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## **“What Ever Happened To....” The Effects of Career Termination from the National Football League**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study is about an elite athlete's experiences with career termination from the National Football League. Researchers have suggested that the most significant and potentially traumatic experience encountered by athletes is career termination (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). An interview approach was used, where the second author developed the interview questions based on the conceptual model of career termination of sport by Taylor and Ogilvie, as well as items from the Athletic Retirement Inventory (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). In total, approximately 86 questions were asked and many of these had follow-up questions. In addition to obtaining the relevant background information, there were 6 major areas covered in the interview. The areas dealt with the athlete's experiences in the NFL, his injury, his termination from sport, the support he received through the career termination process, what he thinks would be the ideal situation for other athletes involved in career termination (including retirement services), and the role of sport psychology (in and out of sport). The person interviewed was the first author. He was instructed to answer the interview questions based on how he felt at that time; two years after his career was terminated (approximately 4 years ago from today's date). A third party transcribed the interview verbatim. The first author then used the interview as the basis for his master's degree thesis in sport psychology. The result is an autobiographical account of career termination (Stearn, 1998). The study provides unique insight into the psychological affect of forced retirement from sport.

## Introduction

Career opportunities in professional sport are limited. Many young athletes have visions of becoming professional athletes, but the chances of turning these visions into reality are quite low (Coakley, 2001). Quantitative estimates of a person's chance of becoming a professional athlete vary greatly because of the different computation methods. Leonard (1996) stated that the odds of an American man between the ages of 15 and 39 becoming a professional athlete in the National Football League (NFL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Hockey League (NHL), or Major League baseball are about 20, 000 to 1. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association president Cedric W. Dempsey (1999) the odds of a high school football player making it to the pros at all, let alone having a career are about 6, 000 to 1. Coakley (2001) stated that the odds of making it from a high school varsity football team to the NFL are 1 in 1, 222 and from the college to the pros are 1 in 68.

In addition to these discouraging odds, professional sport opportunities are extremely short term. The average career in a team sport lasts between 3 to 7 years (Coakley, 2001). What this means is that after one's sport career ends there are about 40 additional years in a person's work life. Media exposure to the public often portrays athletes as wealthy individuals with unlimited income. Generous publicity is given to those athletes who sign the "super contracts." However, in reality, salaries vary widely across the levels and divisions in professional sport. The super contract athletes are the exception; most participants in professional sport sign for the league minimum and are often forced out of their career for various reasons before they can cash in on the fame and fortune. Despite these facts, the dream of becoming a professional athlete is still very prevalent for some people.

Participation in sport brings forth actions, emotions, and experiences in athletes that seem to be unique when compared with members of the general population (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). The event of retirement is a normal consequence of sport participation (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Termination from sport involves a variety of different experiences that sets it apart from typical retirement concerns. Sport careers are typically shorter than most other careers or occupations, as most athletes retire, voluntarily or involuntarily, during their mid to late twenties. Researchers have suggested that the most significant and potentially traumatic experience encountered by athletes is career termination (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Athletes are often forced to contend with the early age of career termination, the need to find another career to pursue, and the diverse ways in which they choose to or are forced to leave their sport.

To date, there has been some interest in athletic career termination in the sport psychology field. From an organizational perspective many sport organizations often do not want sport psychologists to address career termination and life after sport for fear of distracting the athletes from their competitive focus (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). This is interesting because Sinclair and Orlick (1993) found that athletes would be very interested in retirement services, including counseling.

In response to the apparent significance of the issue of career termination, there has been a small but steady stream of anecdotal, theoretical, and empirical accounts of career termination among athletes using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The most comprehensive studies have been conducted on certain groups such as female gymnasts (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and Canadian Olympic athletes (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1996) who competed at the amateur level. At this level monetary compensation is not an issue due to their amateur status. This raises the question of differences in career termination experiences between professional athletes (those receiving payments for services) versus those on an amateur level. Accounts from professional athletes participating on levels such as the NFL would be a way to explore the similarities and differences between termination experiences.

The format of this study is unique. The method used an interview approach. However, the introduction, analysis and discussion were completed primarily by the person who was interviewed thereby making it autobiographical in nature. The interview was completed first.

Autobiographical accounts as a resource to understand athletes have not been widely used even though they allow readers to gain in depth information into the psychological and physical effects of ones experiences (Strean, 1998). The success of research of this kind depends heavily on the deep, dense, detailed accounts of experiences so that *readers* are allowed to experience vicariously the essential features of events that have been described. For the *participant*, autobiographical research may help him/her gain a greater understanding of their retirement experiences, produce closure on their athletic career, and/or foster the development of a new identity that should encourage growth in their post athletic life (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001).

Completing this study may serve several purposes. First, it may lead to further research in the area of career termination. Second, it may give others insight into a world that is often misrepresented by members of the media. For example, “what ever happened to...” is usually the phrase that precedes comments about ex-athletes, that is, if there are any comments at all (Parker, 1994). Retired athletes seem to be remembered more for their escapades off the playing surface rather than their achievements during the pinnacle of their careers (for example, see <http://www.cracksmoker.com/>). Third, perhaps by reading a first hand account of career termination, sport psychologists, coaches and other athletes can better understand the process.

## **Method**

### Participant Background Information

A native of Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, I, Greg Lotysz, grew up in a hockey talent hot bed. Each year players left home to pursue their dreams of playing in the NHL. I began playing sport at an early age taking part in everything from baseball to basketball but my love was hockey. My early hockey ability allowed me to travel with elite teams that exposed me to some of the top hockey talent in the region. As I began to physically

develop, my skills as a hockey player began to diminish. My size began to be a problem on the ice as my feet and body didn't match. At the age of sixteen I gave up the game I loved due to the increasing physical and financial difficulty of finding equipment.

Needing an outlet for sport, I turned to football my senior year in high school (1993). I won several football awards including high school MVP. In college (1995-1999) I was a four-year letter winner, an academic All-American, a playing All-American, and a MVP Division II lineman. I was the third pick in the Canadian Football League draft (1999). I decided not to go with the BC Lions, and instead was an undrafted free agent signee with the New York Jets of the NFL (1999). My first year I signed a contract that was a three-year progressive; starting with \$175 000 as the base salary. I ended up getting cut from the team, but I signed on with the practice squad (which is made up of 5 guys). My bonus for signing with the practice squad was \$120 000, and I also received bonus money for sticking around and not leaving the team to get signed by anyone else when they called (I was contacted by a couple other teams). I earned a roster spot in my second year (2000). My salary was \$250 000. My dream of playing professional sport had been realized. I was the first person from the town of Thunder Bay to make it to the NFL.

I agreed to be interviewed to discuss my career termination from the NFL. It was understood from the outset that I would be using this interview as a basis to complete my thesis which was required as part of my Masters Degree program in sport psychology. The interview was conducted by the second author, my master's thesis advisor. She developed the protocol based on the conceptual model of career termination developed by Taylor and Ogilvie, (2001) and from the Athletic Retirement Inventory (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). I was instructed to answer these questions based on my feelings right now – it had been almost two years since my career was terminated from the NFL. The interview was conducted in my home, and was videotaped. A third party transcribed it verbatim. The analysis and discussion portion of this study was completed primarily by myself. I wrote the introduction to this study after the interview was completed. This time limit was used so my responses weren't severely "tainted" by information that I had read from other career termination studies.

## **Results**

The entire interview is available on request (in writing or on video). In total, approximately 86 questions were asked and many of these had follow-up questions. In addition to obtaining the relevant background information, there were 6 major areas covered in the interview. The areas dealt with (1) my experiences in the NFL, (2) my injury, (3) my termination from sport, (4) support I received through the career termination process, (5) what I think would be the ideal situation for other athletes involved in career termination (including retirement services), and (6) the role of sport psychology (in and out of sport). Each of these areas will now be discussed with responses from the interview.

### *My experiences in the NFL*

There were 7 questions that pertained to my experiences in the NFL. These questions dealt with my salary, status on the team, and overall impression of what it was like to play in the NFL. A lot of the answers to these questions are reported in the background information section above. The following quotes represent the most important and meaningful responses in this area. The first quote deals with rating my overall playing experience.

The playing experience itself was a ten. But everything else that surrounded it, I would probably rate it a five to a six. All the pressure and expectations are fine but the way things were handled and with my injury and stuff; I am just thoroughly disgusted with that. But, there are still enough points in there to put it at a five. But, my experiences on the field itself were by far unimaginable. They were just the ultimate.

When asked to compare my first year to my second year in the NFL, my response was the following.

Well, first year there is a lot of inconsistency and you don't know what to expect. You go into training camp with just a blank slate and you experience so many different things about the pressures and the possibility of getting cut on a daily basis. You deal with different coaching methods – coaches yelling at you, putting you down. They don't really give you positive reinforcement. And then there's the aspect of money; you want to provide a living for, in my case, my family and things like that. So, there was a lot of pressure that way. But, after you get passed the first year you know what to expect. It's just a lot easier because you get to be buddies with the guys, you know your coach, you know your level of play, and you know you belong there. And, you get in a work out group, get a regular paycheck, get a house, so you have a little stability. It's a lot easier the second year than the first. I think that's just what happens, as you get more comfortable.

### *My injury*

There were 9 questions that pertained to my injury. These questions dealt with when I got injured, the specifics of the injury and complications, and the long-term effects of the injury. The following quotation describes how my injury occurred.

My fairy tale story was right on track until the morning of July 15, 2000 (during training camp). It was raining outside so we had to go indoors on turf. I was vying for a starting left tackle position and pass blocking a defensive end when on the last play of the practice, contact was made with another player and a knee injury resulted. My leg went back, I got pushed, and my leg got caught up in the turf; basically, my leg shot forward while the rest of my body was going back. I blew my ACL, my MCL and tore my meniscus. Surgery repaired my knee and rehabilitation began. However, complications surfaced due to two infections and additional surgeries were needed to clear up the problems. One of the infections that I had in my knee went undetected for so long that it

did massive damage. The reason why I am not playing football today is because of the infections. To this day, I have had 6 surgeries on my knee, and I still cannot walk without limping.

This quotation describes my hospital stays.

In August I had my first surgery. I spent about 15 days in the hospital for that surgery. After that I had another surgery to try to clean out my knee from the infection that they finally recognized and spent four days in the hospital. Nine days after that I had another surgery to attempt to clean out my leg again and spent a day in the hospital. Eight days after that surgery I went for a second opinion and I went into the hospital the next day and was there for 8-9 days. Then I was sent home with a pick line in my arm for 7 weeks. Four times a day, for forty minutes, for 7 weeks, I received intravenous antibiotics in my home. I had to stay at my home for that time.

When asked about the transition from feeling as though I was going to play football again to realizing that I would never play again I said the following:

I realize that the standard rehab for a knee is 6-8 months, especially with the medical stuff that goes on now with elite athletes. It stopped being an issue of playing and started becoming more of an issue of “am I going to lose my leg?” Repeatedly I insisted something was wrong with my knee, but no one listened and they kept doing aspirations, taking stuff out of my knee, and kept sending me to surgery to clean it out. Finally I went in there one time and I said, “something’s wrong with my knee, am I going to lose it, what’s going on?” They kept insisting I was fine and to continue going to rehab. I went for a second opinion and I think right there it stopped being “am I going to play again” and started being an “Oh my God am I going to lose my leg?”

When I was lying in the hospital for my fourth surgery, lost all that weight (from 310 pounds to 240 pounds), had intravenous antibiotics with pain medication my doctor came in and said to my wife and my family that I can’t guarantee that Greg will ever walk without pain again. I thought he was embellishing a little bit, but now I come to find out that he’s not. And that’s the time, when you still have an idea in the back of your head well maybe that I can overcome this, but a couple months later (after a MRI) he told me that I was never going to play football again. Then it was no more an issue of playing football; it was an issue of getting my knee back to where I could perform daily activities.

The effects of my injury are noted below.

I wasn’t able to walk for a long time and since there was so much infection they took out all the hardware from my ACL, so I didn’t have one. I had to wear a brace constantly and my knee swelled up.

I was extremely limited in what I could do physically . I had to sit down all the time and I had to take pain killers to be out there so, it was very difficult for me. I found out after

going through the season into December, I had to stop because I couldn't do it anymore; I couldn't physically do it anymore.

Overall, I feel as though "the injury's changed my life." When asked about the impact of the injury (being positive or negative) I responded as follows:

Well, there are a couple different ways I look at it. I think that it has made me stronger, as far as dealing with the pain everyday. It has educated me on the different ways people operate, and the way business operates. But it has such a negative impact on me as far as how much time it takes to rehab everyday. Not being able to go up the stairs, or play with my son, or go for walks with my wife, or ride my motorcycle or things like that. Right now, it's just such a negative impact on my life; it's just immeasurable.

This quote compares my experiences to how I think other players' who have experienced career-ending injuries may be feeling. Specifically, I was asked to relate to someone who just had an injury end their career, and whether I thought that I was different from them.

From the injury standpoint, I'm the same. I was getting worried about losing my leg. That's the part that sets me apart from these people. The injury part I think is very similar. A lot of guys get injured, management just pushes them aside so in that aspect it is very similar too.

#### *My termination from sport*

There were 36 questions that pertained to my termination from sport. When asked about how I felt when my injury first happened I responded with the following:

Well, the fact you have an injury and then it's the uncertainty: are they going to keep you? Are they going to turn you into a reserve? Are they going to cut you with injury? Do they want to keep you? Do they feel you're valuable? That's the kind of things you're worried about initially. Can I rehab? Can I get back to where I was? That's the initial reaction. Now it's more of how am I going to spend the rest of my life? There is more stress now. At the time you think that the injury itself is the hardest thing you'll ever to face. But, you realize it's just so minor compared to years of pain.

When asked about when I felt my retirement was permanent, I responded that I "put my retirement to rest a couple days after told me . In addition, I stated that "I believe I'm pretty strong like that – that I can put away football aspirations and turn to something else." "It's a daily thing now. It's not about football anymore. I can't go up the stairs, play with my son, things like that, so it's not about football anymore it's about just me."

My situation with career termination may be complicated by the fact that I have several ongoing issues dealing with New York State Disability, NFL disability and a malpractice lawsuit. In response to these issues I stated that "obviously I believe they didn't take good care of my leg. And now it's about getting vindicated somewhat in that

you want to for all the pain and the suffering and the sleepless nights and all the weight loss and the permanent damage to my knee that's going to be forever." "I want to be compensated for that so that it's a daily fight now."

Other questions dealt with the ways I coped with my career termination. With respect to potential problem areas during career transition (cf Werthner & Orlick, 1993), I stated that I missed the social aspect. I had financial and employment difficulties. With respect to the impact on my relationships, there was a "little bit of a strain" with my wife. "My dad and mom had a hard time with me not playing because I worked so hard. And they couldn't come to any games. It was tough on them." "They were disappointed with the situation, not with me." I never drank alcohol or took drugs. I did take painkillers to accomplish daily activities (i.e., coach, sleep).

When asked about what strategies were beneficial to me during the career termination process, I replied that I felt that I didn't not have a main focus, however I kept busy by going to rehab and making phone calls various people who could provide me with some solution, advice, answers, etc.

With respect to my feelings I responded that there were periods where I would get extremely emotional. For example, "I was extremely upset at what had happened as far as the way I was treated and that no one would answer me and things like that. I definitely had bouts of crying."

When asked about how I felt I handled my transition out of sport, I responded: "That's tough. I feel that given the circumstances and the resources that I have, I handled it well but I think I could have done things a lot easier if I was given an opportunity or a place to go for help or someone to coach me that was qualified. I think it would have been a lot easier."

I believe this quote summarizes my feelings on the career transition process.

It was sudden, it was rocky, it was, as far as I'm concerned, the worst. It was lonely. It was without aid. As far as from going from one phase to another it was the hardest thing I ever experienced. I thought training camp was hard but I mean it had nothing on leaving the game and it was more because of the injury not because I couldn't play anymore it was because now I have something that will affect me the rest of my life; whereas I could only play football for so many years.

When speaking about my adaptation to my new situation out of sport, I replied that "I think I adapted a long time ago to my career being over, what I haven't adapted to is how it's left me." When asked what, more specifically, I have adapted to, I stated that "I've adapted that I am no longer in the same social class, same economical class, you know, that kind of thing. But I haven't adapted to the not walking or spending a lot of time rehabbing."

When I was a professional football player, even though there was stress and I was under stress, I was in control because if I didn't accomplish my goals it was because I didn't work hard enough or I wasn't good enough, things like that. But now, I mean, I have no control because I haven't worked in two years therefore financially I'm under that stress, my identity has changed so you have that stress, you know, your relationship with others is different because they look at you differently, so I think there's a lot more stress now than there ever was and the height of the stress is definitely financial because you worry about providing for your family first and I just can't do that right now.

Overall I stated that the adaptation was something that I had to get used to but it was not that difficult.

Not playing and not being a part of the weight lifting group, and meetings, and going out to dinner, things like that. But, I never put a lot of stock into it. I put more stock in coming home and seeing my wife. So, it wasn't as difficult as one might think.

I believe that I have adapted to my new situation out of sport, but not in the physical sense.

When asked about whether or not I would participate in the same sport again knowing what I know now, that is, knowing about what really happens in sport, my response was that "if you told me that this was going to happen, the same situation...no, Absolutely not. I would rather pump gas for a living." "Like I said playing was very positive but everything else was, the lasting effect was extremely negative." In addition, I stated that my situation now is "more important than ever because I have a son. Nothing is as important as that. Family comes first. I am so happy that we were able to have a son. My wife had cancer so it's basically a miracle but I think that this situation takes precedence over anything. Let alone football. This situation is the most important right now."

#### *Support through my career termination process*

There were 10 questions that inquired about my support networks (friends, family, coaching staff and management). This first set of quotations deals with my initial perceptions of the NY Jets organization.

I had about, well, I had obviously a best friend on the team, he was from the Midwest. He was my roommate actually my first year. But on a regular basis, all the offensive lineman and even some of the guys that play different positions I had about 5 or 6 really close friends. We went out to dinner like once a week. Did a lot of community events and charity things like that. I mean there were a lot of guys that were chummy on the team. I think that there was just a couple groups and ours was made up of 5 or 6 guys.

You didn't . I got a lot of extra help from one assistant coach from the offensive line as far as what to expect and things like that. He was kind of an ex-player-coach. He'd been to the Super Bowl and things like that. So, he was really good that way. But, you never

knew where you stood with any of the coaches. Other than when they were yelling at you, you knew that at least they cared about you enough to yell. And when they stopped yelling there was something to worry about. But, I would learn later that you couldn't go talk to management especially when something was wrong because, you know, something was wrong and they didn't want to hear about it. So I wasn't comfortable at all and I don't think a lot of guys are. I was a witness to a lot of guys that made big dollars that could say whatever they wanted. But, for me I kept my mouth shut and was on a need to know basis.

During the interview we discussed the support I received from my friends on the team and the coaching staff and management.

I didn't receive, while I was in the hospital for any of my surgeries, one call from the coaches and I received very few calls from the players. I understand that because when they talked to me I was injured in the hospital and they realized it was real and they don't want to talk about it or know anything about it. But still. A couple of my close friends called and came by. Or they called my wife to see how I was doing. But they knew something was wrong, they knew the treatment that they provided was inadequate. And there was some animosity there. The team doctor that performed my first surgeries that didn't detect my infections and didn't listen to me while I was trying to tell him something was wrong came by and apologized. He said that he wished he could have done something sooner and did I need anything? Things like that. So he felt really bad. I was too angry to talk to him though. I was sitting there and I had lost seventy pounds from all this medication I was on and was bed ridden for a month and I was not able to walk.

I also addressed what my expectations were when it came to the NY Jets organization. Specifically, given that the coaching staff and management weren't approachable from the beginning, the question was "was I surprised that they were not approachable when I was injured?" My response was the following:

It is and it isn't because when you first get there have a team meeting and the head coach stands up there and says you know we're a family and if something is wrong it stays in here and you know this and that. I took whatever they said to heart. And maybe that's my mistake. Even when I was going through rehab for the first month the owner of the team came and sat beside me and said you're doing good and you're going to get through rehab and if you need something give me a call and then when this stuff hit the fan with all my treatment and this and that I tried to contact him at his office. He owns a multi not million dollar but billion-dollar cooperation and he didn't take my calls. I'm not stupid. And I realize that you're not going to be able to talk to everybody but in the same sense these people that you work for and went to practice for everyday and put your body on the line yet when things do go wrong you should be at least be able to express your opinion. But, whether they listen to it or not is up to them. But you should be able to do that.

My expectations were to have them to acknowledge I existed for one. For two, provide me with a little better care than they did. And another issue to see me through the whole thing and not just sever all ties. I'm not saying they had to throw roses at my feet but how about a call how are you doing anything like that and then maybe help me with the transition if they knew that I wasn't going to be able to play football anymore. And it's not just a financial issue but a respect issue. You were good enough to play there but yet you're not good enough when you're injured. And I know that happens all the time. But at the same time if someone makes a mistake they should be man enough to admit their mistake and try to rectify it and that's all I was looking for.

When asked about who I considered to be the most supportive of me during this time, my response was my wife, followed by my family and friends. I stated that I was close to about 5 or 6 people on the team. Today, I still talk with one of those people on a regular basis.

The final questions asked about who, besides family and friends, I had talked to about my experiences so far. I replied that I had been a guest speaker for various classes at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and a psychiatrist, psychologist and pastor. "There were a couple of people that approached me to talk. It was a couple ex-athletes that were in the business world. But you never knew who they were connected with and now that you see the way things worked you were kind of scared to open yourself up to anybody."

*My ideal solution (and retirement services)*

There were 6 questions that asked about my perceptions of what I thought would be the ideal situation following my injury in regards to treatment and retirement services. When asked about the ideal thing that would have happened once I was informed that my career was over, I responded that the ideal situation would have been the following:

The absolute ideal, the injury occurs, there's an infection, they realize they made a mistake, offer you some sort of compensation for your troubles, handshakes are exchanged, thanks for coming out here, your part of the family, you are welcome back here anytime, here are the names and numbers of some people that you should be in contact with and that will be in contact with you. Please take the time to visit with them. At least a couple times. If their services are needed you can just tell them it's on us. We are going to help you out at this time. And if you ever need anything give me a call. That would be an ideal situation.

I elaborated on my description of the ideal situation by suggesting what types of retirement services I thought would be helpful. My first suggestion was a "career transition person to talk to." When asked what I thought this person could do for me, I replied:

Well, could help me deal with the feelings I was experiencing. Talk through them, point out direction, give me a sense of direction, give me a sense of focus. Because at this time you're just lost. A financial direction would be great too. Someone to show you that,

avenues to explore, if you were given this compensation packet, what to do with it. Or even employment opportunities. A place to go to work that could use your services, even though you can't do certain things, they would let you rehab in the morning, but come to work later or you know anything like that would be great.

When asked about what the top three things would be that I would offer to professional football players to help them with career termination, I suggested the following:

An ear, would be one, just so that they can talk and talk and talk and they could just listen. And then somebody that has been through it and can share their experiences would be two and then somebody to point out the different phases that you could be expected to go through. Someone to say I felt like this at this time. Something like that. That's what I would say the top three would be.

And I think the best resources that somebody could have is another person that has been through a similar experience, so they can share each other. Because obviously this is what I talked to my wife about, I could never understand having cancer, you could tell me, and I can listen but you can never understand going to the NFL and having your career end because of an injury. And so that's what I would like to see stressed.

In addition, I suggested "a place that you could go to find out information on that wasn't a person" and something else related to financial services. With respect to the services that I used, quite simply, I didn't use any. The NFL says there are retirement services in the book, but "I called, none were offered, other than you can apply for disability." Furthermore, I stated that "there's a Bell/Rozell Disability Plan. And that the NFL Players Association book says there are retirement options and things like that, career planning, and things of that nature. But, when things are going down and you call there was nothing available." "I don't know if I didn't press hard enough but you shouldn't have to when your career is over, and you got injured, even though you only spent a couple years there or a year, it shouldn't matter."

### *My experiences with sport psychology*

There were 10 questions that pertained to my experiences with sport psychology in and out of sport. As my responses show, a sport psychologist was not available to me both during my career and post-injury period. I attended seminars that were mandatory for rookies that involved "guys coming in to talk about different aspects of the game, whether it be financial, or dealing with the pressures, and the fans, and things like that." However these seminars seldom discussed avenues to explore regarding professional help. As I stated in my interview:

It was only because of all my injuries and rehab ... that I realized that I had to go talk to somebody you know and consult "a professional" even though it's not something that a guy like myself is not proud of ... there was nothing set up by the team.

When asked if there were any mental strategies that I used while going through the transition out of sport, I replied that: “I tried to stay positive. It got increasingly more difficult. I found myself getting into funks and just saying there’s no end to this. I couldn’t imagine myself getting better because it wasn’t happening and it was out of my control.” When pressed for more information on the role of imagery in my rehab I stated that although I used imagery when I was playing, “I never used it in my rehab cause mentally I think I was to beat up to even consider it. You know imaging myself getting back on the field or even, you know, just doing the simple things. I just couldn’t do it. I was physically and mentally fatigued.” I also never set goals for myself, in fact my only goal was “just to get out of bed and go to rehab. My knee hurt so bad.”

Currently, I find myself using more mental strategies to assist me with daily living compared to when I played professional football. One of the most beneficial things for me has been to find a focus. Initially “I wasn’t able to find another focus because every day I had to go to rehab and it reminded me of the injury and the way I was treated.” Keeping myself busy was my goal and so I focused on improving my situation. “I really got caught up in trying to make phone calls and trying to get answers, calling different attorneys, and calling the NFL Players Association.”

At night I really try to sit down and picture what I’m going to do the next day to help out my situation; who can I call that would have the greatest impact on my court cases or am I doing enough to facilitate pushing my case to the top, or my situation, not giving up, appealing something. I do that but I find myself lying in bed at night awake because my knee is constantly in pain and things like that so I have a lot of time to think.

Finally, just completing this project (the interview and the analysis) has been a tremendous help to me. Consider the following quotations.

I think it also helps me, you know, to document it therefore maybe some day down the road somebody might pick it up or use it or even for maybe a professor that would look at this and would pick out things that could be taught in another classroom, to other athletes that you know to get ready, make them aware of situations. I think that’s why this is so helpful.

Every time I tell my story it gets easier, I think it helps me out, I think internally it makes me feel better, talking about it because I really haven’t had a vehicle to express myself other than to family and friends who want to know what happened.

hurts but it helps more because I think that by telling my story again, that if it can help one person or make that one person think about it and maybe it will stir them and then maybe they’ll do a little project or research that would help someone else down the road.

I think because I was born and raised to not be selfish, and to not look out for yourself but first and foremost, to look out for how other people would feel. And now that I’ve done it and been through if I can help somebody else that would be the ultimate.

## Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to present an autobiographical recollection dealing with the experiences of an elite athlete upon termination from his career from the NFL. The causes of career termination include age, deselection, free choice and injury (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). When dealing with these causes, injury is considered to be the most distressing to the athlete.

Injury rates in the NFL have been estimated to be 100% (Coakley, 2001). According to Young (1993), professional sports involving brutal body contact are the most violent and dangerous workplaces in the occupational world. There is no doubt that the knee injury that I sustained was the starting point for my termination process. The actual injury (ACL, MCL, torn meniscus) was not considered to be career threatening; many athletes have had similar injuries and successful rehabilitation that allowed them to continue playing. My situation was unique in that I suffered serious post-operative infections. As a result of these infections, for me, the question changed from “will I play football again?” to “will I lose my leg?”

Previous research in this area has not elaborated on the circumstances surrounding injuries (i.e., presence of complications). That is, injury as a cause of termination seems to be a “yes or no” question. We do not know if other athletes have experienced similar circumstances (i.e., infections) as I did. To date, I am the only professional athlete to file a malpractice lawsuit based on an injury I sustained while playing in the state of New York (Associated Press, 2002). This makes my situation very unique. Due to the extreme duration (approximately 2 years to date) of the malpractice litigation and the expectation of it continuing further, my adjustment out of sport may be delayed compared to other athletes who left sport due to injury. It is clear from my interview that the workman’s compensation, NFL disability issues and malpractice case have consumed me on a daily basis.

Furthermore, based on independent medical examinations, I have been labeled “totally and permanently disabled” to the extent that I am unable to be gainfully employed for profit or remuneration. Research (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) has shown that athletes who have options to focus on after retirement, such as employment, interests, or relationships are better equipped to have a smooth transition than athletes who have no options at all. According to one of my Doctors, I am not even able to work a “desk job.” I will continue to take pain medication daily as well as continue my physical rehabilitation program (approximately 4 hours per day 6-7 times per week). These factors, in addition to the initial effects of the injury (i.e., surgeries, being bed-ridden, limited mobility, weight loss, etc.), made my transition far from smooth. In fact, my transition out of sport was “sudden, rocky, the worst, lonely, without aid and the hardest thing I have ever experienced.” From the initial injury to the present day the lingering effects of the infection are still evident and will be for the duration of my life. The injury and infection have clearly affected my quality of life. My ability to perform daily activities (such as holding my child, driving, and other recreational

activities) is impaired. Future surgeries will be needed as I have been told that my entire knee will have to be replaced with prosthesis.

The feelings I experienced throughout my career termination and transition out of sport varied from suicidal thoughts to elation. When the injury occurred I was understandably upset, however I was optimistic that I would be successful in the rehabilitation process. I did not feel as though the injury was career threatening. Once I became aware of the infection, I started to question the impact of the infection and the long-term effects that included whether I would play football again.

While some researchers (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) showed that during the first few months of transition athletes rate their general outlook on life as fairly positive, this was not the case for me. My outlook was bleak; I saw no end in sight when dealing with the physical pain and mentally I was highly stressed. According to Werthner and Orlick (1986), injury could be linked to an athlete's sense of accomplishment and focus out of sport. That is, if the athlete was injured and forced to end his/her career prematurely he/she often had not had a chance to accomplish all of his/her goals and may not have planned for a new life outside of sport. These factors often lead to the most difficult and long transition phases.

There are a number of difficulties that athletes may encounter while transitioning from sport. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) identified 11 factors that include missing the social aspect, job/school pressures, finances, relationship difficulties with coach/association, loss of status, feelings of incompetence in other activities other than sport, lack of self-confidence, injury, relationship difficulties with family and friends, illness in family, and personal illness. The difficulties I encountered during my transition were primarily related to issues of competency and financial.

Consistent with the sport ethic (Coakley, 2001) I expressed that I was taught to "play through pain." While in rehabilitation, I was asked to do certain exercises and follow protocol that physically hurt me and did further damage to my knee. I did these things because I was following directions – "doing what I was told." Implied was that the Doctors and trainers had my best interests in mind. However, because the infection went undetected for so long, I started to doubt the medical staff, including the doctors and trainers. I was repeatedly told that I was "ok" but I knew that something serious was wrong. The doubt created competency issues with my trainers, my doctors, my family and myself. My feelings were justified when I sought a second opinion. My persistence resulted in the discovery of the original infection as well as an additional infection.

Financially, my difficulties are numerous. When I was injured, I got the remainder of my salary from the Jets. Since that time, as a graduate assistant, I earned \$2500. Clearly, I am limited in that I have only been able to live off of the savings I banked during my playing days. In order to have health insurance my wife gained employment and has been able to supplement the household income. I have not been able to live up to the same standard living I was accustomed to while playing in the NFL. Gone are the exclusive

dinners, the beach house, and the trips down south. Here now is the reality that I may have to sell off some of my possessions in order to make house payments.

Right now, I am still financially tied to NFL. I persisted in applying for disability from the Bell/Rozelle plan. My standard of living is dependent on getting NFL disability because of my inability to work at any occupation. I have also obtained the services of two attorneys that will enable me to apply for Worker's Compensation in the state of New York as well as file a medical malpractice lawsuit against the doctors who performed the various surgeries on my knee. Because I obtained professional status in sport – and was not an amateur athlete like those in previous research (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) the financial implications of my permanent disability will limit me in obtaining financial independence away from sport.

Researchers have also suggested that there are certain coping strategies that are more helpful than others during the first few months of career transition (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). In their study, finding another interest, keeping busy, exercising were the most helpful methods for dealing with the stress of retirement. Interestingly, one of the least helpful strategies involves counseling.

I thought that counseling would be beneficial to me. However, I wasn't able to find someone away from the football world that could meet my needs. There were a couple people who I approached to talk about my injury experiences. They were former NFL players now turned businessmen. I was scared to open myself up to them because I wasn't sure who they were connected with, who they knew etc. This was an important issue for me because I put my trust in other people (all people associated with the NY Jets), was let down and was now leery about trusting anyone else in the football world.

One theme that emerges from my interview is that I felt alone after the injury. The Jets organization basically cut off all ties with me including any access to rehabilitation facilities. Numerous attempts at contacting management and ownership were unsuccessful. Institutional groups like sport organizations and coaches were found to be the least supportive of Canadian athletes transitioning out of sport as well (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). I stated that I was able to talk with my wife. However, at times I felt that she did not understand what I was going through. The most supportive group in the Sinclair and Orlick study was found to be spouse/mate. Approximately 6 months after my injury I sought the advice of a psychiatrist, sport psychologist and my pastor as a means to express what I was feeling.

In the initial planning for this study, I expressed that I thought it would be therapeutic for my to tell my story. Account making or narratives enables athletes to gain a greater understanding of their retirement experiences, allows them to produce closure on their athletic career, and fosters the development of a new identity that should encourage growth in their post athletic life (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). In their study (i.e., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) reported that one of their participants stated that the conversation about her career termination was therapeutic. Furthermore, in her discussion on transition experiences of former college football players, Parker (1994) stated that, "if

anything is to be learned from this study, it is that former athletes have a lot to say and perhaps no one to tell. These unresolved feelings and emotions, coupled with the lack of a safe forum of expression, is potentially harmful to the mental health of these individuals. Transitional athletes need to be afforded the opportunity to vent and clarify their feelings about their sport careers without fear of reprisals” (p. 301).

Writing about my experiences with career termination was another avenue that allowed me to express myself – in an educational setting. By researching career termination, and learning about other athletes’ experiences I found many similarities and differences with my own. However, many of the experiences I read about were not elaborated upon to such an extent that I could identify with them. Furthermore, I thought that some of the information I read was misleading.

For example, in my research I found that there are programs in place for continuing education, career transition and family assistance provided by the NFL. According to Anderson and Morris (2000), the NFL’s career transition program improves opportunities for retired players as well as assists them with the transition from professional football. The program provides a pre-retirement seminar, career planning, and work experience program within selected business organizations. The aim of the program is to provide practical seminars that would assist players to deal more effectively with their retirement from the NFL.

These services were not available at the time of my career transition. I inquired several times regarding where to obtain help – financially, psychologically, physically – and about what kinds of programs were available. I was given no direction and I felt that I was no better off with my situation then when I started

With respect to what I would consider to be the ideal situation regarding career termination and transition, I expressed several things. I would have liked to talk with 3 different people. First, a career transition person who would have been able to help me deal with the feelings I was experiencing. Second, somebody who has been through it and can share my experiences. Third, somebody to point out the different phases that you could be expected to go through.

I also stated that I would have benefited from financial services as well. A program that would have shown me that there were avenues to explore, even if a compensation package was given. For example, what could an athlete do with the package instead of “blowing it?” In addition, an employment service would have been helpful too. Perhaps even a place to work – such as an advertising / marketing firm, human resources, sports agencies, – places that could use the athletes’ sports experiences and knowledge. Even though injured athletes can’t do certain things, such a place would let them rehab in the morning, but come to work later and still feel productive. The bottom line is for the organization to be aware of the athlete’s situation and to work with them.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I stated that, “playing was a very positive but the lasting effects were extremely negative.” I made a very bold statement during the interview that cannot be misinterpreted. When asked if I would play football in the NFL again knowing now what really happens I said, “If you told me that this was going to happen, the same situation. No, absolutely not. I would rather pump gas for a living.” To end, I want to point out that much of study was written in the first person to make it more personal. It involves true feelings and emotions that deserve to be told in no other way. Without a topic that dealt with my career I can say without a doubt that I would have never returned to graduate school to further my education. This study was written with dedication to the topic as well as passion in the words. I want every one to know that the NFL is filled with a plethora of emotions during your playing days and those emotions don’t end just because your career does.

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