert & Wippert, 2010). However, far from being a reaction to a single event, career termination typically occurs over an extended period of time. Researchers have subsequently begun to see the end of an athlete's career as a process affected by factors both internal and external to the sport environment (Erpic et al., 2004; Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Park et al., 2012; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman et al., 2004). Torregrossa, Boxados, Valiente, and Cruz (2004) felt that the more an athlete sees sport retirement in this light, the smoother it will be. This is particularly important as retirement from competitive sport can heavily impact upon an athlete's future well-being and development (Erpic et al., 2004; Stoltenburg, Kamphoff, & Bremer, 2011; Wippert & Wippert, 2010).

Despite the inevitability of athlete career termination, athletes do not respond to this process in an identical manner (Blinde & Strata, 1992; Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Historically, athlete retirement has been looked upon as being a negative, and at times a disruptive and traumatic, life event (Archer, 2010; Baillie & Danish, 1992; Stambulova et al., 2009). During their investigation of the retirement experiences of successful Olympic athletes, Werthner and Orlick (1986)

found that 78.6% of athletes they interviewed experienced some degree of difficulty in transitioning into a post-sport lifestyle. Other research has shown athletes transitioning out of sport participation suffer from identity crisis (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), decreased self-esteem (Werthner & Orlick, 1986), feelings of anger, anxiety and depression (Alfermann & Gross, 1997), as well as loneliness and decreased life satisfaction (Erpic et al., 2004). McPherson (1984), however, argued that sport retirement is not necessarily a precursor to stress and physical, personal or social disenchantment. More recently it has also been recognised that not all athletes face difficulty upon their retirement, therefore suggesting that previous research has failed to account for differences in individuals' sport retirement experiences (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008). Sinclair and Orlick (1993) contend that the biggest factor impacting on how an athlete responds to disengaging from the elite sport lifestyle is the perceived reason for which they are actually retiring.

Baillie and Danish (1992) suggested that if an athlete voluntarily chooses and plans for retirement, they will face few disruptions during this career transition. In such cases, athletes typically feel in control and believe that their life will change for the better upon retiring (Marthinus, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Similarly, athletes who gradually submitted to the process of sport retirement were also seen to transition into their eventual retirement with relative ease, experiencing positive cognitive, emotional and behavioural adaptations (Alfermann et al., 2004; Lally, 2007; Lavalley, 2005; Park et al., 2012; Stambulova et al., 2007). In stark contrast,

however, are those athletes whose careers end unexpectedly due to injury, being dropped from a team or squad, or whose sports programme loses funding and is suddenly eliminated. Such an unexpected end to one's sporting career can leave athletes experiencing significant life disruption and emotional trauma (Alfermann et al., 2004; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2007; Wippert & Wippert, 2010). Similarly, athletes who retire due to poor performance, or without reaching their sporting goals, often experience more difficulty than those individuals who retire feeling happy with the success of their athletic careers (Erpic et al., 2004; Park et al., 2012). Athletes in Sinclair and Orlick's (1993) study attributed this lack of coping to perceptions of personal failure.

While many of these disruptions are often the result of factors outside an athlete's immediate control, there is still an opportunity to prepare for such an eventuality. Unfortunately, most athletes seem to be unwilling to consider their life after sport, particularly during the early stages of their careers. Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing, and Cummings (1993) found that 45% of athletes do not think about life after their sport. And, although many countries now offer training programmes designed for athletes approaching the ends of their careers, very few athletes appear to be utilising these services. For instance, Gorely, Lavalley, Bruce, Teale, and Lavalley (2001) found that less than 1% of athletes within the Australian Institute of Sport system made use of the career transition service on offer to them as members of this programme. Such reluctance to develop plans for one's future indicates the lack of importance that athletes typically place upon their retirement, early on in their careers. Instead of

wondering about the end of their sporting participation, athletes' energies and foci appear to be diverted to the transitions and issues immediately relevant to their lives at that time.

When athletes begin to consider their sporting immortality, there is often a marked increase in post-sport career planning (Park et al., 2012). A study by North and Lavalley (2004) found that 79% of elite athletes who believed that they would retire within the next 1-2 years had begun to make plans for this retirement. These athletes were also far less likely to want to increase the time they devoted to their training, instead suggesting that work outside of their sports careers was becoming increasingly important. This research does, therefore, indicate that retirement planning eventually becomes important to athletes; however, the age at which this planning begins varies greatly and depends on the career stage of the athlete. Additional differences also existed depending on the sport and gender of the individual concerned. As these factors mean that athletes approach planning for their retirement differently, the timing of any pre-retirement intervention is therefore crucial to its eventual success (Park et al., 2012; Petitpas & Champagne, 1998).

One purpose of pre-retirement planning or career education programmes is to help athletes accrue the necessary skills to smoothly transition into life after sport (Alfermann et al., 2004; Henry, 2013; Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008). These skills can include the development of educational and occupational opportunities, as well as

creating a wide and varied social network (Erpic et al., 2004). Surrounding the athlete with a supportive environment during this process is also influential in creating a positive retirement transition (Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Lally and Kerr (2005) reported that many student athletes feared retirement would alienate them from their sporting peers. Therefore, most athlete development programmes place importance on developing a strong social support system outside of one's friendships with fellow competitors. Providing a meaningful focus on something away from the elite sport environment, like friendships with people outside of their sport, also allows athletes the opportunity to redirect their energies and attention as they prepare for life after sport. Stephan et al. (2003) found that athletes used this redirection to distract themselves from any feelings of emptiness related to the cessation of their sporting involvement. Werthner and Orlick (1986) also found that athletes who had established a new life focus, prior to their retirement, experienced a far smoother transition period than those athletes who had no new goals to look forward to upon retirement. Providing athletes with opportunities to develop passions away from their sport therefore helps them to remain optimistic and hopeful while still confronting the end of their sporting careers.

Despite these possibilities, some athletes feared that their post-sport life would fail to provide the accolades and fulfilment on offer from their elite sport involvement. For instance, gymnasts in Lavalley and Robinson's (2007) study expressed the desire to find something that provided them with the same level of satisfaction and stimulation as their gymnastics career, but found this search incredibly difficult due to their

limited experiences outside of the sport environment. Similarly, these gymnasts feared becoming just like everyone else upon their retirement. It seems that whilst most athletes looked forward to the increased freedom associated with moving out of the elite sport environment, they also recognised this newly-found lack of structure would be difficult to adjust to (Tracey & Elcombe, 2004). Stephan et al. (2003) therefore highlighted the need to build more autonomy and variety into athletes' lives in preparation for their post-sport careers.

As the commitment required for elite sport involvement is often intense, athletes can also become engulfed by their identification with the athlete role (Baillie, 1993; Marthinus, 2007; Price et al., 2010). This can be particularly problematic if athletes are unprepared for this role to become threatened. In such circumstances, athletes are often forced to assume new life roles, something that they may not be ready to accept (Blinde & Strata, 1992). Some retiring athletes describe this feeling as being caught between their past athletic pursuits and their new non-athletic life (Lally, 2007). As such, it appears as though sport retirement can create a period where the individual's identity becomes suspended. Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) believed this struggle is intensified if athletes are left to negotiate this career change later in life. In such cases, athletes often flounder to find a new identity while their similarly-aged peers (outside of sport involvement) have successfully negotiated this stage much earlier in their lives.

It therefore seems that for athletes to effectively move both within and out of their sport environment, they not only need to have developed a strong sense of who they are as an athlete, but also who they are as a person. In so doing, athletes will be better equipped to negotiate the many and varied transitions that they will face over the course of their athletic careers. The next section of the literature review will address the concept of identity formation, further examine the risks of assuming a uni-dimensional sense of self and suggest ways that elite sportspeople can prevent becoming engulfed within the athlete role.

### ***Identity and Identity Formation***

Personal identities provide a standard, or frame of reference, from which we can interpret the world around us (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Stanley & Robbins, 2011). Consisting of the composite roles that we play in society, our identity is made up of unique characteristics, beliefs and abilities (Groff & Kleiber, 2001; Horton & Mack, 2000; Marcia, 1980; Miller, 2009; Shoemaker, 2006). It is these attributes that help to distinguish individuals within society. As identities are developed, confirmed and maintained through our social interactions, they also help to guide our behaviour as we interact within our environment (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Carless & Douglas, 2013). Essentially, our identity therefore helps us make sense of, and find our place in, a world of limitless daily choices and possibilities (Garcia, 2012; Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010; Sturm, Feltz, & Gilson, 2011). The better developed this anchor system is, the more we are aware of our strengths and weaknesses. Conversely, the

less developed this system is, the more we rely on other people for confirmation of our individual self-worth (Marcia, 1980). Due to the importance of one's identity, the identity formation process has therefore been a focus for many researchers from around the world.

Building on Erickson's original notions of identity, recent theoretical development of identity formation has largely relied upon Marcia's (1966) concept of the four underlying identity statuses: moratorium, achievement, foreclosure, and diffusion. Although originally developed as a methodological tool to explore the notion of identity, identity status theory is now an acknowledged contributor to, and explanation of, identity formation (Marcia, 1980). Each status is said to represent a different approach toward reaching the formation process. In particular, the moratorium status involves the active search for an identity direction; achievement represents the process of consolidating a researched and chosen sense of identity; foreclosure involves commitment to a role identity without exploration of other potential options; and diffusion refers to an apathy and lack of concern over identity issues in general (Schwartz, 2005). Underpinning these four statuses are the dimensions of exploration and commitment. Exploration involves actively sorting through a variety of potential identity choices, while commitment defines the reflective process of deciding to invest in one or more of these sets of ideas, beliefs and values (Schwartz, 2005). Selecting a personal identity is best done when one has sufficient information and experience to ensure an accurate and appropriate decision can be made (Petitpas, Champagne, Chartrand, Danish, & Murphy, 1997).

Each of Marcia's statuses is assumed to operate across a variety of contextual domains and each has been used to explain behavioural choices and experimentation within a wide range of environments. However, although the achievement and moratorium statuses both involve high levels of identity exploration, the foreclosure and diffusion statuses do not. The foreclosure status is particularly problematic in that it involves an individual prematurely committing to an identity ideal without first exploring all alternative options (Adler & Adler, 1989; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996; Sparkes, 1998). Such decisions typically result in an individual conceding to a socially accepted role identity at the expense of discovering who they truly are (Petitpas, 1978). If this foreclosed identity is in conflict with the individual's true beliefs and values, they are then at risk of experiencing behavioural and emotional disturbances.

Foreclosure is less likely to occur, however, if one's identity make up is continually examined, rather than simply assumed (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991). In fact, researchers have suggested that on-going role evaluation and experimentation is essential for both learning about oneself and developing a healthy sense of self (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Schwartz, 2005). As such, identity formation has more recently been thought of as a flexible and dynamic process where elements are continually being added and discarded (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Even when one has reached the status of identity achievement, these roles and beliefs should continue to be explored for their suitability to different environmental contexts. Therefore, rather than just accepting any given identity, every individual should engage in the lifelong process of

continually cultivating their sense of self in order to ensure healthy and adaptive identity development (Albion & Fogarty, 2005; Haggard & Williams, 1992).

By encouraging this type of on-going exploration, a person's identity is far from a static, differentiated structure. Instead, the concept of identity is more typically described as a multi-dimensional and dynamic entity (Maguire, 2011). Specifically, the self is thought to be composed of a variety of parts or what McCall and Simmons (1966) coined as 'role identities'. McCall and Simmons described these self-definitions as the characteristics and roles one devises for oneself as an occupant of a particular social position. As an individual engages in a particular context, and integrates the related images of this activity within his/her self-perception, role identities are being formed (Garcia, 2012; Groff & Kleiber, 2001). Identity formation therefore involves incorporating each of the meanings and expectations associated with these roles into one's daily life (Stets & Burke, 2000). For instance, people whose identities include the role of athlete, mother and/or university student will exhibit behavioural choices that are congruent with occupancy of these particular social roles.

As people are typically embedded within multiple role relationships, they often hold multiple role identities. Not all of these identities are, however, active at any one particular time or situation (Cassidy & Trew, 2001; Stanley & Robbins, 2011). Flux between role identities is dependent upon interpersonal interactions and the depth and

intensity of these relationships. As people act out the behaviours associated with their role identities, they may or may not have these identities reinforced and validated by those individuals around them (Anderson & Cychosz, 1995). Role identities that are positively reinforced by significant others are more likely to be evoked more often. Likewise, the more a person's social relationships are based upon the occupancy of a particular role, the more salient a role enactment will become (Garcia, 2012; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The contexts in which role enactments surface are also significant, as not all role identities are important in all situations. Instead, role identities exist within a structural hierarchy, varying in their degree of importance (Weiss, 2001). The more salient the role identity, the more likely it will influence behaviour in a given situation (Curry & Weaner, 1987; Jackson, 1981; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Additionally, the more dominant the role identity, the more likely it will be expressed or used to interpret a particular situation (Horton & Mack, 2000).

Individuals who exhibit multiple role identities can enact and derive satisfaction from a specific role in any given situation (Killeya-Jones, 2005). Likewise, one can gain additional benefits from all other available roles during that same situation. However, if an individual becomes overly dependent upon a particular role identity, or simultaneous role identities are perceived to be competing and/or contradictory, identity and related emotional disturbances are likely to ensue. Often this type of role conflict leads to the individual withdrawing from one or more of the disputed role identities (Adler & Adler, 1989). Individuals who become engulfed in this sort of exclusive focus run the risk of limiting their exploration of other contextual domains.

In so doing, these individuals reduce the likelihood of maintaining a multi-dimensional (read balanced) sense of self. This becomes particularly problematic if this selected identity is at all threatened in any way, leaving little for the individual to fall back on.

### ***Identity and Interactionism***

The importance of creating and confirming multiple role identities is also recognised by the interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969). Although discussed in more detail during a later chapter, interactionists are interested in why people select the role identities that they do, especially given the variety of alternative role options available at any one moment (Weiss, 2001). The interactionist perspective portrays humans as actively engaging in the development of their identities whenever they participate in social interaction (Maguire, 2011). In this sense, we use the world around us to guide our choices and decisions, aided by socially constructed norms and values associated with particular role identities (Miller, 2009; Shaw, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1995; Weiss, 2001). Evaluations of one's self, society and role performance are therefore dependent upon the way in which an individual interprets their social world. These interpretations are constantly subject to alteration via the process of social interaction (Leonard & Schmitt, 1987). We learn what is required by exploring the significant symbols, values and beliefs associated with each specific role (Kivel, 1998; Weiss, 2001). By embracing and maintaining these, and other, norms and

expectations, each of us reaffirms the complex social categories that help to structure the world around us (Stets & Burke, 2000).

The impact of social interaction means that role identities are contingent upon a variety of different circumstances and effects; such as time and context (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Stevenson, 1990b). Weiss (2001) suggested that an examination of individuals' interactions over time would reveal a multitude of identities, each with its own varying degree of salience and individual meaning. As previously suggested, while some role identities are long lasting, others quickly fade and diminish. The interactionist perspective contends that the process by which one chooses to sustain, or adapt, one's role identities is contingent upon a cost-benefit evaluation of the consequences for meeting or breaking these ideals (Stevenson, 1990a). Individuals are therefore actively involved in the decision making process of determining and confirming which role identities they are most attached to. This process involves wanting to maximise the potential for material, social and emotional rewards, whilst minimising any potential cost of a particular role involvement (Stevenson, 2002).

Prus's model of career contingencies was developed in order to explain this decision making process (Prus & Irini, 1980). Due to its interactionist underpinnings, this model is grounded in the belief that humans are active, self-reflective beings (Stevenson, 2002). Therefore, humans are thought to be the central component in formulating all behaviour or career choices. Prus's four stage model depicts the ways

in which people become involved in, maintain and discontinue these career or role pursuits. In particular, the model consists of an initial involvement, and then the stages of continuity, disinvolvement and possible reinvolvement in any given role/career. Initial involvement explains how individuals are brought into a particular role, while continuity involves the process by which this involvement is intensified (Prus, 1984). Disinvolvement occurs when individuals experience disenchantment with any of these previously mentioned stages; however, the future potential for reinvolvement at any later point means that role cessation is a process rather than any finite entity. The goal of Prus's model was to emphasise the process, participant meanings and components required to undertake a career within the social world (Prus, 1984). It also places particular importance on the formation of an individual's identity.

The key components of initial involvement and continuity are heavily contingent upon the construction of an appropriate sub-cultural identity, as well as the confirmation of this identity by significant others (Donnelly & Young, 1988). As previously described, identity theorists emphasise the role that others play in establishing role identities, as well as reinforcing these labels once they have become established. As with Marcia's model, involvement is never final, rather social support and a favourable outlook is continually required in order to confirm one's role identities. Expectations and entanglements also ensure that an individual cements him or herself within a particular role. These can take the form of relationships with other people, as well as the commitments and responsibilities required of a particular role

enactment (Stevenson, 1990a). Any withdrawal or shift in resources can lead to an eventual disengagement. Therefore, all of Prus's components act to consolidate and reinforce an individual's decision to remain involved within the particular activity, and in so doing determine the individual's future behaviour.

### ***Sport Involvement and Identity Formation***

As sport mirrors society, Prus's model can also be useful in examining an individual's commitment to the sporting realm. Specifically, research has demonstrated that continued involvement within elite sport is contingent upon continued athletic success and earning the acceptance of significant others within the athlete's environment (Coakley, 1993; Donnelly & Young, 1988, Garcia, 2012; Horton & Mack, 2000; Maguire, 2011). The more rewards associated with an athletic role, the greater the individual's incentive and desire is towards maintaining that role (Stevenson, 1990a). Involvement is further consolidated through Prus's notion of reputations and identities. If favourable, one's commitment to the task is enhanced. Seminal work by Coleman (1961) and McPherson (1980), examining subcultures within adolescent society, identified the high status given to athletic involvement. Similar studies, conducted more recently (e.g. Eccles & Barber, 1999; Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell, & Sabo, 2005), have confirmed the elevated position that sport still holds within society. Such high regard for sporting prowess therefore validates the athlete role as a favourable role identity. In so doing, individuals are far more likely to consolidate this identity, embracing the role's characteristic behaviours

and shaping their subsequent activity choices to mirror these norms (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003).

Frequent trainings, team rituals and other social and fitness-related requirements common to sport participation further perpetuate this role consolidation (Stevenson, 2002; Sturm et al., 2011). Athletes can easily become entangled within these obligations and responsibilities due to the physical and psychological energy requirements linked to this particular role (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Price et al., 2010). As such, Pearson and Petitpas (1990) suggested that Marcia and Erickson's idea of role exploration may be incompatible within the world of elite athletics. Additionally, although athletes continue to actively reflect and make choices about each of these commitments, the further along the career path the more entangled they become. Despite media assumptions that the elite sport journey is a somehow preordained, effortless task it therefore appears that the road to sport stardom is a more arduous path (Coakley & Donnelly, 1999). An athlete's ability to navigate this road, while still maintaining a strong multi-dimensional sense of self, will be explored in the following section.

### ***The Athletic Identity***

As stated previously, the extent to which sport impacts upon an individual's identity depends on such things as their talent, social relationships and experiences within their sport environment. Each of these dimensions enables sport to become a

potentially valuable context for identity exploration and definition. Likewise, other roles, such as student, employee, sibling, and friend also serve as a basis for contributing to one's identity and sense of self (Coakley & Donnelly, 1999; Stanley & Robbins, 2011). The relative importance attributed to any one dimension of an individual's self-concept can, however, determine the extent to which this domain influences the individual's self-esteem, affect and motivation (Hale, James, & Stambulova, 1999; Litchke et al., 2012). In fact, self-concept strongly impacts upon an individual's framework for interpreting information, as well as their behaviour and ability to cope with various situations and environments (Horton & Mack, 2000; Todd & Brown, 2003).

Individuals with a strong athletic role enactment have been found to process information from an athletic perspective. During a qualitative investigation of athletes and illness, Sparkes (1998) noted that individuals with a strong sport identity were far more likely to interpret an event in terms of its implications for athletic functioning than a person who only weakly identified with the athlete role. Similarly, Dacyshyn's (1999) investigation into the experiences of elite gymnasts found that many of these top athletes described their lives as being their sport and sport as being their lives. An inability to separate from the athletic dimension in this manner can mean that individuals have become subsumed by the athlete role at the expense of other identity dimensions (Burgess, Edwards, & Skinner, 2003; Stanley & Robbins, 2011).

This single-mindedness can in part be attributed to the above average investments of time, energy and talent thought necessary to become successful in the sporting domain (Archer, 2010; Price et al., 2010; Stephan et al., 2003; Wilding, Hunter-Thomas, & Thomas, 2012). Carless and Douglas (2013) recently described such expectations as part of the strong performance narrative which currently exists within the elite sport culture. These authors propose that athletes are actively encouraged to display both discipline and sacrifice in order to pursue their sporting success. As such, many athletes purposefully seek to prioritise their sport involvement over all other aspects of their life. Carless and Douglas (2009) have suggested that “such is the dominance of this type of story it often becomes totalitarian to the extent that performance stories are expected of all athletes” (p. 54).

One impact of the performance narrative is that athletes restrict their exploration of non-sporting domains. For instance, professional Australian Rules football players revealed their willingness to subordinate all other activities in order to meet the demands of their sport environment (Hickey & Kelly, 2008). Likewise, retired Olympic athletes interviewed by Stephan and Brewer (2007) emphasised the importance of remaining focused on their sport-related goals while attempting to maintain their Olympic status. This primary, if not exclusive, dedication to the athletic lifestyle often means that education and career planning becomes relatively unimportant (Archer, 2010; Miron, 2010; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sturm et al., 2011). However, individuals who neglect such aspects of their lives potentially risk missing out on the social and material resources needed to enter other career and role

identities. Consequently, athletes involved and committed to the sporting context become highly susceptible to developing a self-concept that is largely solely dependent upon the athlete role (Abbott, Weinmann, Bailey, & Laguna, 1999; Coakley & Donnelly, 1999; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Litchke et al., 2012; Louder, 2003; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Wilding et al., 2012). Stambulova (1994) suggested that in such cases life often becomes subordinate to one's sporting involvement.

This is concerning due to the fact that most athletes are likely to develop a concept of their athletic prowess as early as their pre-teen years (Houle et al., 2010; Synder, 1985). Adolescence is typically the time in one's life where people experiment and explore a wide variety of roles and contextual domains (Rakauskiene & Dumciene, 2012). Involvement in sports, however, provides a ready-made peer group and an immediate way to gain a greater sense of social acceptance (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Any personal costs related to the athlete role therefore seem inconsequential compared with the personal gains available during these initial stages of identity development. However, the fact that this identity is developed and internalised so early in life means that it has the potential to dominate and subsume all other role identities (Coakley, 1993; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). By placing this increasing importance upon their athletic involvement, individuals become at far greater risk of developing an overly narrow self-definition (Petitpas et al., 1997).

The extent to which one is engulfed within this athlete role determines what Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) have termed one's 'athletic identity'. Although part of the wider concept of a multi-dimensional self, athlete identity consists of the cognitive, affective, behavioural, and social aspects of identifying with the athlete role (Green & Weinberg, 2001; Martin, Adams-Mushett, & Smith, 1995; Murphy et al., 1996). As a cognitive structure, athlete identity provides individuals with a way of interpreting information, while socially the athlete role is influenced by others' perceptions of what is appropriate for someone displaying this specific identity. Like all other identities, an athletic identity is developed through the process of constructing and interpreting meanings attached to context-related interactions (Miller, 2009). This identity may therefore grow somewhat unexpectedly through the exploration of sport-based activities; or alternatively, an individual may actively seek out these situations with the express purpose and desire of cultivating this specific role identity.

Over the years there has been considerable research examining the formation and impact of athlete identity. Donnelly and Young (1988) used an ethnographic approach to examine the identity construction and confirmation of athletes involved in rugby and climbing. These authors explored the processes that new participants went through in order to become established members of these specific subcultures. Other researchers have used narrative exploration (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013; Tsang, 2000), interpretive biography (e.g. Jones, Glimmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005; Sparkes, 1998), and in-depth interviewing (e.g. Chow, 2001; Lavalley &

Robinson, 2007; Litchke et al., 2012; Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Stephan & Brewer, 2007) to explore various identity processes within specific sporting populations. In contrast, most quantitative approaches to identity research have utilised Brewer et al.'s (1993) AIMS questionnaire to empirically quantify the strength of athlete identity across various sport subcultures (e.g. Albion & Fogarty, 2005; Green & Weinberg, 2001; Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Horton & Mack, 2000; Houle et al., 2010; Nasco & Webb, 2006; Tasiemski, Wilski, & Medak, 2012; Verkooijen, van Hove, & Dik, 2012). Each of these research approaches has revealed a diverse number of sport-related identities across a wide variety of different populations. There has, however, been a common concern about the high numbers of athletes who seemingly integrate their sporting activity into a key aspect of themselves. In so doing, these individuals are ultimately overly identifying with the athlete role at the expense of other alternative role identities.

While not inherently unhealthy, such a singular focus can leave individuals at risk of a range of negative outcomes following the cessation, or a disturbance, of this identity (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Carless & Douglas, 2013; Miron, 2010). In recent years, sport psychologists have even argued that the pursuit of performance excellence may actually jeopardise one's ability to achieve the holistic ideal of personal excellence (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Orlick (1980) first referred to this dilemma when he wrote that "the challenge [for an athlete] is not in pursuing excellence, but in doing so without it destroying the rest of [one's] life" (p. 272). Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing awareness that performance

excellence often comes at the expense of the diversity required to achieve healthy psychological development (Marthinus, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003).

As stated previously, researchers have suggested that athlete identity has the potential to dominate an individual's self-concept due to the extreme investment that is needed to develop this particular role identity. A qualitative study of Canadian student-athletes, conducted by Miller and Kerr (2003), revealed three central and competing 'spheres' in each athlete's life: athletics, academics and social relationships. The prominence of the athlete sphere meant individuals were often forced to make choices and compromises in these other life areas. Miller and Kerr's study further supported Adler and Adler's (1989) seminal research from the late 1980s, which examined American student athletes. Adler's studies found that involvement in athletics was seen to create an anti-intellectual environment which inhibited individuals' academic success.

Pederson (2001) has gone so far as to suggest that sport involvement impinges upon achievement in alternative life spheres. Whether or not this is indeed the case, it does appear that athletes are often forced to modify and negotiate their lives around the various social spheres vying for their time. This negotiation is compounded by the long hours of training and intense level of specialisation expected to become a top level athlete (Aquilina, 2013; Archer, 2010). Research has shown that athlete identity increases with athletic ability and competitive involvement (Archer, 2010; Chen,

Snyder, & Magner, 2010; Horton & Mack, 2000; Sturm et al., 2011; Van Raalte, Brewer, & Schmelzer, 1997; Wiechman & Williams, 1997). With little free time outside of practice, and limited levels of physical and psychological energy, the elite athletic lifestyle makes it hard for individuals to explore alternative life roles (Horton & Mack, 2000; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Murphy et al., 1996; Wilding et al., 2012). This subsequent reduction in social roles therefore leads to the development of an overly strong athlete identity (Erpic et al., 2004). Additionally, Lavalley and Wylleman (2000) have suggested that as many athletes perceive themselves to be happier and more competent in the athlete role, they may actually be reluctant to actively engage in the expansion of other self-identities.

The degree to which one subscribes to an athlete identity can be also heavily influenced by significant others within the individual's environment (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Donnelly & Young, 1988; Houle et al., 2010). Due to the high societal value placed upon sport performance, athletic talent is often nurtured and encouraged by those around the athletic performer. While researching the experiences of elite female gymnasts, Lavalley and Robinson (2007) found that athletes were labelled and encouraged to accept the elite sport lifestyle from the moment they were identified as having gymnastic potential. Similarly, former Olympians interviewed by Stephan and Brewer (2007) spoke of being conditioned into believing that they would become Olympic athletes from very early on in their careers. Researchers suggest this encouragement is especially strong due to the fact that attention and importance given to sporting feats remains unmatched in most other talent domains (Abbott et al.,

1999; Archer, 2010; Brewer et al., 1993; Butt & Molnar, 2009; Curry, 1993). Consequently, the athlete role has become a socially accepted, and in some respects a socially sought after, role enactment (Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Sabo, & Farrell, 2007; Stevenson, 1990b).

In order to fulfil this role, however, many athletes commit not just physically, but also mentally and socially to the athlete ideal (Gordon & Lavalley, 2004). These athletes have often placed their lives on hold for the sake of their sport (Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2012). Additionally, some high performance sports programmes actively discourage young athletes from participating in alternative life activities (Aquilina, 2013; Gould & Carson, 2004; Henry, 2013). Athletes in Stephan and Brewer's (2007) study spoke of coaches and support staff purposefully avoiding discussions on topics outside of the sport environment in order to ensure athletes maintained a clear sport-only focus. While such behaviours are encouraged under the guise of 'protecting' athletes from distracting external influences, these controls clearly impact on athletes' interpretations of what is appropriate when occupying this particular role position. Hickey and Kelly's (2008) investigation into the lives of professional AFL footballers demonstrated how significant others such as coaches, clubs, national organisations, and sport officials, impacted on athletes' interpretations of what it meant to live the AFL lifestyle. Likewise, a study conducted by Gould et al., (2002) acknowledged a similar link between athletes' identities and the institutions responsible for their development. Designed to examine the psychological

characteristics of Olympic champions, this study revealed the significant role that people and institutions play in developing the lives of elite sport performers.

As early as 1975, Ball and Loy recognised a cultural undercurrent within sports organisations to reinforce values such as teamwork, work ethic and competition for resources. More recently, values such as elitism, early specialisation and selection have also gained increasing importance within the sport environment (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Cote et al., 2009). Consequently, modern training regimes now emphasise a sense of duty and routine in which athletes experience very little control or power (Kimball, 2007; McMahon, Penney, & Dinan-Thompson, 2012; Tracey & Elcombe, 2004). Despite evidence to suggest that such values may not be providing the ideal environment to foster on-going and successful sports participation, athletes seem to readily embrace these ideals in order to fit within their newly-found social world (Stevenson, 1990a). This high level of compliance was demonstrated in two recent investigations examining the lived experiences of former elite swimmers (Jones et al., 2005; McMahon et al., 2012). Specifically, the swimmer in Jones's study freely admitted to accepting her coach's ideas and training methods without much thought for how they impacted upon the rest of her life. In an attempt to explain such behaviour, Hickey and Kelly (2008) suggested that athletes become so focused on establishing and then maintaining their sporting careers, they fail to question the ideas and values put forward by those in charge of their environments.

This failure to critique one's way of life led McMahon et al. (2012) to question the imbalance of power between athletes and their coaches. In particular, they suggest that cultural practices ingrained within the elite sport environment foster power differentials which impact on an athlete's ability to exert full control over their sport experience. Consequently, although elite sport environments give athletes some responsibility, they provide very little in the way of self-autonomy. In support of such observations, former elite gymnasts, who took part in a retrospective study about their athletic careers, reported feeling as though they were "dispensable tools" rather than people within their gymnastic environments (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007, p. 135). Driven by external pressures to succeed, these gymnasts believed they were encouraged to seek performance excellence at the expense of their own personal development. Interestingly, some athletes have revealed that it was not until they were actually out of their sport environment that they realised the existence of this lack of autonomy (Butt & Molnar, 2009; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Kimball, 2007; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Despite experiencing a false sense of control at the time of participation, in hindsight these athletes acknowledged that it had instead been their coaches and associations who had exerted control over their lives.

The direct, and indirect, influence of people within the sport environment therefore means that athlete identity is not constructed within a social vacuum (Bruner et al., 2009; Gould et al., 2002). Instead, people within this environment help to promote and encourage those behaviours thought to best represent the sporting role (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). Once having accepted or been socialised into sport

participation, the extent to which athlete identity ultimately comes to define who one is depends upon the importance of this role, both to the individual and those around them. As stated previously, strong social acceptance, as well as high time and energy demands, leave many athletes with a self-concept strongly linked to their athletic performance. The potentially negative consequence of this uni-dimensional sense of self is explained in the following section.

### ***Consequences of a High Athlete Identity***

Despite being associated with restricted holistic growth, athlete identity does not necessarily lead to stunted personal development. In fact, under certain circumstances a high athlete identity can lead to positive experiences for the sport participant (Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Sparkes, 1998). For instance, strong athletic identity has been linked with increases in athletic performance, self-confidence and a positive sense of self (Horton & Mack, 2000; Killeya-Jones, 2005; Sparkes, 1998; Stephan & Brewer, 2007; Todd & Brown, 2003; Van Raalte et al., 1997). Other researchers have associated high levels of athletic identity with enhanced body image and better lifestyle management, as well as increased health and fitness, participation levels, and adherence (Brewer et al., 1993; Horton & Mack, 2000; Van Raalte et al., 1997). Similarly, athlete identity has also been found to increase one's commitment and motivation towards sporting participation, an occurrence that most coaches would encourage (Brewer et al., 1993; Curry & Weiss, 1989; Palmer & Leberman, 2009).

When this commitment becomes excessive, and occurs at the expense of other activities, a strong athletic identity can, however, become an issue (Carless & Douglas, 2012; Horton & Mack, 2000; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b). In contrast, researchers have shown that maintaining a balanced commitment to both sport and other areas of one's life is increasingly beneficial. An example of this was found in Killeya-Jones's (2005) study of student athletes. Athletes who developed strong and uniting role identities for both their sport and studies tended to display greater levels of overall life satisfaction and psychological adjustment when compared with those individuals who found these roles to be conflicting and problematic (Killeya-Jones, 2005). Therefore, although having a strong athlete identity does not prevent the development of a multi-dimensional self-concept, if not explored in conjunction with other role identities it can be problematic.

Individuals who neglect their non-athletic concerns such as education, career development or social networks, significantly narrow their sense of self at the expense of developing a well-rounded self-concept (Adler & Adler, 1989; Butt & Molnar, 2009; Murphy et al., 1996). The effect of this identity narrowing has been linked to issues with developing social skills, resulting in emotional and adjustment difficulties, as well as social disengagement outside of the sport community (Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013; Chow, 2001; Horton & Mack, 2000; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b). Lavalley and Robinson (2007) revealed that gymnasts who focused exclusively upon their sport left this arena unable to interact with people outside of this social role.

The high levels of stress related to an exclusive focus on performance excellence has also been shown to increase an athlete's vulnerability to anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Stephan & Brewer, 2007). This risk is especially heightened when one's identity is disrupted following an injury or unexpected end to the athletic career (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Green & Weinberg, 2001; Hale et al., 1999; Van Raalte, et al., 1997; Wainwright, Williams, & Turner, 2005; Webb et al., 1998). Similarly, athletes with a singular sport focus are at greater risk of experiencing athletic burnout (Brewer et al., 1993; Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä, & Johansson, 2008; Harris & Watson, 2011) and eating disorders (Jones et al., 2005). While Brewer et al., (1993) reported that athletes high in athlete identity showed an increased willingness to engage in risky behaviours and were prone to over training and exercise addiction.

High levels of athletic identity have also been linked to student-athlete failure and educational drop out. Horse riders interviewed during Pummell et al's. (2008) study reported that the pressures of eventing negatively impacted upon their educational achievement, leaving the riders ill-prepared for life after sport and education. Hackfort, Emrich, and Papathanassiou (1997) attributed athletes' lack of academic achievement to a failure to acknowledge the importance of education, limited academic choice for some sportspeople and the perception that sporting prowess might lead to better vocational opportunities than education. The impact of high levels of athlete identity on career transitions has also been widely explored.

Researchers have suggested that the most important determinant of adjustment following sport retirement is the degree to which the individual identified with the athlete role (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Studies have shown that exclusive athletic identities are inversely related to career maturity, positive career decision making and readiness for post-sport careers (Albion & Fogarty, 2005; Martens & Cox, 2000; Martens & Lee, 1998; Martin et al., 1995; Murphy et al., 1996; Sturm et al., 2011). In contrast, Lally (2007) revealed that transitioning athletes who had decreased the prominence of their athlete identity, prior to their retirement, adapted almost immediately to their post-sport life. This suggests that it is not the sport transition itself that creates possible turmoil, rather it is the extent to which one associates oneself with the athletic role that leads to a lack of social role adjustment.

Displays of inappropriate coping mechanisms during sport transitions have also been linked to high levels of athlete identity. Without the flexibility of multiple role identities, an individual with a strong athlete identity can be left feeling uncertain and disorientated if this identity becomes threatened (Dacyshyn, 1999; Denison, 1997; Marthinus, 2007; Park et al., 2012; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b). Consequently, athletes become prone to displays of behavioural disengagement and denial coping strategies as a way to cope with their insecurity during this period (Grove et al., 1997; Todd & Brown, 2003). Such mechanisms can also trigger periods of directionless behaviour until alternative role identities have been constructed. A qualitative study conducted by Lavalley and Robinson (2007) found that gymnasts who had dedicated themselves solely to their sport were left feeling helpless and lost as a result of their

eventual sport retirement. These athletes attributed their feelings to a lack of knowledge about who they were and what they wanted from their lives outside the gymnastics environment. Unable to connect meaningfully with life after sport, or adapt to their new roles in society, they were left flailing during the initial period after their retirement. Coakley and Donnelly (1999) suggest that some athletes even resist changing or terminating their sport involvement because their identities are so deeply entwined within the concept of being an athlete.

### *Prevention Strategies*

The risk of difficulties, both during and after sport involvement, has led some sporting organisations to develop programmes which actively encourage athletes to establish a multi-dimensional sense of self. As part of these programmes, athletes are assisted in exploring lives outside of their sport in the hope of creating greater life balance. While the dominant performance narrative suggests that an exclusive devotion to sport is necessary to achieve optimal sport performance, participation in such programmes has not been associated with any subsequent decrease in athletic performance (Aquilina, 2013; Price et al., 2010). Rather, some studies have actually suggested that developing one's personal and sporting self simultaneously fosters excellence that would not be possible with just a singular focus (Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013; Henry, 2013; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Price et al. (2010) found that time away from the rigours of competitive sport provided athletes with both mental and physical rejuvenation. Athletes in this study linked these breaks to both

increasing sport enjoyment and prolonging elite sport careers. Similarly, a recent study by Aquilina (2013) identified that athletes performed better upon achieving balance outside of the elite sport environment. These results challenge the culturally dominant performance narrative and suggest that athletic success may in fact be possible when physical training is pursued in conjunction with personal development in other life areas (Carless & Douglas, 2013).

Despite such revelations, many athletes are still reluctant to explore a multi-dimensional sense of self. An evaluation of the Australian Institute of Sport's Athlete Career Education (ACE) system uncovered a significant relationship between athlete identity and dysfunctional myths associated with preparing for life after sport (Albion & Fogarty, 2005). Specifically, athletes high in athlete identity felt that non-sport career thinking would detract from their athletic commitments and performance, even after their involvement within the ACE programme. This finding mirrors an earlier study conducted by Murphy et al. (1996), and suggests that athletes fear having time taken away from their sport participation. Some researchers have suggested that this perception is being reinforced by coaches whose jobs are contingent upon performance records, rather than the development of well-rounded athletes (Henry, 2013; Murphy et al., 1996). Coaches and their athletes should therefore be educated in the benefits of athletes developing interests away from the elite sport environment (Denison, 1997; Henry, 2013; Hickey & Kelly, 2008).

One approach trying to tackle this issue is Australia's previously mentioned ACE programme. The goal of ACE is to develop the athlete's personal and professional life in tandem with their sporting career (Albion & Fogarty, 2005). This national programme was implemented throughout Australia in 1995 and is now extensively utilised by athletes within the care of the Australian Institute of Sport's system. Research conducted in New Zealand, soon after the AIS implementation, encouraged the adoption of a similar system in this country. After interviewing 12 retired New Zealand athletes, Denison (1997) encouraged New Zealand sporting organisations to provide career training workshops and counselling services for our own sport participants. Denison felt that without such attention, future generations of New Zealand sportspeople would continue to struggle to find meaning and personal contentment upon the cessation of their sporting careers. A similar concern was also expressed by the 2001 Ministerial Taskforce for Sport, Leisure and Fitness. Perhaps in response to such requests, the NZAS implemented a carbon copy of Australia's ACE programme for New Zealand's elite athletes soon after it was established. This programme has been made available to all carded athletes within the NZAS's system.

Like its Australian counterpart, the NZAS's ACE programme provides life skills and career guidance to complement an athlete's sport participation. Although in theory programmes like ACE have been established to encourage the growth of multi-dimensional, holistic self-concepts, some researchers have, however, questioned whether the special attention, and perhaps perceived reward that the programme provides, further entrenches the athlete role. Primarily, being identified and selected

as part of the Academy of Sport's carding system brings with it an element of pride and recognition of sporting success. As the criterion for sustained involvement within the system is contingent upon continued displays of sporting prowess, such programmes run the risk of reinforcing, and in fact encouraging, an athlete identity by increasing the entanglements and expectations placed upon an individual (Stevenson, 1990a). If this entrenchment is not successfully counteracted with the message that overly identifying with any one aspect of one's life can in fact be problematic, the NZAS's system may only be further contributing to possible behavioural and emotional difficulties, as opposed to reducing them. An Australian review of the ACE programme and its effect on athlete behaviour would suggest that this may indeed be the case (Albion & Fogarty, 2005).

It is, however, also argued that involvement in programmes like ACE do help athletes decrease their over-reliance on the athlete role by allowing them to explore careers outside of their sport (Albion & Fogarty, 2005). This contention was recently supported by a quantitative investigation conducted by Mateos et al., (2008). Using Brewer et al's AIMS questionnaire, these authors explored the impact of a career intervention programme designed especially for elite athletes. They found significant reductions in athletic identity in those athletes with three to four years' experience within this programme. Similarly, a German study revealed that athlete career education programmes can counteract the negative effects of a sport-only identity (Conzelmann & Nagal, 2003). Athletes involved in the German intervention ended up with higher education and professional achievements than non-athletes, thus

improving their vocational chances. Unfortunately, Albion and Fogarty (2005) noted that those athletes who had the highest need for such services (i.e. those with identities strongly linked to the athlete role) were also those athletes who were least likely to embrace and utilise the programme. This is problematic, as although some of these individuals may end up being able to forge a financial future built solely upon their sport involvement, many will not. Consequently, these athletes will become susceptible to adjustment problems upon their sport retirement.

Further research therefore needs to be conducted in order to examine the exact impact that programmes like those implemented by the NZAS have on athletes' careers and identities. While most researchers now agree that sporting bodies should promote the holistic development of their athletes, current programmes may not actually be meeting these needs (Pummell et al., 2008). Further investigation into the factors which influence athlete identity formation and its maintenance may also be useful (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Specifically, it appears that interventions may also need to target those within the athletes' sporting environments, as well as the athletes themselves. Similarly, Lavalley and Wylleman (2000) suggest that additional attention needs to be paid to ensuring that programmes fostering pre-retirement planning or career education provide adequate resources to meet the demands of each individual's sport experience. As every athlete comes into and leaves the sport environment with different expectations and experiences, it is important that intervention strategies take these differences into consideration (Wilding et al., 2012).

### *Learning from the Literature*

Since its establishment in 2002, Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) has directly impacted the lives of New Zealand's elite athletes through its talent selection and development programme; athlete carding. Although developed with the intention of ensuring that New Zealand's athletes fulfil their potential both in and out of the sporting context, research has never previously examined what athletes actually think about the system in which they play a central role. Similarly, previous consideration has never been given to whether this current sport policy and practice is indeed promoting athlete growth and development as is suggested. This is important, as while participating in elite sport can be extremely beneficial for many athletes, other individuals may be denied important experiences after prioritising their sport participation over all other aspects in their life. If the carding system does not successfully counteract the message that overly identifying with the athlete role can be problematic, the NZAS system may in fact be enhancing, rather than reducing athletes' risk of behavioural and emotional difficulties should this identity become threatened. Likewise, although empowered and supported during the promising start to their careers, many elite athletes find this support diminishes once their performance begins to fade (Tannsjo, 2000). This often leaves athletes feeling alone as they negotiate life after their elite sport participation. When this occurs the carding system appears to be abandoning, rather than assisting, athletes once they are no longer deemed worthy of the programme.

It is questionable whether a system that builds up athletes and their place within society, only to ‘turn its back’ on these very same individuals once their performance has declined, has any place within a moral and socially responsible society. Similarly, as athletes have never actually been asked whether this system is in fact meeting their individual needs, both in and outside of the sport environment, one may ask why public money continues to be spent on a programme yet to be reviewed by the very people for which it has been developed. It was the focus of the current research project to answer some of these outstanding questions. Specifically, I aimed to examine the experiences of selected New Zealand carded athletes and consider the extent to which SPARC’s vision of a holistic athlete was becoming a reality. In so doing I was particularly interested to hear what carded athletes actually experienced and felt about the development programme of which they were a part. I also sought to investigate how the special attention, and perhaps perceived reward of being part of an elite sport programme, impacted upon their athlete role identity. As the notion of personal experience was central to the research process, a series of interviews were conducted with athletes from across eight different carded sports. By exploring the world through the eyes of the athletes themselves, I was able to create a personal account of the life within the carding system. It is hoped that the information gathered through this process will provide SPARC (now called Sport New Zealand), and high performance systems around the globe, with valuable insight into the experiences of elite athletes within such programmes.

## **The Research Process**

The NZAS's athlete carding programme was implemented after a governmental taskforce reviewed the state of New Zealand sport in 2001. As with many athlete development programmes, this system was constructed around the political and policy agendas of the day. Policy makers very rarely give voice to those individuals whose lived experiences will be directly affected by such changes. In so doing, elite athletes - who form the heart of the carding programme - have been provided with few opportunities to question or critique the system which has been impacting their lives over the last decade. New Zealand's elite athletes therefore appear to be a previously silenced population who have had limited opportunity to share their experiences about being part of the carded athlete programme. This is significant as it is only those individuals found directly within a given context who can accurately share their particular realities. As this research project sought to uncover life within the athlete carding programme, I therefore felt that it was crucial to gather this information from the carded athletes themselves.

The shift towards research paradigms built on the belief that knowledge is a human construction has led to an increasing exploration of human experience and individual meaning production (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Potter, 1996). In contrast to realist assumptions, this approach allows for the creation of multiple, often competing realities, all of which are dependent upon the framework of an individual's thoughts and mental processes (Brand, 2008; Buelens, Van De Woestyne, Mestdagh, &

Bouckenooghe, 2008; Koro-Ljunberg & Barko, 2012; Prasad, 2005). The placing of the individual at the centre of this model means that human behaviour is thought to occur via a process of reflective interpretation. It is through these interactions and reflections that individuals make sense of the world around them (Cosh et al., 2013; Denzin, 1989; Prus, 1997). One research paradigm that has been built upon such beliefs is the paradigm of Interpretivism. It is this paradigm which forms the foundation of the current research project.

The interpretivist paradigm centres upon the belief that social reality is open to ever-changing individual interpretation. Meaning is therefore defined in terms of the actions and objectives of the person with which it is held (Brand, 2008; Koro-Ljunberg & Bark, 2012; Stowell, 2009). Harris (2010) explored this concept when he shared that the “mind itself can be studied as something that actors define into being” (p. 36). This perspective is in direct contrast with the socially controlled and reactive world of positivism. Instead, interpretivist ideals allow individuals to, in some respects, disregard the system in favour of shaping their own lives of social influence (Flecha, Gomez, & Puigvert, 2003). In so doing, individuals are able to gain control and agency over their environments, relationships and institutions (Prus, 1997). The individual and society therefore become an inseparable and interdependent entity, where meaning cannot exist without individual interpretation and reflection (Meltzer & Petras, 1970). Another recurring theme within this paradigm is the assertion that reality and knowledge are socially constructed (Cosh et al., 2013). Although subjectivist epistemology allows for infinite interpretations of the world around us,

we, as humans, tend to resort to the shared meanings we possess with people with whom we are interacting. This means that although limitless choices are available to us, we have a tendency to address our social world through collective understandings (Prasad, 2005). The interpretivist tradition that addresses this phenomenon in more detail is symbolic interactionism.

### ***Symbolic Interactionism***

Symbolic Interactionism is an American brand of interpretivism that focuses on the nature of social interactions occurring both within, and between, individuals (Prasad, 2005; Stryker, 2008). Like all interactionist perspectives, symbolic interactionism subscribes to the more active nature of human interaction. Therefore, within this tradition the term interaction implies that humans are acting in relation to one another, reflecting upon this interaction and then relating again (Buelens et al., 2008; Charon, 1979; Li, 2011; vom Lehn & Gibson 2011). This dynamic process is ongoing, with societal changes possible after each of these encounters. George Herbert Mead is the sociologist credited with the birth of symbolic interactionism. At the heart of Mead's work was this concept of interaction and, more specifically, the processes through which we clarify meaning within these interactions (Stryker, 2008; vom Lehn & Gibson). Mead's work was refined and expanded by Herbert Blumer during the late 1960s. In fact it was Blumer (1969) who has been credited with giving symbolic interactionism its current name. Both Mead and Blumer believed that symbolic interactionism was based on the following three premises:

- i) human beings act toward things and other people in their environment on the basis of the meanings that they have for them;
- ii) these meanings are derived from, and arise out of, social interaction between and among individuals;
- iii) meanings are established and modified via an interpretive process used by individuals when dealing with things that they encounter.

Mead and Blumer therefore regarded mankind as knowing and reflective beings capable of on-going social construction (Prus, 1997). This construction occurs via the process of communication, and is aided through the use of common symbols (Hausmann, Jonason, & Summers-Effler, 2011; Stryker, 2008). Consequently, social interaction is concerned with making sense of these various symbols, and thus ensuring that we understand the world around us.

### ***Symbols and Meaning***

A symbol is a gesture that is typically understood by both the sender and the receiver. The ability to be aware of and to respond to our own gestures is thought to be uniquely human. Blumer (1969) refers to this ability in his concept of 'minded beings'. Specifically, he describes how self-awareness allows human beings to plan and reflect on their actions and the actions of those around them before eventually responding. In so doing, we are able to control the majority of messages that we transmit to our social world. Likewise, we are able to select our responses in order to

influence their intended impact (Charon, 1979). However, for symbols to be effective there must be shared meaning within a given social context. This meaning transpires through the process of interaction, where individuals indicate the personal meaning that various objects, people and situations hold for them (Hausmann et al., 2011; Mead, 1934; Prasad, 2005).

Although the meaning of symbols is significantly affected by social context, researchers have acknowledged that human life comprises a somewhat shared symbolic existence (Dennis, 2011; Prus, 1997). This tendency for individuals to cooperate and arrive at shared interpretations, despite the ability to attach any number of diverse meanings and perspectives to objects within our environment, has been referred to as ‘intersubjectivity’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; vom Lehn & Gibson, 2011). Intersubjectivity attempts to explain the many interpretations that have become transfixed within our social consciousness. In fact, some concepts have become so ingrained within society, they have taken on a near objective or ‘natural’ existence (Prasad, 2005). When confronted with such contexts, people often fail to use their ability to interpret meanings in order to form their own, individual, social constructions. Instead, they rely upon accumulated knowledge that is passed on through interactions, to provide meaning in that particular situation (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

Symbolic interactionism is therefore not just concerned with the study of symbols; rather, this methodology focuses much of its attention upon the meaningful nature of social interaction (Dennis, 2011). Specifically, it is suggested that as each individual brings their own symbols, experiences and beliefs into any given situation, shared meaning and agreement can only occur through the process of interaction. Consequently, agreement about social reality is only reached after endless negotiation between all individuals acting within the same social sphere (Li, 2011). This process allows for new meaning to be created, and is therefore crucial to maintaining a productive social existence (Hausmann et al., 2011; Li, 2011; Prasad, 2005).

### ***Interaction and the Generalised Other***

As all meaning is negotiated from the multiple realities that exist at any given moment, the concept of active engagement is therefore central to the epistemological foundations of symbolic interactionism. This means that human beings act with intention, rather than merely responding to environmental stimuli found around them. Additionally, although social frameworks exist in order to position one's action, these frameworks are not necessarily the determinants of one's eventual behaviour (Lauer & Handel, 1983; Meltzer & Petras, 1970). Consequently, a key feature of symbolic interactionism is that although individuals are influenced by others and corresponding social institutions, they are also active in interpreting and responding to the people, situations and objects they encounter within their daily lives (Dennis, 2011; Travers, 2001).

It is therefore through interaction that humans not only make sense of, but also influence the world in which they exist. As meaning is negotiated and constructed, it is also able to be transformed during this process (Dennis, 2011; Prasad, 2005). The more direct one's contact is with the social world under investigation, the more comprehensive one's understanding can be (Hirokazu, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). Consequently, a key component of effective communication is the ability to adopt the viewpoint of others within the interaction. Mead referred to this concept as taking the role of the 'generalised other' (GO) (Mead, 1982). This process allows for individuals to understand the perspectives of those around them and thus leads to a greater capacity for mutual understanding (Prus, 1997; Turner, 2011). Additionally, this increased awareness helps individuals define both themselves and society as a whole. Indeed, Mead (1934) stated that 'the self' was only possible due to this ability to take on the role of the GO.

After any action or behaviour has taken place, individuals continue the process of interaction by reflecting upon its impact on one's sense of self (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Turner, 2011). This on-going interaction means that our self-definitions are constantly changing. In Mead's (1934) key publication, 'Mind, self and society', he described the self as comprising two separate, yet interrelated entities, the 'I' and the 'Me'. The subjective 'I' is said to refer to our natural and spontaneous responses to the actions of others, while the objective 'Me' refers to one's reflection of society's attitudes and perspectives (Flecha et al., 2003; Jeon, 2004). It is therefore the 'Me' that incorporates the attitudes and beliefs of the other within the individual (Meltzer

& Petras, 1970). Correspondingly, it is this aspect of the self that evolves through social interaction and ends in the formation of the GO. The GO is therefore a crucial, minded activity. It enables us not only to become more adept at functioning within various social groups, but also provides us with a socially acceptable guide for our own actions and choices.

The organisation of societal representations within our consciousness allows for the internalisation of various roles and attitudes (Dennis, 2011). The majority of these roles are institutionalised symbols that enable effective communication from one person to another (Mead, 1982). Roles and attitudes which are displayed via interaction are therefore interpreted and dissected in order to organise their relevance to the individual and his or her respective GO. As most individuals are in fact part of a number of social worlds, each with its own perspectives and norms, individuals interacting within society can bring with them a number of GOs. We have a tendency to organise these different selves within a more singular entity; however, in some cases the existence of multiple role identities means that role conflict is somewhat inevitable (Stryker, 2008). In order to decrease the risk of role dilemmas, people consciously choose to respond to certain expectations in one given moment, while following different expectations during other situations (Haerle, 1975). Such demonstrations of consciousness reveal our capacity to know what to expect from both our own and others' actions (Prasad, 2005). As such, the formation and usage of these role identities is an essential component within the tradition of symbolic interactionism.

### ***Roles and Identity***

The term role commonly refers to the socially defined expectations attached to occupying a particular position in society; e.g. mother, wife, employee, coach, etc. (Prasad, 2005; Turner, 2011). When an individual's behaviour matches these predetermined ideas, he or she is said to be performing that particular role. In order for these roles to exist there needs to be some sort of societal consensus over shared meanings and behaviours (Lauer & Handel, 1983). Roles are therefore referred to as being part of the social structure's intersubjectivity, or patterns of behaviour which meet the expectations of the community in which they exist (Scheff, 1970). When individuals subscribe to certain behavioural roles they can also become amalgamated into various self-identities (Blumer, 1969). As such, identities are further products of social interaction and enable individuals to situate themselves in relation to others within society (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Charon, 1979). The multivariate nature of social interaction means that identities themselves are often fluid and are therefore subject to modification over time (Powell, 2012).

G. H. Mead and Erving Goffman have been key figures in exploring the concept of self and identity. Mead (1934) asserted that an individual's sense of self is socially created and socialised through the process of creating the GO. Goffman (1959) added that individuals play certain roles in order to present a favourable perception of themselves and maintain a sense of consistency within the social world. This cognitive process requires the individual both to define the situation and choose the

corresponding part which they wish to play (Dennis, 2011). At the time, Mead and Goffman's approach to studying identity was in direct contrast to the prevailing ideas of leading structural theorists. However, during the mid-1980s researchers began to question dispositional models of identity development (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Of particular concern was structuralism's tendency to ignore the wide variation that exists in the development and maintenance of one's sense of self. Instead, the broader notions put forward by the symbolic interactionist perspective provided an alternative investigative tool from which to examine identity and its constructs (Collinson & Hockey, 2007). Consequently, researchers have since moved away from empirical-based models of identity formation in favour of models built upon on-going social interaction.

As stated previously, central to the symbolic interactionist perspective is the concept of the GO, where each GO has a unique underpinning perspective that is often attached to a particular reference group and/or behaviour (Charon, 1979). These reference groups represent certain roles and identities pertaining to that particular perspective. As such, role identities are said to be located within a given social world and individual identities are therefore unable to operate effectively outside of that existence (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Instead, individuals pick and choose amongst each of these perspectives, defining a situation in the way that best meets their particular needs at that given moment. This process has been referred to as 'reflected appraisal' (Gecas & Burke, 1995). The reflected appraisal process provides the opportunity to change one's self perception in order to align more strongly with

current societal expectations (Haggard & Williams, 1992). This negotiation is achieved by comparing the information one holds about oneself to the information perceived to exist about oneself within the social world (Burke, 1991). If these two perceptions differ, then it is necessary to either reject these appraisals as being unimportant, or alter one's behaviour in order to ensure public opinion becomes consistent with one's own view of oneself (Hausmann et al., 2011; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Turner, 2011).

Reflective appraisals, and subsequent behavioural choices, are contingent upon the degree of salience and commitment an individual attributes to the role identity being examined (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Stryker, 2008). Role identities are less likely to become personally important unless they are important to significant other members of our social world. Therefore, as our interactions confirm our sense of reality and individual identities, they are also reaffirming the societal norms and values of the society in which they take place (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Turner, 2011). While all roles represent societal order, some roles enact this order more than others (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This resulting intersubjectivity suggests that social structures can constrain and/or define our identities and the roles that we play in society (Cassidy & Trew, 2001). In so doing, human behaviour becomes a consequence of both personal choice and underlying societal values (Stryker, 2008; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Here meaning and knowledge lose objectivity in favour of reflecting the power relationships and social structures of a given context (Denzin, 1989). Consequently, Denzin (1989) proclaimed "No self or personal experience

story is ever an individual production. It derives from larger group, cultural, ideological and historical contexts” (p. 73). Therefore, while symbolic interactionism, like all interpretive methodologies, can only reveal the worlds of those directly under investigation, by assuming that many circumstances (both systematic and serendipitous) influence an individual’s lived experience, this perspective provides a realistic framework from which to gain an understanding of individual sensibilities (Jones et al., 2005; Stevenson, 1990a).

### ***Methodological Implications***

The goal of symbolic interactionism is to understand the nature of social situations from the standpoint of the participants themselves. As such, its epistemological and ontological position facilitates an understanding of the micro levels of society (Prasad, 2005). Blumer (1969) proposed that such a focus was necessary in order to understand the wider social world. Knowledge, therefore, becomes built upon individual points of view and interactions, obtained within natural, or ‘real life’ settings. Although this could be thought of as a limitation, symbolic interactionists would claim that the veracity of scholarly research is dependent upon one’s ability to capture and discuss the intimate interactions of individual sense-making (Hendry, 2007; Prasad, 2005). While the supposedly objective nature of positivist research runs the risk of substituting the researcher’s view of the world onto the view of the research participants, symbolic interactionism embraces the active engagement of both the researcher and researched (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln,

2008; Diefenbach, 2009; Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Millar-Day, 2012). In so doing, promoters of symbolic interactionism believe this methodology establishes a more effective way of examining societal issues and dilemmas than other methodological alternatives (Dennis & Martin, 2005; Hausmann et al., 2011; Polkinghorne, 2007). More specifically, by becoming involved in the lives of others, it is thought that researchers are able to uncover the inner worlds that exist within society (De Fina & Perrino, 2011; Neale et al., 2012). Armed with this knowledge, they are then able to use these insights in order to assist the targeted population in ways which might otherwise have been unavailable (Denzin, 1989; Hendry, 2007).

Symbolic interactionists support the use of research techniques such as interviewing, case studies, diaries, and participant observation in favour of instrumental and quantitative data. Hence, this approach investigates programmes, situations and individuals based upon the meanings, interpretations and experiences of the actual persons they are intending to serve (Denzin, 1989; Meltzer & Petras, 1970). As such, this study advocates for both a symbolic interactionist philosophy of examining the lived experiences of human group life, as well as the use of research methods which enable an interactive and comprehensive data collection process. In so doing, I endeavoured to uncover the previously silenced lives of carded athletes within New Zealand's elite sport population, while also exploring the significance of this system to their identities as a whole. Denzin (1989) stated "the perspectives and experiences of those persons who are served by applied programs must be grasped, interpreted and understood if solid, effective applied programs are to be put into place" (p. 12).

This in-depth examination of the lives of those involved within New Zealand's Government funded sport development programme also enabled the participants of this programme, the athlete themselves, to comment on the way in which this policy has shaped their lives, both as athletes and people.

## **Methods**

Interviews have become one of the most commonly utilised interpretive research tools for delving into the lived world and experiences of others (Barbour, 2008; Chenail, 2011; De Fina & Perrino, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Within the interpretive paradigm it is imperative that individuals represent their worlds, views and opinions from within their own repertoire of words and ideas (Kvale, 1996). The interview process not only allows for direct interaction with the research participant, it also allows the researcher to explore events and situations through the lives of those who have directly experienced the phenomena under investigation (De Fina & Perrino, 2011; Pezalla et al., 2012; Silverman, 2006). For this research project, the context of interest lay within the lives of New Zealand's carded athlete population. Specifically, I was interested in exploring the impact of such involvement on the identity development of New Zealand's talented athlete population. The interview approach provided me the opportunity to explore, in-depth, the thoughts and feelings individuals had regarding life within the carding system. This chapter details the processes undertaken in this research project.

### ***Sampling***

As symbolic interactionism typically focuses on the in-depth analysis of relatively small groups of participants, investigators often use the process of 'purposeful sampling' to identify participants for their investigations (Kvale, 1996; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012; Patton, 1990). This requires researchers to deliberately seek out those

cases or individuals who are likely to typify the general populace under investigation (Maxwell, 1996; Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Consequently, categories such as age, gender, experience and world view can all be used as defining factors in determining participant suitability (Coyne, 1997). The objective of this type of sampling is to ensure a strong connection between the research questions and the research participants. Specifically, focus is placed upon those individuals who possess a perspective or understanding of the research context that can not otherwise be obtained from within the general population (Bryman, 2003; Flick, 1998; Skott & Ward; 2013). It is assumed that such an approach enables the generation of 'information rich' personal accounts (Patton, 1990; Skott & Ward, 2013; Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Weiss (1994) has therefore argued that qualitative research consists more of panels rather than samples, whereby researchers identify particular settings, persons or events from which they can glean the most about the chosen topic of analysis. This sampling procedure enables the researcher to achieve a true representation of the setting or individuals under investigation. In so doing, the researcher is then able to express greater confidence in the likelihood that his or her conclusions are representative of the archetypical members of the overall sample population.

In this investigation, it was decided that individuals who had been, or continued to be, carded athletes for at least two years would be most suited to providing an overview of life within the NZAS's carded athlete programme. This criterion for participant inclusion was set to ensure that the research participants had sufficient lived

experience and knowledge of the entire carding system under investigation. Specifically, as most NSOs assessed their carded athlete status and service provision on an annual basis, it was felt necessary to ensure that the research participants had had an opportunity to go through this procedure (at least once) in order to have a complete understanding of the carding process. As the researcher, I felt that athletes with at least two years of experience would be best able to provide a thorough narrative account of their experiences within this given context.

### ***Research Participants***

Continued debate within research circles has meant that there are no definitive rules regarding the sample size required for this type of investigation. Instead, most accounts suggest that this decision should in part be driven by the nature and purpose of the project (Diefenbach, 2009). In particular, Miles and Huberman (1994) have stated that the eventual sample size should reflect the proposed aims of the research project, the anticipated function of participant-offered insights and a realistic consideration of the time and resources available to both the interviewer and interviewees. The goal of the research is to capture sufficiently detailed accounts of expert experiences, rather than produce a comprehensive analysis of all possible subjects within a given context (Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2006). Patton (1990) therefore acknowledged that the chosen sample size should be large enough to allow credibility, and small enough to obtain in-depth information. As outlined above, this process is often reliant upon a sample selection that has been purposefully, rather than

randomly, selected (Ezzy, 2002; Swanborn, 2010; Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Tesch (1990) thereby suggested that any scrutiny and focus placed upon participant samples should be directed towards the quality and detail of the information obtained, rather than the size of the research sample from which it came. In so doing, my energy was focused upon capturing carded athletes' lived experience and meaning rather than ensuring an excess of participant numbers in order to satisfy qualitative critics.

This investigation involved 17 athletes who were chosen in an effort to reflect my desire to gain sufficiently detailed information across a variety of participants' experiences within the carded athlete system. These 17 participants consisted of seven male and ten female carded athletes from around New Zealand, representing varying ages, sporting codes, competitive histories, and carding levels. Specifically, the participants ranged in age from 17 - 45 years ( $M = 27.7$  years) and had, on average, 13.35 years of competitive experience within their carded sporting code. Each member of the research sample had in the past represented, or continued to represent New Zealand in their chosen sporting code. The sample also consisted of four past or present World Champions and five Olympic or Commonwealth Games medallists. The athletes ranged in carding level from 1 - 4 ( $M = 1.88$ ), and had, on average, 3.94 years of experience within the carding system. Specific demographic information pertaining to each participant is provided below;

*Kate (17 years old):*

Kate started playing basketball at primary school when she was ten years old. She first represented New Zealand in an U16 age group team and is currently involved in three basketball teams; one school and two representative sides. This means that she trains for at least two hours a day, seven days a week. Kate has been carded as a level two athlete for the past two years.

*Mia (31 years old):*

Mia has played basketball since she was about seven or eight years of age. She first represented New Zealand as a junior and went on to spend a number of years in the New Zealand Tall Ferns team before recently retiring. While a member of the Tall Ferns Mia trained approximately two hours a day, six days a week. Before retiring Mia had been carded for three years as a level two athlete.

*Susan (45 years old):*

Susan started playing bowls when she was 17. At first this involvement was just at a club and regional level, however, she eventually went on to represent New Zealand in several international series. Susan estimates that she spends about four hours a week training or practising for her sport. Prior to recently losing her carding privileges, Susan had been carded for five years. During this time she started out being carded at level four before later becoming a level two athlete.

*Jan (34 years old):*

Jan became interested in cricket as a child; however, due to the unavailability of a girl's cricket side in her local region she did not start playing in a proper team until she was 15 years of age. She first played representative cricket in youth and age group teams, before going on to make the New Zealand White Ferns squad at the age of 27. Jan was later dropped and then reselected into this team over subsequent years. She currently trains at least six days a week for cricket and is carded as a level one athlete.

*Kelly (22 years old):*

Kelly also began playing cricket as a child and first played for the New Zealand Women's side as a 19 year old. During the cricket season she typically trains two or more hours a day, six days a week. Kelly became a carded cricketer while she was still at high school. Originally she held a level three or four carding status before becoming a level two and then finally level one carded athlete during her time in the White Ferns.

*Jaime (38 years old):*

Jaime became involved in cycling about 12 years ago, firstly as a road cyclist and then later as a mountain biker. Initially this interest started as a fun form of exercise but she eventually began cycling competitively a few years later. Jaime was first

asked to ride for the Para-Olympics while at a mountain biking event in 2000. She currently represents her country in both road and track cycling and trains for at least two to three hours, six days a week. Jaime became carded in 2001. Initially this was at a level one carding status; however, after the last Olympic Games she was re-carded as a level two athlete.

*Cam (21 years old):*

Cam got involved in mountain biking through an initial interest in motor cross. He began biking competitively in early 2000 while he was still studying at high school. In 2002 Cam was selected to go to the Junior World Championships after winning the NZ junior title. He has since continued to ride competitively, both nationally and internationally. He currently trains six days a week for an average of about three or more hours a day. Cam is currently carded as a level three athlete; however, during his time within the carded athlete system he has experienced on-going periods of de-carding and re-carding.

*Helen (31 years old):*

Helen started playing hockey when she was just four years old and made her first representative side as an eight year old in a regional U12 team. Helen went on to represent New Zealand at U16 and U18 levels before eventually making it into the New Zealand Women's Black Sticks team. Helen recently retired from all forms of

hockey; however, during the hockey season she typically trained about 18 to 20 hours per week. This included both a morning and an afternoon training, six days a week. Helen became carded when she made the Black Sticks, firstly as a level one player and then later in her career as a level two athlete.

*Peter (30 years old):*

Peter began participating in hockey when he was about eight years of age and has been playing pretty much ever since. He first represented New Zealand as a 15 year old in a New Zealand U16 team; however, he then failed to make another New Zealand team until he was about 21. Peter was eventually selected into the New Zealand Men's Black Sticks team when he was 23. He currently trains five days a week. Peter was first carded as a level two player in 2001, but he lost his carding the following year after he was dropped from the New Zealand Men's side. Peter was re-carded again in 2003 after making it back into the Black Sticks and has been a carded athlete ever since.

*Beth (23 years old):*

Beth began rowing when she was in high school. She was first selected to represent New Zealand in 2000 as a junior and has since made a number of representative crews. She currently trains seven days a week for a total of around 35 hours. Beth

was first carded three years ago when she made the New Zealand U23 crew. She is currently carded as a level three athlete.

*Matt (28 years old):*

Matt started his rowing career in 1996 or 1997 as a university student. Initially he took up the sport for a bit of fun and after a couple of years he retired. He got back into rowing soon after the Sydney Olympics. Until that moment, Matt had considered himself a social rower, but in 2001 he was selected into the New Zealand development squad and his rowing involvement became more serious. He currently trains about 30hrs a week, six days a week. Matt was first carded five years ago as a level four and then a level three athlete. Recent results have meant that Matt is now currently carded as a level one athlete.

*Ben (23 years old):*

Ben started rowing in 1997 while he was still at high school. He first represented New Zealand in 2000 when he made the New Zealand Men's Junior crew and has since gone on to represent New Zealand at the U23 and elite level. Ben currently trains six days a week for around 24 hours in total. He was first carded soon after his selection as a New Zealand Junior and is currently carded as a level one athlete.

*Nick (24 years old):*

Nick started rowing in 1995 while he was a third former at high school. Before joining the New Zealand elite squad in 2003, he rowed in NZ junior, development, universities, and U23 crews. Nick currently trains six days a week for around 25-30 hours a week. He has been carded for five years and currently has a level one carding status.

*Lucy (29 years old):*

Lucy started playing rugby as a five year old, although she was later pulled from the sport at age seven when her father became concerned that she might injure herself. She eventually returned to rugby in her early teens; however, she acknowledged that she only became serious about the sport when she was 25. This was when she trialed, and was selected, for the New Zealand Black Ferns rugby team. As part of this team she currently trains about 12 or 13 hours a week. Lucy has been carded since 2003 and is currently a level one status athlete.

*Holly (33 years old):*

Holly first started playing club rugby while she was a university student. She went on to represent her province and was eventually selected as a New Zealand Black Fern in 1995. Holly maintained her place in this team until her recent retirement. Before retiring, Holly was training about three hours a day, five days a week. Upon the

inception of carding, Holly was carded as a level one athlete and she maintained this carding status until the end of her career.

*Simon (20 years old):*

Simon started playing squash after his father introduced him to the sport when he was just 11 years of age. Up until he turned 15, Simon also played tennis and rugby, however after this age he chose to specialise solely in squash. Simon first represented New Zealand as an 18 year old when he attended the Junior World Championships. Since then he has also represented New Zealand at the Senior Men's level. Simon currently trains around 15 hours a week, including gym workouts and on court practice. Simon has been a carded level three squash player since 2001.

*John (22 years old):*

John started playing squash around the age of thirteen. Initially this was for social and fitness reasons; however, his involvement became more competitive when he was 16. He first represented New Zealand in squash at the age of 18 as a U19 player and then went on to make the New Zealand Senior Men's team in 2005. John currently trains around 20 to 25 hours a week and rarely has a day where he does not play or train for squash. He has been a carded squash player since 2002 and was initially carded as a level four player but has since achieved level three status.

## ***Procedure***

### *Initial contact:*

A letter was sent to ten pre-selected NSOs requesting access to the contact details of carded athletes who met the criteria for inclusion in the investigation (Appendix A). In accordance with the purposeful sampling procedures discussed above, these ten sporting codes were chosen in order to achieve a balance of participants from team, individual, and SPARC's 'priority' and 'non-priority' sports. Accompanying this letter was an information pack about the investigation (Appendix B), as well as a copy of the participant and parental consent forms and the interview guide for the first round of interviews (Appendix C and D respectively). Eight of the ten sports agreed to allow their athletes to be contacted and invited to participate in the investigation. These sports were: bowls, basketball, cricket, cycling, hockey, rowing, rugby, and squash. Once this permission had been granted, information packs and consent forms were then distributed to past and present carded athletes within each of these sporting codes. All athletes who responded to the call for participants, and who met the sampling criteria, were included in the study. The final list of participants consisted of one athlete from bowls, two athletes from basketball, cycling, cricket, hockey, rugby, and squash respectively, and four athletes from the sport of rowing.

### *Interviews:*

Interviews have long been a key component of qualitative research due to their ability to capture participants' underlying perceptions of particular social worlds (Chenail,

2011; Rabionet, 2011). Specifically, interviews work to provide a framework within which respondents can express meaning and understanding of their own experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1990). In so doing, interviews provide the researcher with valuable insight into events and circumstances in which they did not participate and cannot directly observe. As the purpose of using interviews is to uncover an individual's meaning generation, there is an underlying assumption that the individuals' perspectives are in fact noteworthy and able to be explicitly communicated (Patton, 1990; Swanborn, 2010). Emphasis is therefore placed upon the comprehension and expression of knowledge between the researcher and the research participant, with specific attention being given to the generation of interview questions. As such, the role of the interviewer is crucial when collecting participant narratives (Carless & Douglas, 2013; De Fina, 2009).

In this instance, a semi-structured interview approach was considered to be the most effective way to both explore and examine athletes' carding experiences. The advantage of this approach is that it provides respondents with an opportunity to freely express their viewpoint, something that is missing from more structured interviews or questionnaire-based research approaches (Flick, 1998). Specifically, the open-ended procedure allowed me to craft the interview process in a way that ensured a complete coverage of the topics under investigation while maintaining the individualistic nature of the participants' accounts (Chenail, 2011; Dilley, 2004). Therefore, in addition to promoting a somewhat consistent array of themes to be addressed with all participants, this process also enabled flexibility to meander into

broader, yet related, topics during the interview process (Barbour, 2008; Potter, 1996).

The first round of interviews with each athlete lasted between one and two hours and involved a series of open-ended and follow-up questions developed for the purpose of this investigation (Appendix D). In order to ensure the athletes felt comfortable with the interview environment, they were able to choose the location for their interviews. Ten athletes decided to conduct the interviews at their own home, a further five athletes choose local cafés, while the remaining two athletes choose to conduct the interviews at their place of employment. All interviews were able to proceed without distraction or any adverse interruption. Although all participants had previously signed the informed consent documents prior to meeting with me face to face, this document was again reviewed before commencing each interview. Specifically, I emphasised their rights to confidentiality and individual discretion to withdraw or choose not to answer a question at any point during the interview process. During this time, informal discussions also occurred around the overall intent of the investigation.

Atkinson and Delamont (2006) acknowledge that participant narratives are not gathered within a social vacuum, but produced within a specific social context. Hence, all interaction between the researcher and research participants contributes to the overall co-construction of participants' narrative account (Carless & Douglas, 2013; De Fina, 2009, De Fina & Perrino, 2011). Consequently, it was important that

participants were able to discuss matters related to the research project with me, as the researcher. During these discussions, I answered any questions or concerns that they may have had and highlighted that the interview process was about gaining their views and experiences about the carded athlete programme. The athletes were also told that there were no right or wrong answers and that they should instead attempt to answer the interview questions as honestly as possible. These discussions provided an opportunity to develop a sense of rapport and shared interest between myself and the athletes (Kvale, 1996; Polkinghorne, 2007).

The interview guide used for the first round of interviews was developed on the basis of a literature review and the study's underlying research questions. It consisted of six key areas of interest: sport history and background; life as an athlete; impact of carding on life as an athlete; impact of carding on life in general; overall perceptions of carding; and overall perceptions of themselves and others. Although the interviews were semi-structured, the open-ended nature of questions meant that the athletes were empowered to speak fully and freely about their carded athlete experiences (Patton, 1990). As the interviews evolved, elaboration and clarification probes and prompts were used to further deepen the athlete narratives. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview approach also allowed for these topics to be raised in accordance with the ebb and flow of the athletes' responses. This process helped to refine and clarify each athlete's account, thus providing an in-depth understanding of the specific points being raised by each participant (Stephan & Brewer, 2007).

In order to ensure participants had adequate opportunity to share the full account of their overall carding experiences, follow-up interviews were also conducted. This second round of interviews allowed me the time and ability to build stronger relationships with the athletes. All but four of the original 17 participants took part in these follow-up interviews. Of the athletes who were unavailable, three were out of the country or too busy during the timing of the second round of data collection, while the remaining athlete purposefully chose not to take part after his initial interview. This second round of interviews followed a similar semi-structured interview approach. Specifically, new open-ended questions were generated based upon the three underlying aims of the research project (Appendix E). In addition to asking questions based upon these generic topics of interest, specific questions were also tailored for each athlete in order to more fully explore some of the themes and responses from their initial interview. This enabled me to probe in more detail those responses initially missed or not specifically clarified during the first interview sessions (Lally, 2007). These clarifications and probes continued until the athlete's examples and thoughts no longer generated new or varied meanings (Becker, 1992). In completing this process, Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen, and Spiers (2002) have suggested that researchers are able to collect a 'complete' and in-depth account of participants' overall ideas and experiences.

### *Data Analysis*

The purpose of inductive analysis is to produce a consolidated and thorough account of the situation or discourse under consideration (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012; Tesch, 1990). The interpretation of the research data therefore requires the researcher to uncover and assign meaning, significance and explanation to the many and varied perspectives shared during the investigation (Patton, 1990). In so doing, primary importance is placed on ensuring that any eventual system of categorisation and subsequent representation remains a ‘true’ reflection of the original interview narrative, while providing an overall summary of the themes that emerge from all participants (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996; Wolcott, 2009). This means that any organisational grouping of interview data is at first only conditional as it is established before being constantly revised during the analysis procedure (Richards, 2009). As each subsequent interview transcript is considered, themes from the original classification are used to help orient the analysis process, while still allowing the researcher to search for the emergence of new issues within the remaining accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The data analysis procedure therefore continues as a flexible entity until all information can be accounted for and explained within the chosen thematic categorisations (Tesch, 1990).

Transcribing the interviews, verbatim, allowed me to become more attuned to the nuances and flow of what each athlete said before beginning the more detailed analysis procedure (Fischer, 2006; Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Each transcript was

read several times in order to further ensure my familiarity with the narratives. A preliminary descriptive report, outlining my initial interpretations of what each athlete was saying, was then written for each interview. Each participant was given the opportunity to read over and amend, or add to any of their responses. This form of member checking helps to ensure that a complete and accurate description of each participant's experiences, opinions and points of view is obtained and considered (Morse et al., 2002; Polkinghorne, 2007). Upon receipt of the athletes' checked documents I then searched for further themes and meaning portrayed within their individual accounts of life within the carding system. This coding process was guided by the aim of obtaining an accurate representation of life within New Zealand's athlete carding system, as well as the desire to better understand how the experience of being in this system shaped the individual athletes' lives.

The extrapolation of subsequent categories that emerged from the athletes' accounts were used to create to a coherent and comprehensive whole (Maxwell, 1996; Tesch, 1990). Specifically, this process involved collating each of the athletes' interview transcripts into a collective narrative for each significant theme. The emergent themes addressed the impact of carding and importance of elite sport on athletes' lives, as well as the impact of both carding and elite sport involvement on the athletes' overall identities. In order to ensure that the athletes' voices were heard throughout the data representation process, I chose to present the research findings as a modified realist tale. This meant that while I accepted some responsibility over the authorship of the academic text, I did not proclaim to have authority over the views of the interview

participants. Consequently, while still representing my own involvement in the process of presenting the athletes' words, I used verbatim quotes from the athletes' interviews to reveal their experiences. These accounts therefore allowed a comprehensive view of their individual and collective experiences within the athlete carding programme. This transparency also helps to position the reader to make judgements about the benefits and trustworthiness of the research process and subsequent representation of the participants.

*Trustworthiness:*

Qualitative researchers have typically turned to Guba and Lincoln's (1981, 1982) seminal work on trustworthiness, in order to establish academic rigour and credibility. These researchers proposed a variety of techniques to identify and correct interpretation errors prior to their inclusion within the data analysis process. In order to establish trustworthiness within the current analysis procedure, this project therefore mirrored Guba and Lincoln's approach and addressed the underlying concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In each instance, a variety of strategies were used to ensure the quality of both the data collected and the conclusions reached.

Specifically, the methodological strategies of peer debriefing and member checking were used to enhance the overall credibility of the study. The main purpose of peer debriefing is to enhance the credibility of the researcher by exploring researcher

biases, discussing methodological issues, and clarifying interpretations. For this investigation the disinterested peer was someone who had knowledge of the methodological issues and area of study, but who was not directly involved in the investigation. In contrast, member checking involves the confirmation of transcript records and interpretations by the participants themselves (Hanson & Newburg, 1992). This process is important as it ensures that the accounts of lived experience resonate with those whom they depict (Lally & Kerr, 2005). In so doing, member checking decreases the likelihood that misinterpretation or confusion occurs when trying to represent participants' perspectives (Polkinghorne, 2007; Silverman, 2006). This process also ensures that the narrative accounts remain participant driven (Lally & Kerr, 2005). During this study I employed two forms of member checking. Firstly, during each interview I rephrased the athletes' responses to ensure a full understanding of their statements had been reached. Secondly, preliminary reports were written for each of the athletes, who were then requested to read, evaluate and change any of my interpretations that they did not agree with. This process helped reassure me that my interpretations were a true reflection of each participant's individual account and perspective.

Transferability was achieved via the process of thick description (see Geertz, 1973, 2003, for a review). Thick description involves providing a detailed and complete picture of the social context under investigation in order to judge the soundness of one's developing theories (Maxwell, 1996; Polkinghorne, 2007). The aim is to provide enough information "to allow the reader to make an informed decision about

whether the information presented is relevant to his/her situation” (Hanson & Newburg, 1992, p. 37). Thus, thick description details the data collection and analysis procedures so that the reader can take part in concluding whether the study is relevant to his or her own particular societal context (Smith, 1996). Transferability exists if the participants’ perceptions are reported vividly enough to have meaning within the reader’s reality (Patton, 1990).

Finally, dependability and confirmability of results was ensured through the processes of an audit trail and reflexive journal. An audit trail was undertaken by an auditor to examine the overall process of inquiry. Specifically, an auditor looks to examine the process of theory generation and overall interpretation of the collected data (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996). In this case, the auditor (a colleague at the University of Canterbury) examined random samples of the ‘raw data’ to check the patterns, interpretations and conclusions I had reached. By examining aspects of the entire study from data collection to final analysis, the auditor was able to ensure that my thematic interpretations were logical and coherent, and that the conclusions that I had drawn were an accurate representation of each athlete’s experiences of the carding system. I also ensured dependability and confirmability by keeping a reflexive journal throughout the investigation. Reflexive journals typically consist of a daily schedule, personal reflections and a methodological log detailing decisions and rationale regarding the various methods utilised (Barbour, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). By recording daily tasks, reflections, methodological issues, and the way in which data were processed, the diary became a

further tool for the auditor to use when assessing the dependability and confirmability of the researcher and the investigation (Barbour, 2008; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996).

## **Findings**

By allowing athletes to share their narratives, and speak openly about the carding system in which they are involved, the current research provides insight into the lived experiences of a previously silenced, yet growing population of New Zealand athletes. This chapter presents these athletes' stories and experiences within the carding system; including the impact of services, financial support and recognition. The chapter will also address the importance of elite sport in these athletes' lives, how they came to live this lifestyle and the factors influencing the role that sport plays within their daily lives. Lastly I will share the athletes' thoughts on transitioning out of the elite sport environment. It is hoped that this information will better inform policy makers about the impact of current elite sport policy.

### *Athletes' Experiences within the Athlete Carding System*

#### *The Impact of Carding on Athletes' Lives*

##### *Utilisation of support services and impact on performance:*

Intent on nurturing their sporting talents, these athletes relished the increased levels of support on offer upon becoming part of the NZAS's carding system. Most of this support came through the provision of sport science and medical services, such as sports nutrition, psychology, physiologists, trainers, massage therapists, doctors, and physiotherapists. As the majority of athletes had never previously accessed this type of assistance, the carding system was seen to open up an array performance

enhancing tools. Champion rower Matt felt that access to this support was *“positively affecting the lives [of athletes] by making it easier [for them] to have access to the services that they need”*. New Zealand White Fern Jan appreciated knowing people were on tap to help her whenever she needed them. *“It is just nice to [know that]... you can always just pick up the phone and it doesn’t matter what sort of question you have got because they are always going to be there.”*

Access to these wide ranging services left athletes believing they were making more informed training decisions. Kelly stated, *“I have learnt to train better, smarter”*, while hockey player Peter shared the view that *“[It] has just made training more scientific. You are seeing the benefits of what you are doing and you go to fitness training and you can see the testing results”*. Many athletes also felt that the overall impact of this support could be seen in their sporting performances. Susan, who had a long history of playing lawn bowls before eventually being selected as part of the New Zealand team, revealed, *“I wasn’t consistent when I was first got my carding... [But] through my carding... I did get better... The wins started to come more than [the] losses”*. Like Susan, the majority of athletes deemed that carding was helping to make them better sportspeople. Most were also under the impression that carding had given them the opportunity to excel on the international sporting stage. Simon, a newly capped member of the New Zealand men’s squash team, declared, *“[carding] makes a big impact... It gives [athletes]... support to... excel... and... really have a go at their sport”*.

*Impact of financial support:*

The fact that this support was being offered free of charge did not go unnoticed. Most athletes realised they would never be able to access the services had the cost not been covered by the carding system. Olympic cyclist Jamie explained, *“I am quite fortunate that... those services are available and I don’t have to pay for them. [Otherwise] I wouldn’t be able to afford... to use those things. In that respect [carding] is pretty important”*. For this reason, the athletes were extremely grateful for their selection into the Academy of Sport’s programme. With most athletes forgoing regular pay cheques in order to train and compete in their chosen sport, any form of financial assistance was very much appreciated. Beth’s gratitude was highlighted when she discussed how carding allowed her to address injury and illness concerns.

*None of us have really got much money... We are all so poor that there [are times when you] think “oh, I have to go to the physio or the Doctor”, but you think “no, it costs too much... I just won’t go”. [That is when carding becomes] really helpful.*

The availability of free medical treatment meant that Beth was able to seek out and utilise these services whenever she needed. Matt, too, believed that *“You [are able] to catch [things] early [because you have access to help]”*. The financial assistance on

offer was therefore warmly received and widely thought to be benefiting the lives of these elite sportspeople.

All athletes reported an increase in financial support upon becoming part of the carding system, with funding arriving in the form of Performance Enhancement Grants (PEGs), Prime Minister's scholarships, living allowances, as well as the access to sport science and medical service providers. This increased support meant athletes could better focus on their sporting pursuits, with some no longer needing to work in order to financially sustain their athletic lifestyles. Black Sticks hockey player Peter shared, "[Carding] means that you can just be an athlete and not have to stress about anything else". For athletes like Nick, whose typical training workload consisted of around 25-30 hours of rowing a week, this was a godsend. He attributed financial freedom with improving his rowing capabilities, stating "*If I wasn't PEG's funded I would worry more about work and I would [have to] work more... and that would detract from my recovery and my focus on rowing*". Seasoned athletes even credited these increased funding opportunities with actually prolonging their sporting careers. Thirty-one-year-old Mia stated, "*I definitely wouldn't have continued to play... if there was no carding system... The fact that I knew that I could get those sorts of services provided... without a doubt prolonged my career*". Likewise Holly and Helen both agreed that the 2001 launch of the carded athlete programme had unmistakably played a role in maintaining their own sporting involvement.

Yet despite funding positively impacting athletes' abilities to devote themselves to their sport, and maintain this level of commitment over sustained periods of time, older athletes often felt that their younger peers took this support for granted. Mia, one of the more experienced athletes interviewed during the study, declared, "[Now] *a lot of the girls know no different... They are getting... anything that they might need... I think back to how we had it [and in comparison] I spent thousands of dollars playing basketball up until [carding came in].*" Likewise Helen, who had been part of the carding system since its inception, shared "*You come to expect it [and] people don't realise... what they think is free is actually being paid for by the carding system. I don't think... athlete[s] actually appreciate that the services actually get paid for*". Helen felt that tackling this lack of awareness may also address what some athletes referred to as a growing culture of entitlement. "*New athletes that come in now just expect... [They] take, take, take and probably don't appreciate [it]... I think that because it is all laid on that people just take it for granted*". To help athletes recognise the money that was being spent on them she suggested:

*[Giving] them a summary invoice at the end of the year... that showed exactly what was spent on them as an individual. Because... probably a hockey player is worth about \$40 grand each. You would just think "wow, someone is funding me \$40 grand a year and I haven't noticed it" (Helen).*

Without such changes, Helen feared athletes entering the current elite sport system would fail to fully realise the financial value of what was being provided to them.

*Recognition and related expectations:*

Despite some athletes failing to appreciate the monetary value of what was on offer, all gained a sense of achievement from being selected into the carded athlete programme. Lawn bowler Susan described feeling *“special... because... it is a privilege to be able to represent your country... There are not many in NZ that [have had that opportunity]”*. The athletes also saw their carded status as an acknowledgement of the effort and hard work they were putting in as elite sportspeople. Basketball player Mia shared, *“When the carding system came in... I thought “Oh shit, we really are acknowledged”... Other people are recognising that we are competing and training just as much and just as hard as everyone else”*. While World Champion rower Matt revealed, *“It was nice to sort of... know that you are valued by the sport... You know that you are important and people are concerned about your health and well-being and what you are trying to achieve”*.

Related to this recognition, however, came an increased sense of expectation. After the initial glow of the carding reward had begun to wear off, each of the athletes noticed increasing external demands within their sport environment. Training and effort requirements were amplified, with greater workloads and training outputs now being expected. These expectations appeared to impact on every aspect of

performance. Jamie stated, “*Before I became carded I just trained... and I did okay... But now all this technical stuff is coming in... and I have got [fitness] testing and all sorts of things that I never had before, so it... is more stressful*”. Athletes responded both positively and negatively to perceptions of escalating expectation. For instance, Mia welcomed the accountability that came with her carding, sharing,

*If other people are taking it seriously enough to provide you with those services then... you treat it more professionally... [Before carding I think] there would be the tendency to think that if you didn't produce [results] well then, you know, who would even notice?... But now it is a bit different and I think it probably does make people more accountable.*

However, other athletes felt negatively about the pressure that came with being included within New Zealand's high performance sport structure. Lucy, a member of the Black Ferns rugby team, believed sportspeople were being placed under too much external scrutiny. She explained:

*There is too much pressure put on the elite athletes of NZ. I think that they should have the ability to be able to breathe a lot more. Be more human; just be people rather than being a status symbol... [They are looked at like]...*

*“We are going to get a gold medal from her, we will get a good bronze from that one”, rather than just saying “let’s hope she achieves her personal best”.*

Lucy associated these performance expectations with the funding supplied to athletes in the carding programme. Although she greatly appreciated the support that her carded status afforded her, she shared, *“The support is not unconditional, that is for sure. You know there is pressure there”*. Similar perceptions were common across all participants, with most athletes recognising that certain levels of performance were expected in return for the funding and services being provided. Pressure to reach targeted milestones was also linked to securing future or additional funding. Mia described this pressure when she recounted her experiences at the 2006 Commonwealth Games. *“I think our semi-final was almost more important than the final... because we had to medal. I feel like we ran to death... seven players in that semi-final because we were going to leave absolutely nothing to chance”*.

Most athletes, however, acknowledged that such pressure was part and parcel of being in a high performance environment, and readily accepted the conditions associated with the support being offered. Seventeen-year-old age group representative, Kate, felt that Basketball New Zealand’s expectations on her time and effort was acceptable because *“They are putting money into you so you had better work well for them”*. Similarly Jan, an older athlete, acknowledged that *“[Carding] is not just free money that is given out just because you play sport at certain level, you*

*have to have a performance measure against it*". Carding's performance-based structure was also seen by many athletes to mirror workplace scrutiny found elsewhere within society and thus was not seen to be unacceptably unfair or unusual. Additionally, despite some dismay over the pressures associated with becoming carded, no athlete was willing to part with their services in order to reduce these expectations. Instead, all of the athletes expressed a desire to enhance, or at least maintain, their current levels of support. Although this could be construed as an apparent acceptance of the current programme, it would still seem prudent to monitor any further increases in carding expectations. With considerable training requirements already in place, any additional expectations may end up affecting athlete enjoyment and career longevity. The extensive demands on time and effort involved at the elite sport level have also been found to impact an individual's ability to explore a variety of life roles, thereby limiting their potential for forming alternative role identities. The following section will therefore address the specific role sport plays in these athletes' lives, as well as examine how it has shaped the identities of New Zealand's carded athletes.

### ***The Importance of Elite Sport on Athletes' Lives and Their Identities***

#### ***Becoming and Living the Elite Existence***

The athletes in this study had embarked on their sporting journeys well before reaching elite levels, with most having participated for an average of 13 years in the sport for which they were eventually carded. This enduring involvement meant that a

lifestyle consumed by sport was firmly entrenched by the time they had become part of SPARC's carded athlete system. Exploring what initiated this participation therefore seemed integral to understanding what it means to live the elite sport existence. For some, the desire for sporting greatness began very early in life. Twenty-two-year old Kelly played her first game of cricket at her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday party. She recalled, "*I didn't want to be playing inside with the girls so I went out and played with the boys... [Luckily for me they happened to be] playing cricket at the time*". Even at this rather young age Kelly was drawn to representing her country. "[As soon as] *I started playing cricket all I wanted to do was play... for New Zealand... I was just driven... [It became] my life goal*". This dream was eventually realised when she made the New Zealand women's side at age 19. Black Stick hockey player, Peter, confessed to similar early aspirations. "*I [began playing hockey when I] was about eight [and made my first representative New Zealand side when I was 15]... I knew I wanted to [represent my country] from a very young age. That was my dream*". Despite this first early selection, it was a further eight years before Peter made his next representative side, the New Zealand senior men's team. He shared, "*it took a little longer than other people but I got there eventually*". While both Kelly and Peter were fortunate enough to eventually achieve their dreams of reaching national honours, not all of the participants started out in their athletic pursuits with such an explicit goal in mind.

The majority of athletes became interested in their sport through the involvement of friends and family. Jan explained, "*My dad played cricket... and I would go down*

*and watch him play and just sort of play around in the nets with my brother*". It wasn't until she discovered that she was in fact quite talented that Jan explored the possibility of seeking out a sporting lifestyle for herself. *"Once I... found a team and found other girls [to play with, I worked out] that I was actually quite good... [After that I] just wanted more really"* (Jan). After comparing her skills and sporting talent, Jan realised cricket provided an opportunity to stand out in the crowd. Athletic participation was therefore embraced and nurtured, and for many of these athletes it became fundamental in establishing their burgeoning self-identities. Twenty-two-year-old John explained, *"[Playing squash meant my life became about] activeness... making a conscious decision to get up [each] morning and training, playing, coaching, whatever"*. Similarly, immensely proud of her achievements, Susan would often introduce herself by saying, *"I am a bowler and I have represented NZ four times"*. She said, *"when I do that, I sort of stick my chest out a bit"*. Nick, too, cheerfully admitted that friends described him as *"that rowing guy [because] that is [really] all I do"*. Welcoming this label he explained, *"there is no detriment or anything to it so... I don't really care... If anyone asks [me] what I do I [do] say "I row"*". Yet while some athletes openly embraced their elite sport lifestyles, others seemed clearly startled to be defined purely by their sporting talents. Twenty-four-year-old Beth, who, despite being heavily involved in competitive rowing since her early high school days, revealed,

*There are times when I sit out there and you are rowing along and I think to myself it is amazing that so much of my time is taken up doing this (laughs)...*

*And I still think “Oh, I’m a rower!” ... It’s just surprising... We are definitely rowers... but there are times when you think “man, how did I get here, how did I turn out to be a rower?”*

Swept up within New Zealand Rowing’s high performance programme sport had seemingly engulfed Beth’s life without her knowledge. *“I have never really stopped and thought about it I guess... It’s easier to keep going rather than stopping and looking at why you are doing it and why you maybe shouldn’t be doing it”*. Failing to reflect and regularly take stock of her life meant she became a passive, but enthusiastic, participant in the elite sport environment. Similar accounts were shared by other athletes who, when questioned about their involvement, appeared surprised at the influence elite sport had over their lives. Despite 14 years of involvement, including three world cup winning campaigns with the New Zealand Black Ferns, Holly had been genuinely astonished when she realised that *“everything in my house [was] rugby focused... I had rugby pictures up everywhere and all my friends are through rugby and... I have awards everywhere”*. She revealed it took a career threatening injury for her to fully comprehend that sport had taken over her life. *“[I realised rugby was] just such a big part of my identity that I [couldn’t] imagine not doing it. I [was thinking] “what am I going to do when I finish?” And “who am I going to be?”* Although originally reluctant to categorise herself as an elite sports person, injury and the prolific nature of her sporting involvement left Holly considering how she defined both herself and her lifestyle. Forced to re-evaluate

priorities and gain greater control over the direction that her life was heading in, she explained,

*When I didn't make the team last year I realised that life actually does carry on... outside of sport... and... people didn't treat me any differently. I think that was quite good for me to realise... I have a totally different philosophy about [rugby] now and I think it is better for me.*

Most athletes, including both Beth and Holly, however accepted that some form of athletic identity was clearly associated with participating at the elite level. Their uncertainty instead lay in the extent to which sport needed to dominate other aspects of their life. For instance, Beth shared that “[Rowing] *is not the only thing that I am or that I do* [so I] *don't want to be categorised [just] as a rower*”. Likewise, 17-year-old Kate stated, “*I like to think I am not [just a basketballer], like I am a person*”. While tacitly accepting that the athletic label helped to explain the uniqueness of their lifestyle, these athletes disliked being identified solely for their sporting achievements. Thus, regardless of why an athlete set about to become an elite performer, the role that sport eventually played within this life was significant. Whilst athletes like Beth and Kate perceived their sporting selves to be only a small part of their overall identity, others firmly believed that elite sport needed to be the prevalent driving force behind their lives. These differing points of view are explored further in the following section.

### *The Role and Place of Elite Sport in Athletes' Lives*

A desire to maintain some form of life balance resonated through each of the athletes' stories. Despite debate over how realistic it was for this to actually transpire, most agreed balance was about being free to explore a range of activities across a variety of domains. Helen, Kelly, John and Peter all spoke of needing "*something [in your life]... that totally takes you away from [your] sport*" (Helen). This meant the majority of athletes actively tried to pursue interests and experiences outside of their sporting endeavours. Career-minded Mia and Nick chased work goals in addition to their athletic dreams: "[balance is about] *making time to work hard and play hard*" (Mia), while other athletes sought out friends, other sports or study. Lucy, a rugby player working towards her Master's degree, felt that "*It is good to just get away from sport sometimes... for my mind to be able to just switch off and talk about something else that is completely random or irrespective of what it is that I do*". Peter credited participation in activities outside of the sport environment with increasing his overall athletic performance. Reflecting on his time with the New Zealand men's hockey team, he stated,

*You need to have some little job or something that keeps you away from it... [Looking] back on the team... the guys that were working were performing better than the guys that weren't working... Rather than just turning up to training they were turning up and going "Right I am going to train hard and then I will go to work"... [They had more] focus.*

Helen, a recently-retired member of the Black Sticks hockey team, also believed that outside interests helped keep athletes grounded within the world at large. *“It’s important for sports people to have something that makes them normal or else otherwise you just lose sight of the real world”*. This desire was fairly widespread, with the majority of athletes eager to portray themselves as ‘normal’ members of society. Most believed their lifestyles were not dissimilar to those of people living outside of elite sport environments. Participation, no matter how small, in activities away from the sporting lifestyle appeared to be the way for athletes to cling firmly to this belief. Beth revealed, *“[When I don’t have rowing I like to do] things around the house. Sometimes I get away to see my family or friends for the weekend... Um yeah, just try and be normal”*. While Nick shared, *“We... make sure that we... [can have] a normal person’s lifestyle when we are not rowing”*. However, despite the athletes’ insistence that participation in activities away from their sport meant they were able to maintain some balance within their daily lives, the pervasiveness and demands of the elite sport lifestyle were still prevalent throughout each of the athletes’ stories.

Training and competition schedules resulted in periods where sport inevitably took priority. Although desiring life balance, not all athletes felt this was entirely realistic 100 per cent of the time. Helen exposed this predicament when she stated, *“I do get concerned when people have to give up things [because of their sport]... Some people do end up being very, very one dimensional”*, while also going on to say, *“It is not realistic for athletes to say “I have got this great career and I have got all these wonderful friends” because you just don’t have time”*. She demonstrated this struggle

when sharing a hand-written list of friends that was hanging upon her fridge. Having sat down with her husband the night before my visit, Helen had attempted to take stock of all the people she had lost contact with during her build up to the Commonwealth Games. The list mostly contained names of friends not involved in hockey and was written to ensure she reconnected with each of these people now that her sport was no longer her priority. Although this account reveals the potentially isolating effect of a sport-only focus, many of the athletes rationalised such concerns and accepted them as part of the necessary commitment needed to reach their sporting goals. Nick confessed:

*Probably 60-70% [of my week is] dedicated to rowing... It is high, there is no doubting that but if that is what you have got to do to succeed then... there is no point bemoaning it... That is what you have to do.*

Despite losing touch with many of her friends, Helen also believed “*You have to put [your sport] first... you have to make it the number one thing you are doing or otherwise you will never be any good*”. The basis for these justifications revealed the existence of a “*whatever it takes*” type attitude, with many athletes feeling compelled to minimise external distractions from their lives. Nick, Helen, Cam, Simon, Beth, and John all spoke of placing some aspect of their lives on hold, or in the distant background, so as not to disrupt their ultimate goal of sporting success at the highest level. For Cam, this meant shelving education and work opportunities while he spent

the majority of his time racing on the international downhill mountain bike circuit. He stated, *“If you dedicate something solely to one direction... you are better off... You have less distractions”*. Ben, too, prevented outside influences distracting him from achieving his dream of winning an Olympic gold medal for rowing. At 23 years of age, he had already experienced the dilemma of trying to juggle both his sport and his career. He recalled, *“When I first started I thought I could do everything, work and row, everything. But... then you realise that you can’t do everything... You have got to make a compromise”*. Touting the limited lifespan of an elite sports person, Ben explained, *“You have only got a limited shot at this... so it is about giving it all I can while I can”*.

All of the athletes, irrespective of their years of being carded, appeared to live with conflicting ideals about the amount of time, effort and importance required in order to pursue their sporting goals. While each expressed a need to stay connected with the world outside of the elite sport lifestyle, a tension remained over how such connections would impact upon their overall athletic ambitions. These two seemingly divergent points of view left athletes contemplating the realities of life balance within the world of elite sport involvement. In order to represent the narratives of New Zealand’s elite athletes it was therefore crucial to examine how this common journey got separated into these conflicting paths. Athlete discussions revealed a number of factors impacted on the role that sport played within their lives. The following section explores how the athletes’ career development, lifestyle choices and wider sport environment influenced their eventual journey.

### ***Factors Influencing the Role and Place of Elite Sport in Athletes' Lives***

#### *Athlete developmental stage/career phase:*

The stage of the athlete's career strongly influenced the place sport held within each individual's life. While seasoned athletes were eventually confronted with the idea that a sport-only identity was actually unsustainable, relative newcomers readily embraced this solitary focus. These recently-carded individuals, and those athletes still seeking to obtain their sporting goals, willingly prioritised their sporting involvement above all other aspects of their life. Beth, a fresh-faced novice in New Zealand's elite rowing squad, encapsulated this trend when she stated, "*Pretty much everything is on hold because of rowing... Rowing is our job at the moment... Every decision we make has to be based on... rowing*". One reason for such stoic displays of commitment during the early stages of one's elite sport career was the athletes' overwhelming desire to fit into this new and exciting world. Thrilled at being selected for Basketball New Zealand's high performance programme, 17-year-old Kate explained:

*"[It's] a real privilege really... It means that they think that you have the potential to make it so you have to just go hard... you have to put quite a lot of time and energy into it but that is [all] part of it".*

For Beth, this meant leaving behind friends, family and a partially-completed University degree in order to move to Cambridge and begin the rigorous training schedule expected of New Zealand Rowing's high performance squads. She shared that most major decisions in her life were now controlled by what "*other people [believed] we need to do to achieve our goals*". While she had very little influence over her daily schedule, Beth's unwavering dedication appeared to occur without any consideration for her future. "*There is never an open forum... We are all told what to do and we do it ... In terms of what it means to me [and my life after sport] I guess I don't even think about it*". Feeling indebted for her selection, and reluctant to rock the boat, Beth, like most newcomers, was willing to forgo almost anything in order to become a part of the elite sport environment.

Although recently-carded athletes, like Kate and Beth, firmly believed that an exclusive and absolute focus on their sport was necessary to ensure elite sporting achievement, athletes entering the later stages of their career did not share a similar outlook. Instead, experienced individuals, and athletes who had managed to meet their sporting objectives, credited a more holistic view of life with enhancing both their athletic performance and enjoyment. Thinking back on his crew's build up to the recent World Champs, Nick stated, "*We had quite a big balance in our lifestyle [and] I think that is why we actually went really well*". He added, "*You have got to have other things to do*", and suggested that sacrificing life balance in the name of sporting success was neither advantageous, nor sustainable. Peter, Lucy, Mia, Helen, and John expressed similar sentiments about their own performances. These athletes believed

that sporting goals were best served when pursuing other interests alongside their athletic dreams. Peter recalled, “[I achieved and enjoyed my sport more when I was] *having a life outside of hockey. Finding time to work and see my wife... Not having hockey control my life*”.

Similarly, Helen felt that balanced, or more holistic lifestyles, diminished the emotional trauma common when athletes became injured, de-selected or suffered from disappointing performances. She shared:

*You have to have balance, because if you made it the only thing that you did then you are setting yourself up for disaster... Early on [in my career] I would get named, get dropped, get named, get dropped. And it wasn't until... [I] created other avenues, so if I didn't make it, it wasn't going to be the end of the world, [that I relaxed and things got] easier.*

Establishing a life outside of sport meant disruptions, like de-selection, had little effect on Helen's overall sense of self-worth. Holly, too, believed in the importance of developing a life away from sport after witnessing rugby-mad ex-players struggle when their careers ended through eventual sport retirement. “*My friends that have stopped playing... found that transition quite hard... they just couldn't let go*”. Having experienced the fragilities of their athletic careers first-hand, Helen and Holly

highlighted the risk athletes take by focusing exclusively on their sport. In some circumstances, however, it was not solely the athletes who were responsible for this narrowing of focus. People within sport environments were also found to strongly influence whether the athletes would, or could, choose to participate in more than just their athletic pursuits.

*Sport facilitators:*

Athletes looked to those in charge of their environments to clarify the expectations required of carded athletes. The rules and regulations set out by the respective National Sports Organisations (NSOs) and coaching staff were seen to represent the behaviours expected of athletes competing in their high performance programmes. Many of these expectations specifically addressed the commitments required for that sport. This meant NSO's and coaches invariably exerted some control over whether athletes could explore interests away from the sporting arena. Some athletes described their support staff as outwardly encouraging them to develop lives away from their sport environment. Both Ben and Nick spoke highly of the fact that their rowing coach had encouraged them to explore and sight-see during down-time while competing in the European regatta series. “[Our] *coach would say “See as much as you can, do as much as you can... Go out and have a good time” ... He tries to get that balance [for us]”* (Nick). And rugby player Lucy stated, “*The Black Fern management [and ACE staff] are very supportive... [If I say] “I am not dealing with*

*the balance here”... they can say “perhaps you can try this”... [Helping me out] rather than [watching] me just crumbling under the pressure”.*

More often than not, however, coaches and managers were seen as being unsupportive of athletes pursuing interests outside of the elite sport environment. Despite being encouraged by his coach, Ben was aware that not everyone within New Zealand Rowing shared such sentiments. Recalling a previous conversation with his high performance manager, Ben revealed, *“He said “Balance is good [but only] up until a point... They don’t give out Olympic medals to people with balanced lives””*. Additionally, Beth, another rower, felt that the sheer logistical difficulty of taking part in activities outside of her sport showed New Zealand Rowing’s failure to consider athletes’ lives beyond what was necessary for their sport. Having approached her coach to discuss fitting university studies around her training, she found his response particularly unhelpful. *“I went up to... the coach to find out... what times we would be training so that I could pick my uni timetable and he said “oh, I am not really sure”*. In the end Beth *“just sort of [had to] assume”* what her training loads would be like and later found out that there were a multitude of clashes, stating, *“so I am... stuffed”*. She even admitted that at any stage her coach *“could just say “oh, we are now going to start training three times a day” ... [Which means] you can’t [really] do anything except for rowing because... you have to be available... [So] you [end up living] session to session”*. This lack of consideration for activities outside of rowing left Beth with little doubt that her effort to pursue university studies, while

maintaining her place within the high performance programme, was unsupported by many within the New Zealand Rowing organisation.

Other athletes, too, believed that NSOs, coaches and the Academy of Sport staff sent clear and explicit messages about the commitment levels expected when participating at the elite level. Kate, a 17-year-old female basketball player understood that being part of the Basketball New Zealand's carding programme meant that "*you have to put basketball [first because] you are not allowed to play any other sport*". While yet another rower shared, "[our coaches and management have said] "*You are here to row and it shouldn't matter what else you do*"... *they want to control everyone*" (Nick). Such perceptions were common across the participants, with many resolutely accepting that some degree of powerlessness went part and parcel with the elite sport lifestyle. Even so, there were still those athletes who wanted acknowledgement of their lives outside of sport;

*I [wished] that coaches understood [the pressures athletes are under] and maybe integrated the different parts of [their lives] a little bit more... [They just need to] understand that you have got other parts of your life and... that we can not sacrifice everything for our sport (Holly).*

For Holly, this integration meant considering both work and family commitments when planning and scheduling sporting requirements. However, Helen also felt that integration should involve coaches and managers looking upon players as a whole people, rather than just solely as athletes. *“You are forgotten the minute you are [no longer needed... That] concerns me when players devote everything [to their sport... NSOs] could maybe do... more about seeing people not just as athletes”*. As seasoned athletes, both Holly and Helen wanted to feel that they, and their interests and lives outside of the elite sport environment, were considered and valued. Unwilling to accept that pursuing sporting dreams meant sacrificing other life goals, these two athletes felt that those in charge of sport should care more about their athletes as a whole. Creating greater flexibility and encouraging athletes to explore outside interests would also reduce the risk of athletes becoming one-dimensional. This, too, is important as time constraints and the need to juggle lives solely around sporting schedules was a further contributor to the role that sport held within the athletes’ lives.

*Lifestyle and relationship conflict:*

The extensive commitment associated with elite sport impacted on the way in which athletes lived their lives. Jan echoed the thoughts of most athletes when she stated, *“because [of] training, a lot of my time is quite limited”*. It is uncertain the degree to which athletes understood the requirements of working at this level prior to receiving their carding, but they all spoke of a constant need to evaluate and adjust their

lifestyles in order to keep pace with these rising demands. Any desire to maintain some form of life balance meant the interests of friends, family, sport, work, studies, and other activities all needed to be negotiated. Despite the athletes' best intentions, some of these aspects of life were inevitably compromised whilst pursuing their sporting dream. Peter recognised this dilemma when he acknowledged, "*You just don't seem to have enough hours in the day to get everything done.*" The need to choose between activities was especially apparent amongst those athletes who prioritised their sport over alternative life choices. Peter felt the two areas most often affected by such decisions were education and employment. He shared, "*Work [or study ends up becoming] something you do [only] when you have got [the] time*". Stories of athletes' adapting, or placing work and study prospects on hold, in order to pursue sporting endeavours, were widespread. Olympic cyclist, Jamie, ended up changing her entire career path in order to better suit the requirements of her sport:

*When I first started at this level I was in a full time job ... and trying to fit training in around work... After Athens... I decided that if I was going to go to Beijing and have another go I needed to change my whole lifestyle... Now [I'm in] real estate [and my job] works around me.*

Ben, too, altered his career plans because of his rowing commitments. "*At first I didn't sort of like [the training schedule] because I try and hold down a job... but now I have come to realise that if you want to do well then [training needs to become*

your]... *job*". He subsequently reduced the hours he was working in order to concentrate on rowing fulltime throughout the year. A few years earlier, however, Ben had felt it was more important to prioritise his academic career over his sport. Despite having been selected to represent New Zealand in the U23 World Cup regatta, Ben chose to pass up this opportunity in order to finish his university degree. He revealed, "*I had one year of uni to go... [and] I could see myself just putting it off [and] putting it off so... I said... 'I won't be in the team this year' and I finished off my degree [instead]*". Although he felt this decision eventually "*worked out for the best*", Ben was no longer in favour of suspending his sporting career in order to focus on other commitments, declaring, "*It has taken me about... four years of being an elite athlete to work out how much you need to put in... After three years of getting fifths, sixth, seventh, ninth... [you realise results don't] just happen by... turning up.*" Like other athletes who had not yet reached their performance goals, Ben now believed that top level performances could only be achieved by prioritising his sporting commitments over all other aspects of his life.

As a consequence of this prioritisation, however, many athletes felt that their social life was forced to suffer. This was particularly apparent to Lucy, who was just months away from competing at the Rugby World Cup. She confessed, "*lately the weekends have just got rugby [and then] after work it's to the gym or it's to the field... My friends... [know] that if they want to spend time with me they [will find me at rugby]*". The athletes' ability to socialise with people outside of their sport environment was a constant struggle. Nick revealed:

[I try to keep up my relationships with] *the people I work with and friends from school, people like that... but your chances to go see them are quite slim... You can't really say, "oh come over tonight and we will have a beer or something" ... You don't have the time.*

Helen, too, spoke of difficulties keeping in touch with people when engrossed within the elite sport lifestyle: *"you spend so much time training... you only see... sports people... And... when [do] see people... outside your sport... you don't have... much to talk... about because you are not doing other things. Unfortunately... you end up a little disjointed"*. Despite few opportunities to spend time with people outside of her sporting circle, Helen still felt these friendships were particularly important. A fringe player during much of her early Black Sticks hockey career, she shared, *"I remember... when I was being dropped and picked, thinking how nice it was that people actually liked me for me... My friends outside of hockey couldn't care less about hockey, which is nice"*. Similarly, Ben stated, *"I think you have to try and make an effort... to keep relationships with people outside of rowing... It gives you... perspective... [and reminds you that] there is more to life than just training"*.

With the majority of their time spent surrounded fellow sport participants, it seemed inevitable that athletes invariably formed close bonds with individuals from amongst this peer group. Simon, a recently-capped member of the New Zealand squash team, reported, *"[I still have] a few [friends] from school, but [my mates are] probably*

*mainly from squash now... Just because I am sort of spending more time with people from squash and we have sort of got the same focus". Friendships, built on convenience and shared experience, likewise left individuals feeling as though their fellow athletes best understood the restrictions of the elite sport lifestyle. Holly acknowledged, "My [rugby] friends... all know where I am coming from and understand me".*

Decisions and motives for exploring and developing friendships were also found to translate into the athletes' romantic lives. Yet again, there were those athletes who felt relationships were easier to conduct with people from within their own sporting circle. For instance, Holly stated, "[My partner is also] *involved in rugby... [it's] easier, just because of the amount of time it takes up... not necessarily better, but easier".* While, alternatively, other athletes preferred the idea of finding a partner outside of their sport environment. Basketball player, Mia, explained, "*The relationships I have had have probably been with non-elite sports people... I think you need a bit of balance and time away and to be with people who are away from sport".* There were also athletes whose participation in elite sport meant that they chose not to have intimate relationships with other people. These athletes made the conscious decision to avoid such relationships for the sake of both their training and the stress associated with managing this type of additional commitment. Kelly, a New Zealand White Fern, firmly supported this view when she reasoned, "*I am not in a relationship... because of cricket... I don't think that would fit in. Cricket takes up so*

*much of my time... There is absolutely no way I could even consider it... It would be [too] hard”.*

Many of those athletes who did enter into relationships lamented that the time and energy required for involvement in elite sport was in fact a major source of stress for everyone involved. World champion rower, Matt, explained that “[Sport] *is not very easy... on relationships because... you have to be so committed... Training becomes number one and unfortunately [partners] usually come number two. [That] it is pretty hard to cope with*”. Similarly, Lucy revealed that she ended up separating from her partner of 13 years after deciding to pursue a place in the rugby World Cup side. She recollected:

*My... ex-partner... thought our time together was being sacrificed... and he... felt second best... We had been together a long time but I said... “This is my childhood dream and either I am going to get it with or without you”. [In the end] it was without.*

Perceptions of neglect were also felt by members of the athletes’ extended families. Although, for the most part, each of the participants portrayed their family as being supportive of their athletic endeavours, some acknowledged their family unit had been disrupted due to their elite sport involvement. As a teenager, Kelly was picked

to play in her regional women's cricket team; however, as she was living in a rural town outside of the team's city base, she had to drive two hours each way in order to attend the team's frequent trainings. She revealed:

[Because of the commitment this required] *it has felt like I haven't really lived at home since I was about 15... It was always like, "hi, bye", I never saw [my family]... I guess that impacted on them... I never actually got to spend quality time with family... [Even now] it is quite distant.*

Kelly's story was not uncommon, as most athletes confessed to having missed special occasions with their family in order to pursue their sporting goals. As a professional basketball player, Mia was frequently contracted overseas, meaning that she "*missed out on a lot of family stuff*". Although her family had never explicitly asked her to break any of these commitments, she stated, "[It was more about them saying] *"we wish you were here", which is sometimes worse... [It's the] guilt thing*". Other athletes felt their family support was tainted with a pressure to perform. Jan explained that since her selection into the New Zealand women's cricket side, her family had developed increased "*expectations... Now... if I don't make a team or I don't win a game... there are just sort of like questions... [And] I know if I feel disappointed about my performance then I know that they will be too*". Although Jan admitted her family's increased scrutiny really only came out of their immense pride in her

achievements, she still confessed that “*it is almost like having a responsibility [to them]*”.

Being forced to navigate these sorts of familial tensions can impact negatively upon the athletes’ sporting experiences, leading many to question the place that sport held within their lives. For some, this resulted in a questioning of their continued sport involvement. The need to constantly negotiate the role of sport and its influence over the athletes’ lives, did mean that future elite sport participation was not always assured. In fact, the athletes were aware that the elite sport lifestyle would inevitably come to an end. To fully experience the lived existence of New Zealand athletes it was therefore also important to examine the process by which these individuals discontinued their sporting participation. As such, the following section will address the circumstances resulting in athletes transitioning out of their sport, as well as the factors affecting athletes’ experiences during this process.

### ***The End of the Affair***

*I did a speech [recently]... on my love affair with rugby. That is how I sort of explained my decade in the Black Ferns. You know when you first start a love affair it is amazing and wonderful and you can only see the positive sides. You can't see any negatives. And then you start to get into a rut and... you start to feel taken for granted and you are not communicating and think “This sucks, what the heck am I doing?” ... You think “Yeah, I've probably had enough” ...*

So [you end up having your] *final fling*... [And because you always knew] *that it was going to end*, [you just] *enjoy it* [while it lasts] (Holly).

Holly's account summarised many athletes' thoughts about the inevitable end of their sporting careers. Like Holly, the athletes understood that time at the top of their sport was limited, with most careers typically ending once the athlete could no longer sustain the elite sport lifestyle. As a six year veteran of the elite environment, Ben confirmed, "[It] *is definitely a lifestyle choice* [and] *I think one of the biggest reasons why people don't continue competitively in elite sport for a long time is because of the lifestyle*". Despite much speculation about when their sport-based sacrifices would become too much to bear, the athletes agreed it was only a matter of time before they would eventually need to end their careers. "*It is a decision that you make... for however long you want to do it and then you move on*" (Ben). Such decisions appeared to come down to a series of cost-benefit type negotiations where athletes considered how their sporting involvement was impacting upon the rest of their lives. For instance, while Kelly recognised the opportunities that she gained through her cricket participation, "*I... have gotten to see the world* [and]... *probably wouldn't have achieved a lot of the things... I have... if I hadn't... played cricket*". She also admitted, "[Increasing cricket commitments mean that] *you get busier and busier... [so] the hardest thing is that... [there] is less and less time [to] spent on [other] things*". Although Kelly believed that opportunities currently outweighed the sacrifices to her lifestyle, for other athletes this was not always the case.

Sometimes threats to their finely-balanced lives left athletes needing to renegotiate their continued sporting commitments. In cases where changes were able to be made, sport participation was likely to continue. However, where this lifestyle could no longer be reconciled, individuals were often left questioning their continued athletic involvement. In the end it was increasing work obligations clashing with the effort needed to maintain her top class rugby performances that placed Holly's sporting love story at risk. She explained:

*When you are involved in rugby it is all or nothing... you have to forget about everything [else] because you are part of a team... I found it extremely stressful trying to cope with a new job and trying to commit the time for training and the time away... I was like, "I just can't cope... [it's] time to give up".*

After 14 years of involvement and three World Championship titles, continued work pressures meant that Holly eventually retired from elite level rugby. The birth of her first child meant that Helen, too, retired part way through this research project. She shared, "[Although] *there were times when... all I ever wanted... [was] to... play in the Silver Fern... I [now] have a whole other life so the balance suddenly flips... [Eventually] the rest of my life became more important*" (Helen). While these decisions certainly did not come easily, both women knew they could not fully commit to more than one aspect in their lives. With first-hand knowledge of what it

took to reach, and then maintain, elite level performances, changing circumstances meant they no longer possessed the time necessary to devote to the elite sport lifestyle.

Required time, effort and the pull of other opportunities also raised problems when athletes were facing less than ideal performances. Although he was a relative newcomer to the New Zealand representative squash scene, John stated, *“If my level... went backwards that would... be a deterrent [for me to keep going]... You put in a lot of hours... and effort to... go backwards”*. Similarly, the more seasoned Ben voiced, *“The thought that you could... win a medal... keeps you going... [so] if you don’t think that you’re getting to that point... that is when you start thinking “bugger it” and... you throw in the towel”*. Consequently, Ben felt he would walk away from rowing after attaining his sporting goals. Thoughts of retirement were also prevalent when athletes believed they had reached the limits of their sporting potential. Retired Black Stick, and new mum, Helen explained, *“I think you... reach the point where there is not more that you could give... and you’re satisfied. I was satisfied with my own performance so I was able to say “I want to live another life for a while””*. In contrast, the expectation of the next big event, race or achievement kept athletes focused and committed. Despite having participated in a previous Olympic campaign and achieving success at numerous World Championship regattas, Ben acknowledged, *“If I reached my goal this year, there is always the [next] Olympics”*. While Kelly stated, *“I have some goals and milestones that obviously now you are in the team you want to achieve so that drives you to keep going”*. This strong

connection between on-going ambition and sustained sport participation signals a need for coaches and administrators to concentrate on the continual development of their athletes.

A lack of sustainable funds was also blamed for ending some individuals' sporting careers. Time and again individuals revealed the frustration of living within a state of financial insecurity. "[Having to exist without an income means] *people... will [participate in elite sport] for a couple of years and get thirty grand in debt and [then eventually] think "God, I can't do this anymore" and flag it*" (John). Although athletes were aware dedication to elite sport meant putting their financial goals on hold, they also knew this sacrifice would eventually become too great to bear. Speaking of her retirement, Helen shared, "*We [finally] realised that... we were never going to [get anywhere financially if I kept playing]... It is just unfortunate with amateur sports really... as you get older you realise, "hang on a minute, we need to move on"*". Helen's desire was compounded by the economic needs of her growing family, yet other athletes financially struggled even to participate in their chosen sport. Despite exceeding performance expectations at the Commonwealth Games, John was genuinely worried about his ability to keep playing squash. He stated, "*With most small sports [money] is the biggest hurdle... [Like "am I] able to support myself... and be able to train and play and travel?"... If I can't sustain that, then I will have to walk away*". Athletes whose poor performances had led to a decrease in their PEG's allocation were even more affected. A disappointing World Cup

campaign left Nick needing to withdraw from Rowing New Zealand's high performance training programme. He explained:

*I can't row at eight and two because [now] I have to have a full time job... [Without any funding] there is just no way that I can afford to be part of the system they want me to be in... I still want to row... I just can't do it when they want me to do it.*

To ensure that athletes have the best opportunity to reach their full sporting potential it therefore looks as though the cost, financial or otherwise, of maintaining elite sport commitment should not outweighed by opportunities outside of this environment. Despite this, however, transitions out of the elite sport environment are still very much inevitable. Consequently, NSOs and the NZAS do need to make certain that these transitions occur as smoothly as possible.

*Moving on:*

Fearing the unknown, it was athletes who had prioritised their elite sport involvement who were the most concerned about the prospect of leaving this environment behind. Susan, who at 45 years of age was the oldest of the interviewed athletes, confessed, *"I have played [bowls] for so long. It has been my life really since I was seventeen... I can't think of life without bowls... What do I do with the time that I [would] have?"*

The impact of time-intensive training schedules meant athletes like Susan had seemingly forgotten what life was like without their sporting involvement. Confronted with the reality that their athletic lifestyle would eventually come to an end, they anxiously contemplated a life without their sport. Jan shared, *“I wouldn’t know what to do with myself... I worry a little bit about how that is going to be when I stop playing because I am so used to putting all that time in”*. This unease left many athletes planning to quickly fill the void left by the cessation of their sporting commitments. After retiring from an eleven year stint in the New Zealand Tall Ferns, Mia immediately enrolled in university study so she wasn’t *“sitting around bored wondering if [she] should [still] be playing... or not”* (Mia). Similarly, Matt explained; *“[When] I quit rowing [I will] go from having something that really dominates my life... to suddenly not having it... I think I will just have to fill it with something else or I would go nuts”*. Helen, however, feared that nothing could replace the challenge and feelings associated with playing for one’s country. Even though she had recently become a mother and had earned a Masters degree in Business Administration, she revealed:

*I hope I find something else that equals it, but I don’t think you ever will... There is nothing that compares to standing up and hearing your national anthem and... the buzz you get from knowing that you are going to go out and do battle with somebody else.*

Irrespective of Helen's fears, most athletes looked forward, at least in some part, to their eventual sport retirement. Jamie, Lucy, Holly, Jan, and Kelly all had plans to get involved in activities which were currently "*off limits*" while they were still competing. John simply dreamed of doing "*general stuff, like I would go out to dinner, I would muck around. I would do whatever I wanted... I can't do that* [at the moment]". Even with this freedom, however, John still desired to remain physically active, an attitude mirrored by Helen, Matt and Holly. "*I think [exercise] is part of my personality now. I have an innate fear of turning into a big old Oompa Loompa. There is definitely an area of paranoia around that*" (Helen). For these athletes, the sporting lifestyle had become ingrained and was at least part, if not most, of who they were. By somewhat defining themselves in this manner, they wanted to ensure this element remained nurtured, despite the cessation of their elite sport involvement.

While a strong athletic identity was not necessarily unhealthy per se, an exclusive focus on sporting achievement did leave elite athletes at greater risk of negative sport transitions. This impact was further compounded if the retirement was unexpected or unplanned. As previously stated, Holly had watched many of her rugby friends struggle with their eventual sport retirement. She noted, "*I know that a lot of my friends that have stopped playing [rugby] have found that transition quite hard*". Yet she felt such experiences could have been prevented with an element of forethought and preparation. "*If you have got other things in your life, it does make that transition easier*" (Holly). The readiness of athletes to plan for the sport transition process was, nevertheless, again dependent upon the stage of their athletic career. When discussing

the need to prepare for his eventual sport retirement, one young athlete stated matter-of-factly, “[Sport] is my number one priority, I’m not really thinking about anything [else]” (Cam). This athlete even went so far as to decline the carding system’s offers of free tertiary education, explaining he preferred at that moment to focus solely on his sporting career. “*When I am finished and if I am still interested, that is when I will study... At this stage I don’t want to do both, I don’t want to do half and half*”. This attitude was in complete contrast to how the more experienced Helen shaped her life. She shared:

*I [always] tried to have something else that I was trying to achieve so that when I came out the other end I had a back stop, or if I got dropped or I got injured... [Basically] if your sporting career ends all of a sudden, then you have got something else that you do.*

Differences in athlete readiness to address these issues suggests that education and assistance in the area of career development should be tailored to the athlete’s specific needs, be regularly evaluated and more importantly be based upon the athlete’s career life cycle. This may require a rethink of services such as the Prime Minister’s Scholarship and ACE programmes which are currently on offer to New Zealand’s elite athletes, as there appears to be very little in the way of tangible support for athletes preparing for, and having exited, their sporting careers.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

The carded athlete programme has provided New Zealand's elite athletes with increased opportunity to develop their sporting talents. In particular, carded athletes greatly appreciated the enhanced access to sport science and medical services, along with the additional funding and financial support offered with their carded status. In conjunction with these benefits, athletes also, however, acknowledged an increased level of scrutiny and performance expectation that accompanied their participation in the carding programme. Such pressures have shaped the role and place that elite sport holds within each of the athletes' lives. In so doing, the carded athlete programme has impacted both the athletes' sporting journeys and their day-to-day lives.

## Discussion

After athletes' lacklustre performances at the Sydney Olympic Games, and World Cup losses in both rugby and netball during 1999, the New Zealand Government sought to increase its investment into high performance sport. What followed was a turning point in the development of New Zealand's elite athletes, including the introduction of the NZAS's carding system for promising athletes. While the carding system was seen to open up an array of valuable performance-enhancing tools, the athletes interviewed during the course of this study were very aware that these services were only available if they continued to meet the NZAS's performance expectations. As one athlete stated, "*The support is not unconditional, that is for sure. You know there is pressure there*" (Lucy). For the most part, this pressure was an accepted part of the carding process and likened to workplace scrutiny found elsewhere within society.

Such expectations, however, led to the prioritisation of immediate rather than long-term goals and the physical over the psychological needs of the athletes. This was apparent through the emphasis placed on those services providing 'instant' improvement to athletes' physical conditioning (e.g. physiotherapy, strength and conditioning and exercise physiology) over services which aided in the development of athletes' mental and emotional well-being (e.g. sport psychology and Athlete Career Education). In many cases, these latter services were marginalised or forgotten entirely. Consequently, reaching and maintaining peak performance was clearly being

favoured over the more expansive notion of personal development. This was reinforced through the constant comparison and measurement that athletes were subjected to as part of the carded system. Such scrutiny reminded athletes to remain focused on maintaining their position at the top of their sport, while limiting distractions from the outside world.

Although the exclusivity of the carding programme fostered athletes' gratitude upon entering into this system, the initial enthusiasm for being a carded athlete faded once athletes experienced the fickle nature of this support. Specifically, while many of the athletes were led to believe that they were indispensable and, to varying degrees, provided with emphatic support and encouragement during their entry into the world of elite sport, this support was not always assured. In reality, when athletes outlive their usefulness (i.e. by failing to perform) the carding system no longer has a place for them. With a scarcity of resources, and a plethora of "would be" champions, support can quickly turn to neglect and even abuse. All carded athletes were mindful that their status within the carding system was based upon their proven and/or perceived athletic potential. For instance, speaking of a time in her career where she was constantly on the fringe of Black Sticks selection, Helen realised she needed to create other avenues of support in order to avoid falling apart if she was permanently dropped from the team and, subsequently, the carded athlete programme. Witnessing the fragility of both her career and the support on offer, Helen called for those in charge of elite sport environments to consider the wellbeing of individuals beyond the sporting arena, when helping them to achieve their athletic goals.

As with many other athlete development programmes, the New Zealand carding system has been implemented by administrators who have been influenced by the neo-liberal ideologies of the last 20-40 years. Consequently, these principles have shaped the carded athlete programme and while purporting to want the best for their athletes, many see them as ‘assets’ or commodities, requiring careful investment, management and surveillance. Such organisations therefore have the potential to essentially dehumanise the elite sport experience. This is significant as failing to provide athletes with a voice to question or critique the carding initiative risks its ability to represent the population at the very heart of its existence. Additionally, as policies like the carded athlete programme alter the lived experiences of those they affect, it is essential that decision makers understand the unique issues and circumstances facing these individuals (Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Silk & Manley, 2012).

This research project therefore explored the impact of the athlete carding programme from the perspectives of the athletes themselves, thus allowing these individuals to provide a personal account of life within the carding system. In particular, I examined the key influences which underpinned their athletic careers. Although each athlete’s narrative told an individual tale, there were a number of similarities found across their sporting journeys. And while all athletes entered, and would eventually exit, this journey at differing points in their careers it was what happened in between these moments that had the biggest impact on their sporting lives. Specifically, the carded athletes were continually confronted by circumstances that, much like a game of

pinball, either propelled their career forward or sent it closer to its conclusion. The remainder of this chapter will therefore reflect on life as a New Zealand carded athlete. It will address the various societal forces at work within this environment and explain the implications of maintaining an athlete career for an individual's identity development.

### *Living the Elite Sport Existence*

The diverse group of carded athletes represented in the current investigation displayed three clear and common phases through which their sporting lives were seen to evolve: sport initiation (where sport exposure and selection occurred); consolidation (where sport specialisation, commitment and skill development occurred); and cessation (where sport retirement and planning for the future occurred). Each stage required the successful completion of a number of transitions in order for the athletes to move forward with their sporting careers. Although no standardised process for elite sport development currently exists, these transitions appear to be common regardless of the sporting context or culture in which they occur. In fact, few developmental differences were found across the athletes' sporting journeys, thus suggesting that the evolution of a carded athlete's career appears to be fairly consistent despite age, gender, ethnic and/or class differences. Similarly, differing expectations within elite sport environments resulted in very few variations to the athletes' career pathways. The athlete narratives also revealed that the transitions facing New Zealand's carded athletes closely resembled those found in American and European elite sport environments. Therefore, despite the many

differences in organisation, funding and support on offer within these countries, the experiences of elite athletes appear to remain remarkably similar regardless of sport, nationality, experience, or gender (Cote, 1999; Erpic et al., 2004; Stambulova, 2010; Wylleman & Reints, 2010).

### ***Starting the Game: Initial Sport Involvement***

In order for an athlete's talent to be fostered and encouraged, it must first be discovered. New Zealand's carded athletes credited their parents as playing a fundamental role in initiating their love for sport. Jan recalled spending her Saturdays "*tagging along [and playing] around in the nets*" while her father participated in his weekly cricket match, while Simon shared stories of playing 'friendly' games of squash against his father as a youngster. Through these recollections, it was apparent that parental involvement validated the athlete role. The carded athletes therefore embraced sport as a worthy activity in which to invest their time and energies. Additionally, as the majority of the carded athletes were initially exposed to this sport involvement during their early childhood, they had not yet consolidated a strong sense of self. This meant that they willingly embraced the role exploration and experimentation suggested by their parents (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Marcia, 1966; Schwartz, 2005).

In addition to exposing athletes to their chosen sport, parents were also recognised for the support they offered in terms of time, transport, money, and motivation. In

particular, the carded athletes acknowledged the invaluable support of their parents as volunteers, sponsors, and their primary cheer squads. Such efforts enabled the athletes to fully embrace the sporting lifestyle and further strengthened their socialisation into the sporting role. As such, all of the athletes credited the role that parental support played in their eventual sporting success. Bruner et al. (2008) noted that this investment – of both time and money – can, however, prove all too consuming for many families. In such cases, athletes are often unable to fully nurture their sporting prowess. Nonetheless, as the current study focused on those athletes who had managed to navigate their way to the top of their sport, there was no indication of a lack of family support within any of the 17 carded athletes' personal histories. This observation provides additional support for the notion that a strong familial support system is necessary in order to develop one's sporting talents (Bloom, 1985; Bruner et al., 2008; Cote, 1999; Keegan et al., 2009).

The importance that the carded athletes placed on their family support may account for the lack of credit given to other individuals who helped initiate their sporting participation. In contrast to previous studies (e.g. Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Proios, 2012; Pummell et al., 2008; Rakauskiene & Dumciene, 2012; Videon, 2002), the athletes in the current investigation did not attribute their friends or coaches with facilitating their initial participation. These relationships did, however, gain increasing importance once athletes had consolidated the athlete role. Much like the Australian athletes interviewed by Abernathy et al. (2002), New Zealand's carded athletes described strong social ties linking them to their sporting lifestyle. In

particular, many athletes acknowledged that the majority of their friends were in fact other athletes. The ease of maintaining such friendships, based upon the large amounts of time spent together as well as shared goals, lifestyles and experiences, meant athletes actively sought to consolidate such bonds. In turn, these friendships further reinforced the athletes' socialisation into the athlete role. Specifically, Hogg et al. (1995) suggested that the more ties one has with a particular role identity, the more salient that role enactment is likely to become.

Sporting success is highly valued within New Zealand society. It is therefore not surprising that many athletes found that their social 'status' rose upon entering into the world of elite sport. Some carded athletes described feeling like minor celebrities due to media interest in their athletic triumphs, while others told of the importance that friends and family placed upon their sporting achievements. This importance meant that athletes were encouraged to pursue sporting excellence upon being identified as having athletic potential. For instance, Beth described receiving an 'Olympic sales pitch' after being selected into Rowing NZ's high performance squad. She explained, "[Everyone was] *telling you that they are looking at you for the next Olympics*". Like Beth, many athletes felt as though they were being conditioned into becoming a sporting champion from very early on within their athletic careers.

Although such hope encourages athletes to pursue their sporting talents, very few people within elite sport programmes ever reach champion status. Butt and Molnar

(2009) acknowledged that with reputations on the line, those who stand to gain from these rare sporting feats are reluctant to admit that they offering up false hope to most of the athletes within their care. Blissfully unaware, and wanting to please, athletes instead invest increasing amounts of time and energy into furthering their athletic endeavours. This innate desire to maintain a favourable role identity highlights the influence that significant others play in the formation of personal identity (vom Lehn & Gibson, 2011). Early exposure, role approval, increasing social ties, and public validation each left carded athletes susceptible to becoming socialised into the athlete role. Once sport involvement had been initiated, societal expectations and entanglements within the elite sport environment further impacted on whether an individual further cemented his or herself within this role identity.

### ***Running the Sporting Gauntlet: Societal Expectations and Role Entanglements***

Human beings actively develop their identities through on-going social interaction. This process is aided by the socially constructed norms and values associated with particular role identities (Hausmann et al., 2011; Stryker, 2008; vom Lehn, 2011). Consequently, when roles like those occupied by the carded athletes exist, they do so based upon shared meaning and behaviours. Once athletes had committed to a sport-focused lifestyle, they were therefore continuously confronted with the numerous expectations which accompanied this specific role enactment. In so doing, these expectations needed to be navigated as part of the athletes' daily lives, thus heavily influencing the carded athlete experience. The following section addresses the

gauntlet of societal expectations and role entanglements faced by New Zealand's carded athletes.

*Societal expectation:*

While athletes willingly devoted their lives to pursuing sporting goals, at least some of this commitment was driven by perceived societal beliefs. Specifically, the athletes felt that the New Zealand public expected their lives to be dedicated to improving sporting performance. Holly explained, "*People expect you to get up at the crack of dawn and... to train for four or five hours a day and be completely focused on your sport all the time*". Upon establishing the reputation of being an elite athlete, the carded athletes were therefore drawn to displaying those behaviours and characteristics most commonly associated with this specific role. In this instance, embracing the elite athlete identity meant that athletes needed to apply themselves wholeheartedly to the athlete role. Not surprisingly, many of the athletes in the current investigation therefore sought to perpetuate an image of self-sacrifice and overt dedication to their sporting selves. Accordingly, these athletes actively restricted their personal development in areas outside of the elite sport environment.

This level of commitment was seemingly encouraged by those in charge of elite sport environments. Specifically, as all future funding and selection decisions were explicitly linked to reaching NZAS performance expectations, athletes were sent clear and explicit messages that it was their sporting performance that was of utmost

importance. Additionally, in order to ensure on-going support, athletes were discouraged, and in some cases prevented, from exploring activities outside of their chosen sport. For instance, Ben was once told by the NZ Rowing's high performance manager, "*You are here to row... not do anything else... They don't give out Olympic medals to people with balanced lives*". With NSO's revenue contingent on obtaining international sporting success, coaches and administrators were far more determined to achieve positive results than create multi-dimensional athletes. Therefore, despite the NZAS championing the ideals of holistic athlete development, its policy of performance-based funding severely limited the likelihood of this actually occurring. This failure to support life outside of the sport environment left athletes further entrenched within the athletic lifestyle. In so doing, this behaviour also reinforced and further perpetuated the societal expectation associated with living the elite athlete lifestyle (Haggard & Williams, 1992; Turner, 2011).

*Role engulfment:*

Athlete careers were also consolidated through the on-going process of role engulfment. Specifically, the perceived, and in some cases very real, expectations of carded athletes' time and energies meant that their lives were built around their sporting lifestyle. Additionally, the athletes purposefully sought out those activities which fuelled their sporting identity, while avoiding activities or behaviours which could possibly interfere with their athletic goals. One athlete went so far as to separate from her partner of 13 years because he was not supportive of her dream to

make the New Zealand Black Ferns. Likewise, other carded athletes described social relationships, living arrangements and even future life plans that were all linked to their athletic role and sporting achievements. This level of complete absorption within the athlete role supports Gordon and Lavalley's (2004) contention that sporting excellence requires not just a physical, but also a mental and social commitment to one's sport.

With so much depending upon the maintenance of their athletic identity, it is understandable why this self-definition becomes favoured and protected over all other possibilities. This increased focus did, however, mean that the athletes had limited opportunity and/or desire to explore activities such as work or study. With few ties outside of their sport environment, the athletes were therefore left feeling somewhat disconnected from wider society. Some researchers (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2013; Danish et al., 1993; Miller & Kerr, 2003) have questioned whether the pursuit of sporting excellence can, in fact, even occur without the expense of wider personal excellence. Although such concerns remain unanswered it is apparent that individuals who fail to continually reassess and evaluate their role identities may struggle to ensure a healthy and adaptive sense of self (Albion & Fogarty, 2005; Maguire, 2011; Stambulova, 2000, 2012; Stanley & Robbins, 2011).

The risks associated with uni-dimensional self-concepts are particularly concerning given that carded athletes looked to embrace, or at the very least passively accept, the

athlete role rather than challenge its solitary existence. For instance, despite already being devoted to her sport for a number of years, Beth acknowledged that she had recently wondered, "*How did I get here, how did I turn out to be a rower?*" The symbolic interactionist approach relies on individuals being self-reflective beings however one's ability to exact meaning is limited when individuals are unaware of the external influences impacting upon their experiences. This absence of any serious personal reflection may therefore be linked to the lack of control these individuals felt once becoming part of the carding environment. With limited say over when, where and how much training they were expected to complete, many athletes felt increasingly powerless. However, far from begrudging this somewhat unsettling lifestyle, most were quick to point out that these sorts of sacrifices were necessary - and expected - in order to get to the top of their sport. Similar sentiments have been echoed by elite athletes in other studies conducted around the world (e.g. Aquilina, 2013; Butt & Molnar, 2009; Jones et al., 2005; Kelly & Hickey, 2010; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). However, while such views may indeed be prevalent it is questionable whether this lack of self-determination is in fact necessary for achieving sporting success.

A lack of autonomy was most apparent in those athletes new to the carding programme, or at the peak of their careers. Athlete narratives, during this phase of the athletes' careers, suggested that a range of entities (i.e. NZAS, NSO's, coaches etc.) struggled for control over these athlete's lives. Seemingly unaware of the inequitable power balance, most of these athletes fully trusted the advice of the authority figures

within their sport and readily accepted that a singular sport focus was necessary in order to ensure on-going performance gains. Embracing the myth that effort, hard work and commitment would eventually get them everything they desired, these athletes 'put everything on hold' in order to achieve their sporting goals. According to Butt and Molnar (2009) and Lavalley and Robinson (2007) it would not be until they had actually left their sport that most athletes would eventually realise that this lack of power and social conditioning had even existed. In this study, some of the participants approaching the end of their careers had, however, started to question why the carding system encouraged a narrowed athlete-focused identity. Witnessing the vulnerability of their athlete careers, and the fickle nature of the support on offer, they expressed concern that this lifestyle would eventually become too much to bear. Consequently, a number of athletes had begun the process of transitioning out of the elite sport environment. This unavoidable end of an athlete's career raises the question, what impact does elite sport have on an athlete's life once this lifestyle is no longer a priority? The following section will therefore address the issue of sport retirement and discuss the role that athlete carding, and one's identity, plays in this process.

### ***Ending the Game: Sport Cessation***

Retirement from performing at the highest level is one of the inevitable transitions that an elite athlete will face (Erpic et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2009). For most, this process involves a gradual physical and emotional withdrawal from their sport

participation; however, a smooth transition out of sport is not always possible. Some athletes' careers end abruptly due to injury or de-selection and, if not anticipated, can result in a traumatic conclusion to the athletic lifestyle (Alfermann et al., 2004; Carless & Douglas, 2013; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Marthinus, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2007; Stephan et al., 2003). Researchers have therefore suggested that the more equipped an athlete is for the process of retirement, the less disruptive this transition will be. Despite this, readiness to plan for sport retirement appears to be dependent upon an athlete's stage of career (Gorley et al., 2001; North & Lavalley, 2004; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a, 2013; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). As discussed earlier, most newly carded athletes were reluctant to begin preparations for life beyond their sport involvement. Referring to such activities as a distraction from their current goals, these individuals fostered their athletic identities at the expense of all other areas within their lives. Consequently, it was these newly-carded athletes who expressed significant fear over the sport retirement process and worried how they would cope without the daily structure and sense of achievement that their sporting participation provided.

In contrast, many of the experienced and/or older athletes in this study were more prepared for their eventual sport retirement. These athletes had begun to reflect on the sacrifices which had been made in the name of their sport. In so doing, some saw the solitary focus expected of an elite athlete as increasingly unsustainable, while others had simply reached the point in their careers where they wanted to focus on something other than their sport involvement. For instance, after many years trying to

consolidate her place within the NZ hockey team, Helen stated, “*the rest of my life [eventually] became more important*”. While most athletes could not pinpoint the exact moment they decided to embrace alternative identities, they did reveal that factors such as not seeing expected results, negative experiences with coaches and/or NSOs, funding shortages, a lack of time to pursue other interests, and witnessing friends outside of sport progressing with their lives, had each contributed to their changing priorities. Whatever the reasons, these individuals slowly began contemplating and preparing for the day when they would no longer be involved in the elite sport lifestyle.

These athletes used the latter stages of their sporting careers to regain some control over their day-to-day lives. One athlete took on a part time job while others, like Helen, began studying towards tertiary qualifications. Wanting to ensure they had something to fill the void that would be left from their eventual elite sport cessation, they readily embraced new experiences and opportunities beyond the sport environment. This meant that these athletes were choosing, for the first time in many years, what was good for themselves rather than their coaches, their sport and their country. By seeking out these activities while still continuing their sport participation, the carded athletes were also able to connect with a life outside of the sport, while still maintaining their athlete identity. This process enabled athletes to slowly reduce their reliance on the sporting aspect of their identity while developing a more multi-dimensional sense of self. In so doing, the athletes became far better equipped to transition into a life without elite sport (Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008; Lavallee &

Robinson, 2007; Marthinus, 2007; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2013; Stephan et al., 2003).

While athletes did acknowledge the assistance provided by the carding programme during this process (e.g. by providing scholarships for tertiary study and links to recruitment agencies), many still felt as though the programme did not do enough to help prepare them for life after sport. In particular, despite opportunities like Prime Minister's Scholarships being available to almost all athletes, it was typically only those athletes nearing the end of their sporting careers who took up this opportunity. This lack of pre-retirement planning may be associated with societal expectations associated with the elite sport lifestyle. As discussed earlier, many coaches and NSOs actively discouraged their athletes from taking time away from the sport environment. Consequently, those unwilling, or unable, to challenge this mentality were unlikely to engage in activities outside of their sport.

Stambulova et al. (2009) also noted that athletes' energies are typically channelled towards those transitions and requirements immediately relevant to their lives at that given moment. Subsequently, it appears as though most athletes were not interested in spending time and energy investing in what they considered to be the far away concept of sport retirement. Thus, despite the relevancy of post-career planning and education their focus remained firmly on the here and now and achieving success at the highest level. While attempts to shift this focus may indeed be challenging, it is

crucial that those in charge of elite sport environments address this issue in order to ensure all athletes are prepared for the inevitable end of their sporting participation. As such, the NZAS must engage in a wide-reaching education programme, aimed at both athletes and their sporting bodies, about the importance of post-sport career planning. Likewise, differences in athlete readiness to address this issue means that education and assistance in this area should be tailored towards meeting the specific needs of each athlete and their stage of career. In so doing, the carded athlete system will be one step closer to realising its goal of creating both world class and holistic athletes. Additionally, these changes would explicitly acknowledge the potential impact that the elite sport lifestyle can have on the personal development of those high performance athletes. Such an acknowledgement could play a significant role in addressing the societal expectations and role entanglements which are confronting our elite athletes.

### *Chapter Summary*

Since its establishment in 2002, the NZAS's carded athlete programme has played a significant role in the development of New Zealand's elite athletes. This research project explored athletes' reflections of the carding system, and identified how involvement within this programme has impacted on their lives, both in and out of the elite sport arena. Utilising a symbolic interactionist framework, I was able to represent a snap shot of athletes' experiences within the carding context. Like their counterparts from around the globe, New Zealand's carded athletes achieved varying levels of sporting success after numerous years of practice and commitment dedicated

to their chosen physical endeavours. Socialised into displaying those behaviours thought to best represent the role of an elite athlete, these individuals often found themselves consumed by their sporting responsibilities. While this process helped to consolidate a firm athlete identity, it often came at the expense of achieving a well-balanced and holistic sense of self. The final chapter in this thesis will therefore address the consequences of these carding experiences and suggest recommendations for developing future elite athletes in New Zealand.

## Conclusion

National fervour associated with sporting success has prompted heavy investment into the promotion and development of elite athletes around the globe. This increased attention coincided with sport being claimed as one of the key socialising agents of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Butt & Molar, 2009). With its ability to foster national identity, demonstrate ideological dominance and promote international recognition, sport has increasingly become an important political vehicle. Consequently, a growing number of countries are using elite sport to increase their international standing within the global community. Against this backdrop, many nations, including New Zealand, have adopted centralised models of athlete development whereby the systematic allocation of resources is used to maximise a country's chances of obtaining sporting glory. While New Zealand's carded athlete programme has been in place since 2002, very little research has examined the impact of this system on the athletes involved. The current research project therefore sought to explore this gap in athlete development literature, as well as highlight the experiences of elite athletes within the New Zealand sport context. As the overarching aim of this project was to represent life within the carding programme, each athlete's narrative was subsequently used to create a comprehensive and collective view of athletes' experiences within the carding programme.

Elite sport, with its emphasis on measurement, competition, rationality, and the need for constant improvement, closely mirrors the capitalist neoliberal ideologies

prevalent within western society (Andon & Houck, 2011; Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Grupe, 1985; Hemphill, 1992; Tannsjo, 2000). This underlying doctrine is clearly evident throughout New Zealand's carded athlete programme. Specifically, the carded athletes interviewed during this study found their lives 'managed' while being subjected to strict monitoring and training regimes focused on maximising their athletic potential. Additionally, the allocation of performance based funding, and the importance given to those services focused on improving physical conditioning over less immediate and future-oriented services such as sport psychology and post-sport career planning, has meant that athletes were acutely aware of the performance expectations associated with their carded status. Subsequently, these policies have resulted in an increasing emphasis being placed upon athletes' sporting achievement since the implementation of the NZAS's carded athlete programme.

This prioritisation of achievement over wellbeing is also evident in the way in which carding is both obtained and maintained. Specifically, an athlete's entry and continued involvement in the carding system is contingent on meeting certain performance criteria. This process was established when the Government, through the NZAS, narrowed its funding to just a few selected sports which they believed had the potential to achieve a high level of success at major international events (NZAS, 2005; Sam & Jackson, 2004; Silk & Manley, 2012; Taylor, 2008). The rationalisation of public monies meant that not all sports, or all athletes, were eligible for the carded athlete programme. In fact, with limited support and funding up for grabs, New Zealand's elite athletes are essentially competing against each other in order to be

part of the NZAS's carding programme. As such, upon becoming part of the carding system, athletes acknowledged feeling pressured to meet the performance expectations that their carding status has afforded them. In fact some of the athletes interviewed during this study revealed that they were more focused on maintaining their carding status than on the life they would lead following the conclusion of their sport involvement.

Consequently, despite assurances that their lives were not dissimilar to other members of society, many of the interviewed athletes admitted to avoiding alternative role identities in the fear that they would interfere with attaining their chosen sporting goals. Such inconsistencies highlight a simmering tension between the real and perceived reality of living the elite sport lifestyle. Although athletes wanted to believe that they lived a balanced and 'normal' life, moves such as centralised training programmes, performance-based funding and a strong focus on the monitoring of training accomplishments overtly encouraged a dedication to the athletic lifestyle at the expense of other life pursuits. Additionally, heavy training requirements and NSO responsibilities meant that the carded athletes had limited time, energy and opportunity to undertake the exploration of other life roles, regardless of what was on offer. These restrictions significantly impacted on their ability to maintain a multidimensional sense of self and increased the importance placed upon the athlete role identity. In so doing, the carded athletes were unwittingly reinforcing the culturally dominant performance narrative.

Although achievement in top level sport undoubtedly requires commitment over a considerable period of time, and a certain amount of sacrifice, it is questionable whether a singular sport focus is indeed beneficial to obtaining elite level success. In fact, a number of athletes within this study described greater levels of enjoyment and better performances after adjusting the place and value that sport held within their lives. These results further support Carless and Douglas's (2013) assertion that athletic success at a high level is still possible when physical training is pursued in conjunction with personal development in other life areas. Similarly the athletes' experiences strengthen the position of researchers (e.g. Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003; Stambulova, 2012) who suggest that athletic performances benefit from a more holistic approach to athlete development. While further research examining the link between holistic development and sporting performance is still required, the current project highlights that the NZAS needs to provide support and encouragement for athletes striving to achieve both personal and athletic success.

When SPARC launched its high performance sport arm, the NZAS, it did so under the guise that it would ensure New Zealand elite athletes fulfilled their potential, both on and off the international sports field (Sport, Fitness & Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). Although the NZAS is committed to ensuring athletic success, it has not been as successful in promoting athlete needs away from the sporting arena. Specifically, many athletes within the current study described situations where they were actively discouraged from exploring opportunities outside of their sport

environments. Rather than experiencing a more holistic approach to athletic development, these carded athletes were instead being asked to dedicate themselves fully to the athletic lifestyle at the expense of all other life pursuits. This is significant, as such behaviours leave athletes facing formidable transitions into post-sport careers upon the cessation of their elite sport involvement. Likewise, such experiences also contradict the underlying philosophy upon which New Zealand's carded athlete programme was built. This failure to successfully fulfil the holistic mandate may explain why the tensions and experiences of carded athletes mirror those of elite athletes found outside of this programme,

If the holistic development within the athlete carding programme is to be given greater credence, critical attention must be directed at the culture of New Zealand's elite sport system. In particular, the NZAS's practice of providing performance-based funding leaves little incentive for those in charge of athlete development to focus on athlete welfare beyond their sporting performance. Specifically, as the livelihoods of these individuals are dependent upon seeing athletes achieving results on the international sporting stage, the long term needs of athletes typically come second to the more immediate goal of winning gold medals. It could be inferred that this lack of attention has seemingly led to an acceptance within the elite sport environment that sporting success is valued more than personal development. Consequently, SPARC (now called Sport New Zealand) needs to educate coaches and administrators about the importance, and benefit, of preparing athletes, at any stage of their career, for life both in and beyond sport participation.

The experiences of some of the carded athletes involved in this study indicate that those in charge of elite sport environments had more control over their lives than was acceptable. A number of athletes acknowledged that they were at the mercy of their coaches and NSOs, with training and competition schedules entirely outside of their control. In essence, the carded athlete model essentially hands control of an athlete's development over to respective sport administrators and/or coaches. These individuals are then tasked with setting out performance plans, often with little regard for how these actions may affect the lives of athletes under their control. Sport New Zealand therefore needs to ensure that personal development remains at the forefront of its high performance programmes. In so doing, athletes will regain some of the self-determination that seems to have been lost within the current elite sport model. Such a change will begin not only to fulfil the sporting potential of gifted athletes, but also achieve the carding system's goal of developing well-rounded individuals.

The willingness for athletes to accept this current lack of self-determination, however, demonstrates a widely held belief that this was 'just part of living the elite sport lifestyle'. It remains unclear whether this absence of personal reflection is an orchestrated strategy of denial in order to cope with the limited freedoms athletes experience within their sporting lives, or an ignorance stemming from the belief that coaches and NSOs are working with athletes' best interests at heart. What we do know, however, is that as more carded athletes are seen to relinquish control over their sporting selves, they further perpetuate the belief that such behaviour is the norm for our elite sportspeople. As such, those in charge of these environments are

gaining compliant, and seemingly complacent, athletes who further entrench those role-related behaviours that do not always favour the individuals whom they portray. This performance doctrine therefore needs to be challenged by athletes, coaches and sport administrators alike.

Likewise, there is scope for further investigations to incorporate a more critical lens when analysing the experiences of New Zealand's carded athletes. In particular, it would be valuable for researchers to examine how the underlying principles of power and surveillance have shaped carded athletes' identities. In so doing, researchers could draw upon the views and experiences of other entities within the carding programme (e.g. coaches, high performance managers etc.). While such viewpoints were not the focus of the current research project - which aimed to represent the athletes' interpretations of their social world - these insights could further explore the concepts of autonomy and control that exist within the carded athlete context.

Within the current investigation, it was only those carded athletes nearing the end of their careers who questioned the societal expectations associated with elite sport participation. Specifically, these individuals expressed concern over what years committed to pursuing their sporting goals might mean in the long-term. Faced with the reality that their carding support was not always assured, and having witnessed the futile nature of this system of expendability, these individuals had begun planning for their sport retirement. However, those athletes new to the system, or at the peak of

their careers, were reluctant to focus their energies outside of their sporting pursuits. Consequently, most gave little attention to what their lives might be, or become, beyond their sporting participation. In so doing, it appears as though many of the carded athletes were either unable to imagine, or were not conscious of, the impact that their elite sport lifestyle was having on their personal development. This is concerning as sport retirement is an inevitable part of any athletic journey and it is therefore important that all athletes are prepared for its eventuality.

These athletes were unanimous that the carding system gives less attention to assisting them moving on from elite sport than it does when helping them move into this environment. Although the NZAS's education programme has attempted to take on some of this responsibility, most athletes still felt ill-equipped when facing the prospect of post-sport careers. Sport New Zealand therefore needs to actively encourage all athletes to engage in activities outside of their sporting commitments. In particular, it should provide a more flexible and supportive high performance sport structure which allows athletes to pursue interests away from the sporting context, while still maintaining their elite sport focus. Given that there appeared to be some resistance by young athletes to prepare for life beyond their sporting careers, and the fact that sport retirement cannot always be planned for (e.g. in the case of injury or de-selection), they also need to develop strategies which promote personal development throughout all stages of an athlete's sporting career.

As every athlete enters, moves within and exits the elite sport arena with different expectations, motivations and experiences, it is important that the carding programme gives due consideration to their individual differences. In particular, narratives collected over the course of this study highlight the influence that an athlete's career stage plays in their desire, and/or willingness, to explore alternative life roles. While further research is needed to identify the unique requirements at various stages within an athlete's career, it is critical that athlete development programmes consider such aspects in order to best meet the needs of these individual athletes. Arguably, individually tailored approaches to athlete development would therefore be more beneficial than blanket service provision models which fail to address athletes' personal histories (and futures). Despite bureaucratic constraints which may challenge such an approach, open and honest dialogue between Sport New Zealand, NSOs and athletes is necessary to create effective and manageable individualised career pathways.

Finally, in order to ensure the success of such programmes, any future research needs to create space for athletes' voices within their research design. In so doing, researchers will provide athletes with the opportunity to assign personal meaning to their lived experiences, thus allowing for a unique insight into the lives of elite athletes. Likewise, pursuing a more critical analysis of future data, based upon the perceived lack of agency that was evident within the narratives collected during this investigation, will further expand the body of research in this area. Such research has the potential to strengthen what currently occurs or possibly facilitate the emergence

of alternative career development programmes that prioritise the well-being of the athletes alongside their on-field performances.

In conclusion, the current research project gave voice to 17 elite athletes, from a variety of different sports, who offered a snapshot of their experiences within the carding programme. These individuals attributed many of the improvements in their sporting performances to the services and support on offer to them after becoming carded athletes. In addition to maximising sporting potential, the carding system also provided some opportunity for individuals to gain employment and tertiary qualifications outside of the sporting arena. However, despite these positives, many athletes still displayed overly high levels of athlete identity, with the majority of their lives centring upon their athletic participation. The risk of overly identifying with any one aspect of one's life can be problematic, however, due to the potential for emotional and behavioural disturbances if this area becomes threatened or diminished. For elite athletes, this appears in the form of injury, loss of form, poor performances, or de-selection. As such, it is important that multi-dimensional self-concepts are not only encouraged but have the potential to be maintained within high performance sport environments.

Despite proclamations by the NZAS that its programme does in fact allow for, and actively encourage the holistic development of those in the programme, this was not clearly evident across the athletes' narratives. In fact, policies such as performance-

based funding, and heavy training requirements upon being selected within the carding programme, led many athletes to believe that they were overtly encouraged to pursue their sporting goals at the expense of development in other life areas. Similarly, coach and NSO expectations often ensured that athletes were unable to pursue interests outside the sporting arena. Consequently, if Sport New Zealand, and its new high performance arm, High Performance Sport New Zealand, wish to achieve their goal of developing well-balanced sportspeople, it would be worthwhile re-examining the way in which they support and fund elite sport. Specifically, more emphasis could be placed upon enhancing personal development alongside sporting performance when allocating funds to national sporting organisations. Similarly, Sport New Zealand could look to engage in a wide-reaching education programme which promotes the importance of developing a well-balanced sense of self alongside one's sporting potential. Such an initiative could further enhance the success of sport development and the high performing sports people in this country.

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## Appendix A

### *Letter of Request for Information from National Sporting Organisations*

Date

Address

Dear (appropriate member)

My name is Christina Ryan and I am currently completing my Doctoral degree at the University of Waikato, under the supervision of Dr Clive Pope. As part of my requirements for this course I am conducting a research project involving New Zealand's carded athlete population.

This study will examine these athletes' experiences of this system. The results from this investigation will hopefully provide an understanding of the system from the perspectives of the athletes involved, as well as provide insight into how this system is impacting upon the lives of these individuals as a whole. This project aims to help governing bodies like yours, learn how best to structure elite sport development systems to ensure enjoyable, successful and sustained sport participation.

I am writing to enquire whether you would be willing for me to access your carded athlete database so that I can recruit possible participants to take part in this investigation. This access would involve identifying and obtaining contact information for all carded athletes (past and present) who have had at least two years of experience within the carding system. These individuals would then be contacted and invited to volunteer to participate in the investigation.

I have included for your interest an information sheet further outlining the study and an example of the interview guide that will be explored with the participants. I will

be contacting you by phone within the next few days to answer any further questions you may have regarding the study and to inquire about your interest in allowing this information to be obtained. I would very much appreciate your support for the project and look forward to speaking with you in the near future. In the meantime please feel free to contact either myself or my supervisor on (07) 8552 543 or (07) 838 4500 respectively.

Yours sincerely,

Christina Ryan

## **Appendix B**

### ***Research Project Information Sheet***

#### Life as a Carded Athlete

Athletes with experiences of the New Zealand's Academy of Sport's carding system are currently being invited to participate in a study being conducted at the University of Waikato. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate in this project. If you do decide to participate we thank you. If you do not decide to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the aim of the project?**

The proposed study aims to examine athletes' impressions of;

- a) the carded athlete system and their experiences within this programme
- b) the carding systems impact on their sporting participation
- c) the overall importance of this system on their lives as a whole

The results from this investigation will hopefully provide an understanding of athletes' perceptions of the carding system and its effect on their lives in general. It is hoped that this information will provide practical ways for athletes, coaches and sporting bodies to best structure the elite sport development system in order to ensure enjoyable, successful and on-going sport participation.

#### **What will participants be asked to do?**

If you choose to volunteer your time for this study you will be asked to participate in at least two face-to-face interviews scheduled at a time and place convenient to you. During these interviews you will be asked questions about your experiences within

the carding system and its impact on your life in general. It is anticipated that these interviews will take approximately one hour to conduct and that they will occur within a three month period. The interviews will be taped and a typed copy of your interview transcript will be sent to you so you will have an opportunity to add and/or change any points you feel may need to be further explained before sending this copy back to the researchers.

### **Can participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any stage leading up to the conclusion of the data collection process without prejudice or reason.

### **How will the information that is collected be used?**

Please note that any personal information collected during the course of this investigation will remain strictly anonymous and your confidentiality will be preserved at all times. Only the two principal researchers involved in the project will have direct access to personal information. No information that could identify participants will be disclosed or published. Upon consent each participant will be assigned a unique, coded number and from this point on individuals will be identified only by this number.

A plain language summary of the project will be available to you upon request.

If you are interested in participating, or have any questions concerning this study, please do not hesitate to call either;

Christina Ryan: (07) 855 2543

Dr Clive Pope: (07) 838 4500

## Appendix C

### *Research Project Consent Form*

Athlete/Participant

I, ..... *(please print)* have read the information sheet regarding this project and I understand what is required of me if I choose to participate in the investigation. I have had the opportunity to discuss the study and to ask questions, which have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I am aware that: -

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time during the data collection process without any disadvantage;
3. I understand that results from this study will be treated in strict confidence and that my identity will remain anonymous in the study;
4. The results of this study may be published, but my anonymity will be preserved.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....

(Signature of Participant)

.....

(Date)

I wish to receive a copy of the results      Yes / No

***Research Project Consent Form***

Parent/Guardian

I, ..... (*Please print*) have read the information sheet regarding this project and I understand the purpose and processes involved with participating in the investigation. I have had the opportunity to discuss the study and to ask questions, which have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

My child's name is: ..... (*Please print*)

I know that: -

1. My child's participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. My child is free to withdraw from the project at any time during the data collection process without any disadvantage;
3. Results from this study will be treated in strict confidence and that my child will remain anonymous in the study;
4. The results of this study may be published, but my child's anonymity will be preserved.

I hereby consent to my child taking part in this project.

.....

(Signature of Parent/Caregiver)

.....

(Date)

I wish to receive a copy of the results:      Yes / No

## **Appendix D**

### ***Interview Guide – Interview One***

It is important to note that sections 1 and 3a were discussed in a consistent manner with each of the interview participants. Questions in all other section were not presented in the manner in which they have been written here. Rather, these sample questions provided topic checklists that were covered during each of the interviews and were brought up randomly based upon the flow of discussion. The wording of the subsequent discussions and questions therefore varied to the wording provided in this document.

#### **1. Orienting Process**

- a) Introduce the researcher
- b) Purpose of the study
- c) Rights as a participant
- d) Informed consent
- e) Taping of the interviews

#### **2. Introductory Questions**

A range of basic introductory questions were asked in order to establish rapport with the interview subject. These questions were age and circumstance specific. For example if the athlete was school-aged a series of questions concerning this environment were asked. If the subject was working, questions were asked to elicit information about this environment. As stated, the purpose of this section of the interview was to get the interviewee comfortable about the interview process and to establish a rapport between themselves and myself (as interviewer). As information gleaned during this portion of the interview was not used for the purpose of the study there was no need to be consistent with the questions asked across participants.

#### **3. Carding Discussion**

Once I felt as though the interviewee was comfortable with the interview process a series of questions relating to the carding process was initiated. Before this discussion began I outlined that;

- the time period being discussed during the interview related to the period from when the athlete was first carded until present day.
- all aspects of the athlete's experiences during this time needed to be considered (such as their relationships with other athletes, coaches, family, friends, teachers etc.), as well as the impact that carding has had on the athlete's life.

### **3a. Introduction to Carding**

- a) What sport are you carded for?
- b) How many hours a week do you train?
- c) How many days a week do you train?
- d) How long does/did your competitive season last?
- e) When did you start participating in the sport you are carded for?
- f) When did you start competing in this sport?
- g) How long have you been carded?
- h) At what levels have you been carded?
- i) If more than one, how long were you carded at each level?

### **3b. Impact of Carding to Life as an Athlete**

- a) In what way has being carded helped your development as an athlete?
- b) How would your life as a sportsperson be affected if you weren't a carded athlete?
- c) How has being carded benefited your life as a sportsperson?
- d) What impact would being de-carded have on your development as an athlete?
- e) What role do you see being a carded athlete has had on your success as an athlete?
- f) How has being carded impacted on your relationship with your team mates? Coaches?
- g) What advantages/disadvantages do you think you receive because you are carded?

- h) What tools for being a better athlete has the carding system allowed you to develop?
- i) How important is being carded to you as an athlete?
- j) What experiences/opportunities/advantages has being carded allowed you?
- k) What disadvantages has being carded caused you?
- l) In what way has carded hindered your development as an athlete?
- m) What impact has being carded had on your overall sport participation?
- n) What impact has carding had on your training?

### **3c. Impact of Carding to Life in General**

- a) In what way has being carded helped your development as a person?
- b) How has your life changed since becoming carded?
- c) How has being carded effected your perception of yourself?
- d) What changes have you seen in yourself since becoming carded?
- e) How important is carding to you as a person?
- f) How important is carding to the people around you?
- g) What impact has being carded had on your school/university/work?
- h) In what ways do you think carding has hindered your development as a person?
- i) How do people treat you when they learn you are a carded athlete?
- j) How has being carded benefited your life in general?
- k) What impact would becoming de-carded have on your development as a person?
- l) How has being carded impacted on your relationships with your family, peers, any other significant others?
- m) How has being carded impacted on your plans for life after sport?
- n) How have your relationships changed since becoming carded?
- o) How has your life balance changed since becoming carded?

### **3d. Overall Perceptions of Carding**

- a) What does being carded mean to you?
- b) How do feel the carding system is affecting the lives of New Zealand's athletes?
- c) What messages do you think the carding system is sending to athletes in New Zealand?
- d) What messages do you think the carding system is sending to the New Zealand public?
- e) If you could change any aspect of the current carding system what would it be?
- f) From your understanding of the carding system, do you think you are being offered what you were anticipating/told was available to you?

- g) If an athlete you knew was about to be carded what advice would you offer them?

## **Appendix E**

### ***Interview Guide – Interview Two***

#### **1. Re-Orientation Process**

- a) Re-introduce the researcher
- b) Re-introduce purpose of the study
- c) Review rights as a participant
- d) Review informed consent process
- e) Review taping of the interviews

#### **2. Carding Discussion**

Questions in these sections were not presented in the manner in which they have been written here. Rather, these sample questions provided topic checklists that were covered during each of the interviews and were brought up randomly based upon the flow of discussion. The wording of the subsequent discussions and questions therefore varied to the wording provided in this document. Furthermore individually tailored questions were also asked based upon the initial round of interviews conducted with each athlete. These questions helped to ensure a complete and comprehensive view of athletes' experiences within the carding programme.

##### **2a. Impact of Carding on Life as an Athlete**

- a) What is required of you to excel in your sport?
- b) In what way has being a carded athlete impacted on your experiences as an athlete?
- c) To what extent has being carded affected your performance? Describe an incident which depicts this.
- d) What parts of the carding system do you consider to be the most/least essential?
- e) In your opinion what areas of carding need to be reassessed?
- f) What aspect/s of carding would you not want to see altered?
- g) How could carding be improved to enable you to increase your performance levels?

- h) How would/does a centralised programme impact on your life as an athlete? Your life in general?
- i) What expectations do you feel are being placed on you as a carded athlete in this country? What are the implications of these expectations?

**2b. Impact of Carding/Elite Sport Involvement on Life in General**

- a) How has your life been shaped through your involvement in sport?
- b) What role does being an athlete play in your life?
- c) What value does sport hold in your life, and in the lives of those around you?
- d) What are the current struggles you have as an elite athlete in New Zealand?
- e) What are the current benefits of being an elite athlete in New Zealand?
- f) What role do you think elite sport plays in New Zealand as a whole?
- g) How do you feel after you have had a good performance?
- h) How do you feel after you have had a bad performance?
- i) What changes would you imagine to occur if sport was removed from your life?
- j) What differences do you think you would have in your life if you were not involved in sport?
- k) When did you first consider yourself to be an elite athlete? Why?
- l) How do you choose to allocate your time on a day to day basis?
- m) How do you think your life could be better organised /managed?
- n) What does the term 'balanced life' mean to you?
- o) What decisions, choices, strategies do you make that protect that balance?
- p) What threats or potential threats to that balance have you experienced and how do you cope when these occurs?
- q) Describe (choose one word that describes) how being an elite athlete impacts on your life as a whole.
- r) What key decisions have you made in your life that you feel have led you to becoming an elite sports person?
- s) What key decisions do you continue to make that enable you to achieve at this level?
- t) Describe the impact that your training and competition requirements have on your life?
- u) What drives you to continue your sporting commitments?
- v) How do your performance levels factor in on your continued involvement in sport?
- w) What sorts of things would result in you rethinking your involvement in elite sport?
- x) What would be the most rewarding/difficult part of your life? Why?