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## Career Termination: The Collegiate Athletes' Self-Identity with the Transition Through the Grief and Loss Cycle

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CAREER TERMINATION:  
THE COLLEGIATE ATHLETES' SELF-IDENTITY WITH THE  
TRANSITION THROUGH THE GRIEF AND LOSS CYCLE

by

DYLAN STREET

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Sport and Exercise Science  
in the College of Health Professions and Sciences  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## **Abstract**

The research seeks to understand and explain the impact, if any, on transition out of sport, based on the level of commitment to sport being a Collegiate Athlete. Interest for this study came from personal experience as an athlete, as well as knowing numerous athletes who have gone, or are going through, questioning their Identity once their playing days came to an end. This study includes extant literature discussing Athletic Identity. It offers a different perspective than other studies working through grief and loss after losing the ability to play a sport.

The purpose of this study is to offer possible explanations and resources to deal with the problem of Identity Crisis in a post-athletic career. Here, Identity Crisis will be defined as a “personal psychosocial conflict especially in adolescence that involves confusion about one's social role and often a sense of loss of continuity to one's personality” (Merriam-Webster's dictionary). This is currently being brought to light with the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study will describe the effects of transitioning out of sport through the Kübler-Ross “Grief and Loss cycle” of an athlete. This study is intended to be a resource for collegiate athletes, coaches, trainers, administrators, parents, and counselors to be better prepared to help athletes with this transition.

## **Dedication**

To my Former Athletes, this thesis is for you. No matter the level of performance, there is someone who is questioning “Who Am I” after they can no longer play their sport. I am writing this for you. Take what you read and apply it. You are more than an Athlete.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In modern collegiate athletics, emphasis has been placed upon the Student-Athletes' experience as an athlete, but little emphasis has been paid to what happens when the athlete is no longer able to play. While the subject of the unique collegiate athlete experience in college has been explored (Harrison et al., 2009; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Ting, 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007), little has been examined regarding the transition out of the sport and what the athlete experiences. According to (date) Merriam-Webster's dictionary, an Athlete is defined as "a person who is trained or skilled in exercises requiring physical strength, agility, or stamina." To be good at their sport, an athlete must dedicate significant time to their sport which, in turn, creates an identification with their sport (Brewer, 1993). A Student according to (date) Merriam-Webster's dictionary is defined as "scholar or learner." Putting these two terms together results in a "Student-Athlete." This is a term coined by the NCAA as a college student who participates in a sport governed by the NCAA. The Student-Athlete can also be referred to in general terms as an "Athlete-Student". The labeling of Athlete first suggests that this Collegiate Athlete Identifies with their sport more than the role of being a student, seen more in revenue-generating sports.

In 1993, Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, and Orlofsky argued that Identity Development necessitated an active exploration of possible roles and behaviors. This is followed by a commitment to the occupational and ideological options that are most consistent with an individual's values, needs, interests, and skills. Typically, athletes spend much of their time pursuing, planning, and training for their sport from a very young age (Brewer, 1993). Super (1993) suggested that the athletes' adolescent identity, coupled with the activities in which they engage from ages 18-24 are the critical factors involved in career choice. It only makes sense that, over time, athletes would begin to

develop what is called an “Athletic-Identity” (Brewer 1993). Many Student-Athlete’s adolescent activities were usually filled with athletic practices and events, revealing a high level of Athletic Identity (Brewer 1993). As defined by Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993), Athletic Identity refers to the magnitude to which an individual integrates the social role of being an athlete into their self-concept. Athletic Identity is a complex social role thought to develop as early as late childhood and continues to be of significance in identity formation throughout young adulthood (Houle et al., 2010; Webb, Nasco, Riley, and Headrick, 1998). One explanation for the strong formation of Athletic-Identity is starting to play sports at an early age. Once the level of performance rises to eventually show promise of playing professionally, the athlete’s sport becomes more than just a “pastime” and moves towards a “full-time job” outlook (Parker 1994). Once in college, athletes begin to build even stronger identities related to their sport due to their significantly unique experiences compared to their non-athlete peers (Harrison et al., 2009; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Ting, 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Unlike other students, Student-Athletes are a nontraditional group burdened with many demands. These are a result of the existing structure of intercollegiate athletics posing challenges to their academic success and the overall quality of their college experience (Harrison et al 2011). Collegiate athletes resonate with Athletic-Identity due to the increased attention, physical benefits, and recognized athletic achievement creating a college experience that may be perceived as a springboard to a professional sports career (Harrison 2009., Kissinger et al., 2015). Although there are many positives associated with Athletic-Identity, it has also been researched extensively on the negative effects of having a strong Athletic-Identity (Brewer 1993. Harrison 2009.). Some Student-Athletes may experience “athletic-identity foreclosure”, that occurs when their self-worth and definition are linked almost exclusively with their athletic endeavors (Beamon, 2008). In such cases, Student-Athletes may react impassively or even negatively to any suggestion of a career outside of

athletics (Kissinger et al., 2015). Researchers have also found that a high level of Athlete Identity is associated with low levels of career maturity (Murphy et al., 1996), resulting in very little focus being placed on academics (Parker, 1994), difficulty balancing other life roles (Balague, 1999), and low career-decision self-efficacy (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000). Overall, the more that Student-Athletes identify with the role of an athlete, the less focus they typically place on academics during their college years (Sturm et al., 2011).

### **Athletic Identity: The CANE Model, Athlete-Student V.S Student-Athlete**

With any discussion of Athletic Identity comes the debate as to whether collegiate athletes are either “Student-Athletes” (as described by the NCAA) or “Athlete-Students”, a term that may more accurately describes collegiate athletes. A way to look at the significance of sport to an individual can be made through the Commitment And Necessary Effort (CANE) Model of Motivation. It is important to note that this model was originally designed for the use of defining motivation behind classroom students and then was expanded upon by Dr. Thomas Fisher (2003) to add “Identity”. The expansion to add Identity to this model is highly relevant to this thesis addressing the athletic arena. This model helps explain the various reasons people may be motivated to accomplish specific tasks, (Clark, 1998). This model can be applied to collegiate athletes and explain their motivations for being and remaining an athlete. The CANE model is a multiplicative model (Clark, 1998). It has three key factors that are multiplicative into Goal Commitment (Clark, 1998). The first factor influencing goal commitment is “Self- Efficacy” of the individual towards the goal. This can be applied to the athlete’s perception of their individual skill, confidence, or ability to compete within their sport. The second multiplicative factor influencing goal commitment is the “Emotion” or mood of the individual or, in this case, the athlete’s emotional outlook towards their sport, whether positive or negative (Clark, 1998). The third factor influencing goal commitment is the “Task Value” (Clark, 1998). There are

four tiers to task value. They are cumulative and summative while gradually contributing to the motivation towards a goal. The first level within a “Task Value” is that of basic utility. This is the lowest level of Task Value, and there is not much time or energy invested into the task at hand. The second tier is “Interest”. This is the basic level of investment behind doing something that is relatively enjoyable. The third tier is “Importance”. This level is reached when a task is regarded as necessary in an individual's life or, in this case, a sport played by an athlete for a possible scholarship. The theoretical final tier, first proposed in 2003, is the most extreme tier. It is known as “Identity.” This ultimate level accounts for how you identify to the world, and how you allow the world to identify you (Fisher, 2003). Up until the level of “Identity”, the “Task” has been something the athlete does. At the level of “Identity”, the sport becomes something more than what they do. It becomes something that they are. The value of the task is so high that it is a major part of who the individual is. Identity is suggested to be the highest level of Task Value in an individual's perception (Fisher, 2003). Identity is the elite level for motivation which suggests why Athletic Identity is so high among many collegiate athletes (Clark, 1998, Fisher, 2003). It is important to note that this model is not to any ordered, sequential scale. The steps described are compounded and are not equal to one another (Fisher, 2003).

Athletic Identity does vary with each athletes' level of importance. The distinction between Student-Athlete and Athlete-Student is defined by how much a collegiate athlete identifies with being a student as opposed to how much they identify as an athlete. Typically, Student-Athletes would rise in the CANE model to the “Importance” level of identification. This may be due to the Student-Athlete being “more well-rounded”. For example, athletes earning a higher cumulative GPA, were associated with decreased scores on the Career Athlete Identity subscale mean score, after controlling for the other variables entered in the model (Murdock et al., 2016). This has been investigated

through a variety of epistemological perspectives. They all revealed that the level of investment in Athletic Identity does, indeed, impact the future plans of those who integrate this role into their self-concepts (Adler & Adler, 1987; Comeaux, Speer, Taustine, & Harrison, 2011; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004).

This seems to fall under the Athlete-Student category. The Athlete-Student, in terms of the CANE model, would identify with being an athlete above all else. Collegiate athletes with high levels of Athletic-Identity repeatedly show that Athlete-Students identify more with the role of an athlete on this measure, the less focus placed on academics during their college years (Brown, Giastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000, Murphy et al., 1996, Balague, 1999). With society only looking at collegiate athletes through that lens, athletic stereotypes may negatively impact athletes' academic and social lives (Harrison et al., 2009).

### **Athletic Identity: Revenue Generating Sports vs. Non-Revenue Generating Sports**

In college, athletes are presented the greatest opportunity to play their sport professionally. Professional Sport is defined as a means for an athlete who performs services in a professional athletic event for wages or other remuneration (Webster's dictionary) (2020). Through numerous career development studies (Murdock et al., 2016), researchers have found that the primary reason for high Athletic Identity is the opportunity to play professionally. The prospect of playing professionally is so strong in revenue-generating sports, that even the imagined experience of losing their ability to participate could create extreme feelings of distress and depressive affective responses (Brewer, 1993). According to 2009 research by Hughey and Hughey, collegiate athletes often articulated career plans, such as pursuing a position in professional sports, that may not prove realistic. Hughey and

Hughey suggested that athletes may not distinguish between athletic and vocational identities. Vocational identity is defined as having a clear and secure understanding of career goals, abilities, educational interests, and personal values (Hughey and Hughey, 2009). Those individuals with limited occupational information may not recognize that their vocational identity is underdeveloped in comparison to a strong Athletic Identity. Research has shown that, regardless of division, the prospect of professional sport creates the greatest Athletic Identity (Murdock et al., 2016). The career programming examined in 2016 by Murdock et al. was offered directly through the athletic department, with the support of the student-athlete's coaches, life skills staff, and academic advisors. The study found that the student-athletes received enough support and encouragement. However, the programs did not significantly impact the students' career-athlete identity. To this end, the problem with 'life after sport' preparedness may not be *accessible* to career planning services. Instead, it may have more to do with student-athlete's perceptions of career prospects after graduation (Murdock et al., 2016). The CANE model can also be used to show athletes perceived motivation for sport. It may help to explain why athletes with high Athletic Identity perform in collegiate athletics. The CANE model defines motivation as having two processes: that of commitment and necessary effort (Clark 1998a, 1998b). Commitment refers to actively pursuing a goal over time in the face of distractions (Clark 1998a, 1998b). The effort is concerned with the amount and quality of non-automatic elaborations invested in achieving the knowledge component of performance goals (Clark 1998a, 1998b).

Not every collegiate athlete has the opportunity to play professionally after graduation. This can potentially lead to less of an Athletic Identity and more of a vocational identity. Collegiate sports may be divided between revenue and non-revenue generating sports. A revenue-generating sport

earns money during the season rather than losing money (Harper 2006). These sports typically include Football, Basketball, and sometimes Baseball, depending upon the institution (Harper 2006). Revenue generating sports typically receive the most media attention. This generates television contracts and corporate sponsorships, as well as attract fans to games and yields merchandise revenue (Harper 2006). Other, non-revenue generating sports require money from the athletic departments to continue every year. Revenue generating sports impact Athletic-Identity. Collegiate athletes come into their respective sports knowing that, when they graduate, they have the potential to play professionally (Clayton et al., 2015). The idea of playing professionally is so high that many schools have experienced academic misconduct, such as creating “ghost” classes where the athletes do not even attend classes (Clayton et al., 2015). Non-Revenue sport generating student-athletes enter college knowing their sport is a means to pay for school but is not a means to play professionally after graduation (Harper 2006). This may change the athletes’ mind set to be more open about other college opportunities knowing they do not plan to play after college (Clayton et al., 2015). Revenue generating sports often place Athlete-Students on such a rigorous schedule that they live, eat, study, socialize together and are even directed into the same majors. This may lead, in part, to academic and social isolation from the rest of the campus community (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2011; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). The ability to make a living wage playing a sport after college may account for revenue-generating sports having such a strong effect on Athletic Identity (Clayton et al., 2015). In some cases, Athlete-Students so strongly identify with their athletic role that they do not explore non-sport careers or other areas of interest. Athlete-Students are often found to have self-identities rooted in their athletic achievement. The college experience may be seen as more of a springboard to a career as a professional athlete than an opportunity to secure an education and seek a career and life outside of sports. Overall, findings support the view that many Athlete-Students, particularly those at

the highest echelons of college athletics (i.e., D1), hold strong athletic identities. They view their college playing careers as a path to becoming a professional athlete. Individuals who exhibit an ideological or occupational commitment to sports without considering other possible futures demonstrate identity foreclosure (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Revenue generating sports tend to receive more media attention and “when people are constantly identified by one role to the near-total exclusion of their others, they become increasingly committed to that role and it is likely to take precedence in influencing their self-conceptions” (Greendorfer and Blinde, 1985). As they examined identity and vocational goals, Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) asserted that role salience is noteworthy in experiencing difficulty while transitioning away from an athletic lifestyle. The concept of identity relates, at its roots, to an individual's perception of self. Various theories in psychology have commented on this concept of self. Gergen (1971) discussed the theory of the self as not a single concept, but rather multiple concepts embodied in an individual. In terms of the proposed research, it is possible for an individual to have both athlete and student identities. Markus and Wurf (1987) referred to this idea as the "multifaceted self-concept," because the self is not defined by a single label. It involves various roles an individual assumes during their life. Marsh and Shavelson (1985) took the theory of the multifaceted self a step further. They suggested that some self-concepts are situation specific. For example, it is possible for an individual to perceive themselves as an athlete in one situation and a student in another. This contention allows for the collegiate athlete to change their perception regarding self, based on the context in which life is currently being experienced. Student-Athletes often describe their sport and Athletic Identity as being the most prominent aspect of their daily life. When athletic participation ends abruptly upon graduating, the change can have a profound effect on them. As transitioning students suddenly find their lives without the pervasive structure,

support, and guidance of intercollegiate athletics, many find themselves struggling with what to do next (Beamon, 2008).

### **Loss and Grief Cycle**

Dr. Kubler-Ross's "5 Stages of Loss and Grief" model from her 1969 book "On Death and Dying" may be useful. Even though the Athlete isn't physically dying, it has been theorized that their Identity is, in a sense, "dying" as the athlete is, in turn, going through the "Loss and Grief Cycle." It is important to note that not all of Dr. Kubler-Ross' stages are experienced in a precise order, or experienced at all (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The first stage of "Loss and Grief," is "Denial and Isolation." The first reaction is to deny the reality of the situation and it is normal to rationalize overwhelming emotions as a defense mechanism to buffer the immediate shock (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The second stage in the "Loss and Grief Cycle" is "Anger" (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Anger begins to show once the masking effects of Denial and Isolation wear off. It occurs as reality emerges and the individual is not yet ready to accept. So, they turn to anger as a coping mechanism (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The third stage of the "Loss and Grief Cycle" is "Bargaining" (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Bargaining is a normal reaction to the feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. Bargaining consists of questioning statements "If only..." or making a "deal" to accommodate the realization of what is happening (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The fourth stage is "Depression" (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Depression is divided into two types and is associated with mourning (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The first type of depression is a reaction to practical implications relating to the loss (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Sadness and regret dominate this type of depression. The second type of depression is more subtle and, perhaps, more private (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The fifth and final stage of the "Loss and Grief Cycle" is "Acceptance" (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Acceptance is not always reached. Some individuals never make it past anger and denial (Kubler-Ross, 1969). This phase is marked by withdrawal and calm. This is not a period of

happiness and must be distinguished from depression (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The following research seeks to determine the effects of career termination on the collegiate athletes' self-identity with the transition out of the sport. It will try to explain how the athlete goes through the grief and loss cycle to cope with the change and eventually redefine themselves.

## **Chapter Two: Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to increase understanding and resources to deal with the problem of Identity Crisis post-athletic career. Identity Crisis can be defined as a “personal psychosocial conflict especially in adolescence that involves confusion about one's social role and often a sense of loss of continuity to one's personality” (Merriam-Webster's dictionary (2020)). This is currently being brought to light with COVID-19. The results of this study will describe the effects of transitioning out of sport through the “grief and loss cycle” of an athlete. This study is meant to help inform collegiate athletes, coaches, trainers, administrators, parents, and counselors to become better prepared to help athletes with their transition.

## **Chapter Three: Methods and Procedure**

### ***Search Strategy:***

The search strategy used to conduct this review involved a search through scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles. A refined search through the University of Central Florida's databases was accessed, and filters were placed to focus on articles categorized under the field of "collegiate athlete's" "Self-Identity" "transition" "Sport". Papers published in the English language were considered.

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

Studies included were those conducted within the United States alone due to the nature of collegiate athletics. The studies focused on NCAA Athletes and the criteria provided. This study has been careful to include only terms and quotes from studies that matched the keywords in the search. The data specifically have been vetted to apply to the transition out of the sport. This study's overall purpose is to understand what the grief and loss process is like for a collegiate athlete transitioning out of the sport and how it affects their subsequent career. The goal is to offer possible answers and explanations to the Identity Crisis that collegiate athletes may face when losing their ability to participate in their sport. Other theories may be applied as well. The study will rely on simple data collection. The study designs included are mixed methods, case-control, qualitative and quantitative studies. The articles are utilized to provide background on the topic, the model's framework, and the current usage of the models provided. The findings then utilize the provided model's framework in a novel proposed manner to better explain the impact, if any, on the self-identity of collegiate athletes with their transition out of sport.

This search hosted several terms to search for articles within the seven databases. The terms and databases utilized to search for relevant articles are in Table 1. The research inclusion and exclusion criteria are seen in Table 2.

**Table 1: Search terms entered in ERIC databases for Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity**

<b>Search terms used in ERIC for articles relating to Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity</b>
<b>ERIC Sport Discus:</b>
SU+(+college+athletics+OR+athlete+AND+SU+(+colleges+OR+universities+OR+higher+ed education+) +AND+DE+professional+identity&bdata
SU+college+athletes+AND+SU+(+identity+OR+self-perception+OR+self-esteem+OR+self- evaluation+)
Athletes + AND + identity + AND+ (+ retirement + OR + transition+) &
<b>ERIC Psych Info:</b>
SU+(+college+athletics+OR+athletes+) +AND+SU+(+colleges+OR+universities+OR+higher+education+) +AND+DE+professional+identity&bdata
SU+college+athletes+AND+SU+(+identity+OR+self-perception+OR+self-esteem+OR+self- evaluation+)
Athletes + AND + identity +AND+ (+ retirement +OR +transition+) &bdata

**Table 2: Search terms entered in Ebook Pro quest/Pro Quest databases for Collegiate Athletes Self- Identity**

<b>Search terms in Ebook Pro quest/Pro quest for articles relating to Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity</b>
<b>Ebook Pro quest:</b>
"college+athletes"+AND+"identity"+AND+"retirement"+OR+"transition"
"college athletes" AND (identity OR "self-concept" OR "self-perception") AND (transition OR retirement OR "career ending injury") AND la.exact ("English")
<b>Pro quest:</b>
"college+athletes"+AND+"identity"+AND+"retirement"+OR+"transition"
"college athletes" AND (identity OR "self-concept" OR "self-perception") AND (transition OR retirement OR "career ending injury") AND la.exact ("English")

**Table 3: Search terms entered in Pub Med databases for Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity**

<b>Search terms in Pub Med for articles relating to Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity</b>
("college athletes") AND (retirement OR identity OR transition)

**Table 4: Search terms entered in Science Direct databases for Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity**

<b>Search terms in Science Direct for articles relating to Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity</b>
("college athletics" OR "college athletes") AND (identity OR transition OR retirement OR injury) AND self

**Table 5: Search terms entered in Web of Science databases for Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity**

<b>Search terms in Web of Science for articles relating to Collegiate Athletes Self-Identity</b>
("college athletes" OR "college athletics") AND TOPIC: ((identity OR retirement OR transition))

**Table 8: Research Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>
Topic: Papers evaluating Collegiate Athletes, Identity, transition out of sport, the CANE Model, 5 Stages of Loss and Grief Model	Papers that do not utilize collegiate athletes as the subject, papers that do not touch upon self-identity.
Location: Studies conducted in the United States	Studies conducted in other parts of the world
Language: English	Studies conducted in other languages than English
Study Designs: Mixed Methods, Case-Control, qualitative and quantitative studies	Studies that do not fall under Mixed Methods, Case-Control, qualitative and quantitative studies
Sources Used: Papers published in peer-reviewed journal articles	Papers not published in peer-reviewed journal articles
Model Used: Papers utilizing the CANE Model or 5 Stages of Loss and Grief model when those search terms are included.	Papers that do not utilize this model but use the framework

## **Chapter Four: Discussion**

Being an Athlete is the primary and most basic requirement to have an Athletic Identity.

Athletic Identity is the magnitude in which an individual integrates the social role of being an athlete into their self-concept (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder 1993). Being an Athlete then integrates many traits into self-image. These traits potentially lead into participating in collegiate athletics. College athletes, as a population, holds many traits associated with Athletic Identity. The culture behind college athletics strengthens them every year. Collegiate Athletes are identifiable by the ultimate risk of sport termination. Eligibility always ends in four or five years for a collegiate athlete, regardless of the circumstances, and may not be volitional. While the sport may be terminated earlier, the overall connection is that of longevity in the career of an athlete. College Athletes may be split into two subgroups depending on the relative value placed on the sport by the athlete. These subpopulations are being a Student-Athlete or an Athlete-Student. The value of the sport perceived by either of these subpopulations will tend to influence the events following career termination of the athlete regardless of the timing or reasons behind the termination.

The Commitment and Necessary Effort (CANE) Model of Motivation may be utilized to address the concerns with athlete's motivations and the relative value placed on sport (Clark 1998a, 1998b). The CANE Model defines motivation as having two processes: that of commitment and necessary effort (Clark 1998a, 1998b). Commitment refers to actively pursuing a goal over time in the face of distractions and obstacles (Clark 1998a, 1998b). The effort is concerned with the amount and quality of non-automatic elaborations invested in achieving the knowledge component of performance goals (Clark 1998a, 1998b). Ultimately the CANE Model may be used to determine the Athlete's level of commitment and persistence in their sport. With that, the athlete's motivation or value placed on sport being a Student-Athlete or Athlete Student may be determined. Self-Efficacy is

the first portion of the CANE Model. This is the belief in the ability to organize and execute courses of action to obtain and achieve goals (Bandura, 1997). Athletes need to have a high level of self-efficacy to effectively compete. Athletes are assuming risk when competing and must have a high level of self-efficacy to appear on the stage for competition. Agency is part of Self-Efficacy and is the belief that task-oriented action will be supported or allowed in accordance with set goals (Clark 1998a, 1998b).

The CANE Model is a multiplicative model (Clark 1998a, 1998b). The next point to consider in the model involve the Emotional realm. Emotions are how an athlete feels about performing certain tasks. The athlete may not want to perform a certain drill. They may have some positive or negative feelings about practice or a recent game. Positive emotions typically elicit a response for the athlete to persist on a task (Clark 1998a, 1998b). Negative emotions often produce avoidance behaviors, and the athlete may not want to participate. Athletes are also basic, human beings. Part of “being human” is going through different moods depending upon circumstances. Mood bias may occur, which often reflects an athlete's thoughts, not necessarily their actions. This may also influence their goal commitment, persistence, and overall motivation (Clark 1998a, 1998b).

Goal commitment is multiplicatively affected by many different factors in the CANE Model. The final factor, and one of the most influential in Commitment, is Task Value (Clark 1998a, 1998b). Task value refers to the importance a certain task has to the individual (Clark 1998a, 1998b). The established hierarchical ranking in the CANE model begins with Utility, through Interest and Importance, to the ultimate level of Identity (Fisher, 2003). The assigned, perceived value and the role a sport plays in an athlete's life are what determines the level of Task Value (Fisher, 2003). The progressive values are cumulative in nature (Fisher, 2003). Progress to a higher level of Task Value will, necessarily, contain the elements of lower levels (Fisher, 2003). Utility, being the lowest level

of Task Value, would be consistent with a little league or recreational athlete (Clark 1998a, 1998b). The sport is embraced purely for fun and is not necessarily going to negatively impact life if the athlete were to stop playing. Utility is, essentially, a willingness to perform task A to secure B (Clark 1998a, 1998b). In this case, the athlete could be rhetorically asking, “What’s in it for me?” Collegiate Athletes typically have Utility established from a very young age as they began to enjoy playing their sport. They use the emotions or feelings they derive from playing their sport and continue in competition until they are collegiate athletes, representing their university.

Cumulatively following Utility is the level of Interest. Interest in Task Value is reflected by expending modest effort to overcome obstacles (Clark 1998a, 1998b). At this stage, athletes may commit to tasks even if the only thing received from the effort, is pleasure. Athlete’s often find themselves questioning their continued participation as the primary indicator to keep moving forward. This stage may be applied to many high school athletes who often participate in the sport for fun. But should the sport take more effort than it is perceived to be worth, the athlete often stops playing. Importance is the next level of Task Value (Clark 1998a, 1998b). Here, athletes tend to commit to the task when they believe in the necessity of the task to their journey of goal attainment (Clark 1998a, 1998b). This involves expending significant effort to overcome obstacles. It could involve overcoming enough obstacles to earn a scholarship at a university. Importance is cumulative, including all the elements of Utility and Interest (Clark 1998a, 1998b). The stage characteristically assumes committing more time and energy to the specific sport as it takes on more meaning. Collegiate Athletes have also established Importance in the sport as they are participating at a level where compensation is involved along with a concomitant level of risk.

The risk-taking mindset of an athlete arguably does not set in until the Sport becomes a value of Importance (Fisher, 2003). Importance leads to one of the telling characteristics of an athlete that is

not present in a regular person or an athlete where the sport is just of basic utility or interest (Fisher, 2003). This is the “Risk-Taking” mindset. The ability to be a risk-taker not just in bodily harm physically but also mentally, emotionally, and even an athlete’s reputation gets put on the line every time they compete. Not everyone is a risk-taker in society. Most individuals are risk averse (Fisher, 2003). For instance, an athlete will compete with anyone when it comes to their sport for many reasons, even if the athlete knows their competition is better than them. The general person is not interested in taking a risk like this. Athletes take this risk time in and time out again and again throughout the competition. Competition is ultimately assuming risk (Fisher, 2003). With the sport being of importance on top of the other levels in the CANE Model (utility, interest) the Collegiate Athlete is then placed into a bracket. The Athlete can be a Student-Athlete or an Athlete student. Both hold the level of importance to themselves of sport, but the Athlete-Student often moves further along the ladder into Self-Identification with the sport.

The 5 Stages of Loss and Grief come into play when the athlete reaches levels of Importance and Self-Identification of sport (Fisher, 2003). As there is enough significance to the athlete, that if something were to happen to them and the athlete could not play the sport anymore, they would be subject to these stages of Loss and Grief. The last set of task values in the CANE Model that falls under the Five Stages of Loss and Grief is that of Identity (Fisher, 2003). This task is less of what the athlete does and more of what the athlete is. College athletes, but more specifically Athlete-Students fall under this category due to most of the time spent on a sport and with that encompassing vocation, avocation, and leisure. When speaking to a collegiate athlete the athlete may label themselves as a “(insert sport) Player.” Whether it be football player, soccer player, baseball player, etc. This is due to the large amount of attention garnered by supporters towards the athlete and their sport along with the vast amount of time put into making the athlete successful at their sport. When the athlete is no longer

able to play their sport this task value of identity is taken away from them. The Five stages of grief will presumably set in as the Self-Identity of the athlete has been stripped.

### **Dr. Kubler-Ross: 5 Stages of Loss and Grief**

Once the Importance and Identity portion has been satisfied, Dr. Kubler-Ross's 5 Stages of Loss and Grief presumably comes into play (Fisher, 2003). These stages are most likely applicable and felt by Athlete-Students rather than Student-Athletes. Student-Athletes may go through some of these stages, but it is presumed to not be as big of a detriment to their self-identity as an Athlete-Student. This section is more geared towards the Athlete-Student with their high level of commitment to the sport, often being linked to their Self-Identity. This may be due to the Collegiate Athlete's Identity is rooted in being an athlete who may, in turn lead to a possible Identity Crisis. The Identity Crisis predisposes the Collegiate Athlete to enter the 5 Stages of Loss and Grief. That is the primary reason for falling into stages of Grief and Loss as the Athlete-Students view of themselves and to the world is essentially dying (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The former Collegiate Athlete now needs to find a completely new identity as all their time was spent upon a singular goal/identity and now it is gone. It is important to note this is not a linear model and the stages can be experienced in different orders (Fisher, 2003). One could theorize that the order in the stages of grief and loss could be due to the incident that caused the stages to occur. The stages are not linear, and an athlete may never progress out of a stage or may come back to a stage in the cycle (Kübler-Ross, 1969). It is important to note some athletes may not experience any of these stages. The stages will be discussed as the model shows in order but noting they do not always flow in a specific order (Kübler-Ross, 1969). In terms

of understanding this model, it is best to talk about the stages in the order they are most seen (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

The first stage of the model is Denial (Kübler-Ross, 1969). If the collegiate athlete's identity is deeply rooted in their sport, often the first thing that will happen is Denial. Denial may help the athlete cope with the initial loss of their identity. As described by Dr. Kubler-Ross, "denial can be a natural defense mechanism of refusing to accept the reality of a situation in an attempt to ignore and/or evade traumatic change". Athletes often must hear of the reality of their situation from a coach or physician about a potentially career-ending injury, being cut, or any other form of termination from a sport. Denial and shock may help the athlete cope. It is, perhaps, a way of only allowing as much as an athlete may be able to handle. The news may not make sense or have any rational meaning. The news may be denied, and they may go numb to everything around them. Although the athlete may feel they still have a chance to play again in the near future, they are unable to fully process the news at the moment. As a result, potential issues may arise in an athlete's schoolwork, friendships, personal relationships, and other roles that were socially integrated with the athlete's athletic identity. The athlete is perhaps in a state of shock. Typically, they have lived most of their life as an athlete and now they are faced with no longer being considered an athlete. Denial aids in the covering of feelings towards the event (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Denial can also be referred to as "unknowledgeable stress" (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

In the model, the next stage that follows is generally Anger (Kübler-Ross, 1969). This occurs when the athlete comes "back to reality" and not in a "preferable reality" of denial. The athlete may now have to start dealing with their emotions previously overshadowed by denial. This can typically lead to bouts of anger and questioning (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete may begin to blame others including coaches, other players, or the precipitating circumstances. The athlete may also begin to

direct their anger towards those involved with the method of sport termination. The athlete may feel angry that their life is “shattered” or that they appear to have no grounding. Dysfunctional behaviors may arise from futile attempts to bury their anger (Kübler-Ross, 1969). They may include compulsive, addictive and self-medicating actions that detrimentally affect the body and brain chemistry (Kübler-Ross, 1969). These compulsive behaviors may include obsessive worrying, anorexia and/or bulimia and workaholism (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete may potentially turn towards alcohol or drugs to cope with their anger. Anger is, perhaps, the bonding agent that holds the reality of the situation together (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Although this anger may lead to negative behaviors towards themselves or others, it is a common and necessary part of the grief process (Kübler-Ross, 1969). There may be anger in social gatherings where the athlete is no longer treated like a hero. This may result in them questioning their place in society. Anger as a reaction to sport termination may be coupled with depression, worry, fear, confusion, frustration and lowered self-esteem. Kubler-Ross described anger as “Just another indication of the intensity for your love.” Anger at the circumstances may give the athlete a temporary anchor and form of motivation. This may offer hope for an athlete while passing through the terminal stage in their athletic career. Anger is often a precursor to Bargaining.

Generally, after Anger, bargaining begins (Kübler-Ross, 1969). At this stage, the athlete is usually past the emotional roller coaster of Denial and Anger. The associated internalized behavior and coping responses are usually subsiding as well (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete may now consider making adjustments to their life goals that are reasonable to their new situation. This may involve an athlete looking at transferring or finding another sport they can play. An example is an injured Olympic Sprinter having successfully transitioned to Olympic Bobsledding. The greater difference in this stage is the athlete is less concerned with being angry at the situation or denying

that it happened. They are more concerned with ways to return to where they were before or find a new alternative (Kübler-Ross, 1969). This stage may be accompanied with guilt (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete usually starts to question “what if?” The athlete may try to “make a deal” or understand why such a scenario could possibly have occurred. They may even try to rationalize that whatever happened was necessary. This stage may lead to several setbacks (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete will often appear to be restless. They may take on new goals or a different lifestyle to cope with their new reality (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete may become involved with a spiritually higher power and try to make a deal. This stage can be very difficult and varies according to the individual (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Overall, the athlete is trying to either find a new identity or find a way to hold onto their existing athletic identity.

Depression is the next predicted stage in the model (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete is starting to understand the reality that they may never be able to play or be at the level they once were. The athlete may feel empty or purposeless. This might reflect the lowest point for the athlete. Desperation may start to develop in various facets of their career and life (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete may feel numb and withdraw from life. Losing interest in their former sport is a possibility. The athlete may feel the world is too overwhelming and could allow themselves to get out of athletic shape. According to the Mayo Clinic, depression is characterized by the following symptoms: “Feelings of sadness or unhappiness; irritability or frustration, even over small matters; loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities; insomnia or excessive sleeping; changes in appetite; restlessness and irritability; slowed thinking, speaking or body movements; distractibility; fatigue—even small tasks may seem to require a lot of effort; feelings of worthlessness or guilt; fixation on past failures or blaming yourself when things aren’t going right; trouble thinking or concentrating (Mayo Clinic Health Information).” The athlete may start to regret playing the sport and even begin

to question all the hours dedicated to playing. “What if” statements are, again, a characteristic theme within this stage. The athlete may begin to understand and feel the sadness of letting all their supporters, coaches, and teammates down. The athlete’s identity is gone, and they may feel the consequences of having no other identity.

Finally, the ultimate stage of the model is Acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Depending upon circumstances, this stage is not always reached and, perhaps, may never be reached (Kübler-Ross, 1969). This stage is where the athlete is thinking that it is acceptable that they do not

play anymore. At this stage they may believe that, although they cannot play anymore, they will get through it. In this stage emotions begin to stabilize, and a “new reality” is entered (Kübler-Ross,

1969). At this stage, athletes come to terms with their current situation and their current ability to

participate. It is important to note that this does not mean the athlete is happy. It simply means that

the athlete has come to accept the terms of the situation in which they find themselves. This stage

does not mean that the athlete will not experience sadness or become upset (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Rather, the athlete typically feels better about their situation. They may start to resume going out with

friends or participate in new pursuits. It is important to note that acceptance can take place in different

levels and/or forms. Some athletes may accept what happened but may still “hold a grudge” on a

person, circumstances or even the school. At this point, it is theorized that the athlete may move onto

a new career and may begin to start forming a new identity.

These Stages of Grief and Loss provides a useful framework for a collegiate athlete to

successfully go through loss of athletic identity. However, it is important to note that the athlete may

become stuck in denial, anger, or may never make it through all five stages (Kübler-Ross, 1969). An

athlete may be stuck in denial. They may not have played in college for years but is still working out

and preparing for “their moment.” They may perceive this as “never giving up on a dream”.

This may help explain what may be seen in an Athlete-Student. Athletes may be seen to go through a wide range of emotions. They will often be filled with anger and denial after no longer being able to play. If the athlete made it all four years of collegiate eligibility, but was not good enough to play professionally, there may not be closure for years. If the athlete had a career ending injury, it may continue to be a sensitive subject. The athlete may continue to relive the time back when they played. They may seek to recapture the same feelings they were denied (Kübler-Ross, 1969). They may try to find a career with similar attention, adrenaline, or work environment as their sport. The athlete may not want to watch their former sport on television or may even turn bitter towards loved ones trying to console them. The nuclear family may have the greatest and most profound influence on the athlete. This also applies to the very close circle of friends around the athlete. They were always there with the athlete and having an influence on the athlete since they were young.

Friends of an athlete may experience some issues as well. The athlete will now have more free time. The role of a friend is to help the athlete recognize their strengths outside of playing their sport. Friends can help show the athlete that there is so much more to life. Athletes may turn to substance abuse, may isolate themselves, or may even lash out. This is to be expected. Now that they no longer have their athletic identity, they may find it difficult to associate with others. It is important to not make too light of the situation even if the athlete does so. The athlete will probably still be in the grief and loss cycle for some time to come (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Let the athlete choose when they want to be around the sport and if they want to watch it for fun. This may be a trigger for the athletes' mood.

As a coach, you may find the athlete acting differently with resentment directed towards you. The athlete is looking for a tangible reason as to why they cannot play anymore. They may find it

convenient to simply blame the coach. It is an easy way for an athlete to cope. Coaches are a direct link between what the athlete does in the day-to-day life they experienced with the sport. The coach may be blamed for potentially playing them while injured. The athlete may blame the coach for a strategic play that, in the end, may have led to a career ending injury. A coach is often one of the main influencers in a collegiate athlete's career. An athlete may have committed to the University because of a coach and their influence. This may add another dynamic to career ending injuries

A coach's role may prove to be most impactful on the athletes transition out of sport. Coaches spend the most time with athletes and are responsible for decisions regarding performance, playtime, and strategy. Strength and conditioning and position coaches also spend as much time with the athletes.

Position or sport specific coaches are given the responsibility to make sure the athlete is taken care of physically and mentally when faced with career ending adversity and trauma. Most sport specific coaches will have played the sport themselves. They also should have gone through the transition out of playing their sport. A coach might have experienced a career ending injury and may be seeking the same joy and excitement as playing. Coaches will often speak of playing while expressing their desire to play again if they could. This suggests that many became coaches to cope with no longer being able to play. Due to the exclusivity of coaching, they have successfully associated their former and present careers. Because of experience, a coach may be able to detect different behaviors from their athletes. However, it may take time to re-form or build a new relationship in the athlete.

The role of a strength and conditioning coach consists of building the athlete physically and mentally to compete and perform to the demands of their sport. The athlete may be grateful for building their character or turn to resentment due to questionable training practices that led to

potential injury. Regardless, part of the role should be to help transition with a post athletic career workout schedule. Oftentimes, collegiate athletes will have a dramatic gain or loss in weight due to going from rigorous workout schedules to doing absolutely nothing. With no intended reason or motivation for competition the athlete may drop out of any workout routine. An occasional lifting session may provide an unfortunate reminder of what they are no longer able to do. This may send the athlete back through stages in the grief and loss cycle. It is important to make note of these potential issues as the health and wellbeing of the athlete may be in jeopardy.

A trainer will deal with the day-to-day injuries and work with medically disqualified athletes. This puts trainer's integral to decisions when it comes to career ending injuries. Athletes may directly blame them for a misdiagnosis or a failure to rehabilitate them properly. This may be true even if there was nothing that could be done. As a trainer it is also important that the athlete is offered Mental Health services together with exit surveys, interviews, and scans. The relationship between the trainer and the athlete may remain strained. The trainer's role and the athlete's desire to compete and play may outweigh their desire for a healthy body.

An administrator's role is to help find ways for the athlete to better develop their career maturity and identity. The athlete's sense of self is "dying", and it is up to the administrator to provide support to help the athlete cultivate a new identity. This may involve something that does not revolving around playing a high stakes sport. This is obviously not the ideal situation. But perhaps finding careers with similar traits to the sport played will benefit an Athlete-Student. An obvious career move is to become a coach. But this may to add to the cycle of grief and loss for the athlete.

Overall, each of these individuals serve a role in helping a collegiate athlete transition out of sport. The sport-specific coach should continue to keep in contact with their athletes, as this may help with the transition of the athlete out of sport. The strength coach should continue contact with the

athlete and potentially provide advice for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. This may help keep the athlete in good health and ease the physical side of transitioning. Despite having a debilitating injury, this will help them cope and learn to move forward in life. Trainers should continue to help the athlete recover from the transition out of sport. Even a season-ending injury will elicit the same response through the grief and loss cycle. It may still prove helpful for athletic trainers to take the initiative in communicating with the athlete.

It is important to note that the CANE model is a summative model (Clark 1998a, 1998b). It suggests that more and more identification with sport will continue to build up until the athletic identity is put into question by a traumatic event (Clark 1998a, 1998b). A career ending injury, being cut from the sport, or dropped to no playing time or having the sporting venue closed may have the same impact on the athlete. It is important to note that after a forced change to the identity, the Grief and Loss cycle is entered quickly (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

This thesis was more of an introduction to the topic of the loss of athletic identity than a formal study. The framework provided may give athletes and those close to them some direction towards understanding. This direction may include more directed research to understand the exact issues displaced collegiate athlete's face. Although this thesis was limited in terms of being an actual study, it may serve as a theoretical framework to examine what the collegiate athlete is most likely experiencing. The CANE Model provides a viable explanation for the motives and commitment of an athlete (Clark 1998a, 1998b). If the athlete were to fall under the "Student-Athlete" category, they still may upon losing the opportunity to play their sport. But it is not their Self-Identity. They are not solely known as athletes. This is the key distinction the CANE Model helps establish (Clark 1998a, 1998b). The other side of the being a collegiate athlete is known as an "Athlete-Student". This describes a collegiate athlete whose sole identity is that of being an athlete. These athletes are traditionally in revenue generating sports and may have spent all their life preparing for competition. They generally play a sport with a lot of media attention and are busy to the point where they are almost excluded, socially, academically and in virtually all external activities in college. Their sport gives them the opportunity to go on to play professionally and make a living. Once identified, the Athlete-Student is invested enough in their sport to reach the point of Self-Identity (Fisher, 2003). The loss of such a stage of investment is where the 5 Stages of Loss and Grief become useful (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The common overlay between all distinctions is the playing window of eligibility. There are differences between athletes good enough, or perceive themselves to be good enough, to play professionally. Then if the sport is terminated early at any point, the Athlete-Student is most likely to go through an Identity Crisis. According to the research, they may, presumably, fall into the 5 Stages of Grief and Loss (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The thesis attempts to explain what the

collegiate athlete will most likely experience, though not necessarily in the order proposed (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The athlete may never attain Acceptance that their time with sport is over. They may continue to dream, mistaking “the grind” and “perseverance” for hopes of a more positive outcome. The athlete may not be aware this is a necessary mindset for success at the highest levels of competition. Elite athletes reminiscing on their career may never get close to finding the same satisfaction of playing within another career.

Whether in the classification of a Student-Athlete or an Athlete-Student, there is another common factor in all collegiate playing careers: Graduation. Regardless of how good or bad a collegiate athlete is, the time clock of eligibility and graduation continues to run. While this distinction makes the transition out of sport inevitable, it is not the only method of ending a collegiate athlete’s career. Collegiate athletes' careers have a likelihood of ending far sooner than graduation. Various reasons including quitting on their own volition, injuries, being cut from the team, or even COVID-19 may have impacted and ended a collegiate athlete’s career.

There may be many different reasons for the athlete to voluntarily terminate their sports career. An Athlete-Student is less likely to “fall out of love” with the game and quit than a Student-Athlete. A Student-Athlete may not see a purpose in continuing to play their sport. They may pursue other career goals rather than continue the daily practices, workouts, meetings, and games. An Athlete-Student may quit the team because of not getting enough playing time as was promised. The Athlete-Student may look for an opportunity to play elsewhere. The athletes who leave the team or quit may also experience some stages of the grief and loss cycle. But, leaving voluntarily may help with the denial and anger stages (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Career ending injuries for collegiate athletes tend to be a common reason for leaving the sport. Unfortunately, these injuries often lead to isolation, removal from team activities, and self-reflection

that can be detrimental to an athlete's future career. A career-ending injury for an Athlete-Student may be something the athlete cannot overcome. They will probably enter the grief and loss cycle and may not even make it past Denial (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The Student-Athlete also may have a negative reaction to a career ending injury but it will probably not affect them as much. The Athlete-Student wanted a professional career in their sport, unlike the Student-Athlete pursuing the education.

With the current climate in college athletics only becoming more competitive and lucrative, questions may continue to plague them as their time playing their sport comes to an end. The current climate of the Pandemic reflects a constant desire for more competition and better athletes. Consequently, factors like the inevitable post-graduation transition coupled with the termination of sport venues pose very real questions for athletes. The little research provided on Athletic Identity and the transition out of sport appears to be dated and may need to be updated. More research in this field will likely be conducted. Growing numbers of athletes are now becoming aware of the issues surrounding Mental Health and athletics. This thesis has offered some the general concerns. It may provide a framework for Coaches, Players, Trainers, Family members, and the athletes themselves to understand what is being experienced. This is meant to provide some structure towards the grief and loss cycle and the feelings/emotions that arise due to identity loss. There are levels of distinction between athletes and their levels of commitment towards sport which helps explain the Athletic Identity in collegiate athletes. With that, more research will examine the transitions athletes face regarding identity loss. There has been significant research conducted on all other parts of athletics but little addressing what happens when the athletic career is over. Playing a sport in college may influence an athlete's career path. College athletes may never progress through grief and loss to reach the Acceptance stage. Some of the affected athletes never move on. The reasons the athlete may be holding back or unable to move on due to the sport termination could offer some important insights.

From such research, we may be able to improve the process of transition out of sport for collegiate athletes. There are many opportunities for future research on this timely topic. The problems collegiate athletes face with the transition will continue. Name Image and Likeness (NIL) may now add another dimension to consider. Any collegiate athlete would be affected now that the potential to make money from NIL exists. With more questions than answers, there appears to be a clear need for more research and development in the matter of Self-Identity and sport.

## **Addendum Appendix A:**

**Athletic-Identity:** The magnitude in which an individual integrates the social role of being an athlete into their self-concept.

**Athlete-Student:** A Collegiate Athlete that self-identifies more with being an Athlete than a Student.

**Collegiate Athlete:** An Athlete playing an NCAA sanctioned sport in college.

**Identity Crisis:** Personal or Psychosocial conflict that involves confusion about a social role.

**Student-Athlete:** A College Student who participates in a sport governed by the NCAA.

**Self-Identity:** How an individual identifies and defines themselves.

**Vocational Identity:** Having a clear and secure understanding of career goals, abilities, educational interests, and personal values.

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