

RETIREMENT REASONS OF FORMER HIGH LEVEL
COMPETITIVE ARTISTIC GYMNASTS FROM
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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by

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Abstract

Young athletes are required to sacrifice increasing amounts of their time and energy in order to excel in the world of competitive sports, and are encouraged to do whatever it takes in the pursuit for excellence. This 'win at all costs' attitude has been cited as one of the major reasons for athletes to withdraw from sport (Petlichkoff, 1992).

Gymnastics is one of the top three sports with the highest percentages of dropouts per total participants in Canada (Butcher, Lindner, & Johns, 2002). The fact that gymnasts are children and adolescents during most of their athletic careers may affect the nature of their sport experience and therefore their reasons for withdrawal. Understanding what gymnasts believe participation in gymnastics will gain and cost them is critical in understanding their decisions to discontinue participation.

The purpose of this study was to explore, identify, describe, and understand the factors associated with athletes' decisions to withdraw from the sport of competitive artistic gymnastics in Newfoundland and Labrador. In order to capture the participants' experiences and to present their subjective perceptions with clarity and meaning, phenomenology was chosen as the study's guiding methodological orientation.

Both female ($n=7$) and male ($n=4$) participants were former high level competitive gymnasts from NL between the ages of 19 and 29 years ($M=23.09$, $SD=3.26$) at the time of the interview. The participants' gymnastics career lasted for an average of 11.73 years ($SD=2.83$), with an average starting age of 5.36 ($SD=2.11$), and retired at an average age of 17.18 years ($SD=1.40$).

The participants were interviewed following a qualitative interview guide. All the

interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. To analyze and gain a greater understanding of the participants' lived experiences, an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008) was used to guide the interpretation and analysis of the data gathered. The social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) provided the means for understanding the process associated with decisions to continue or leave competitive sport, suggesting that behaviour is motivated by the desire to maximize positive experiences and minimize negative experiences through social interactions.

The comprehensive and rich descriptions of the participants' experiences point to a number of factors that likely contributed to their decision to stop participating in competitive artistic gymnastics. The participants engaged in a personal assessment of the costs and benefits with regards to their involvement. As the participants came closer to their retirement, the perceived benefits became increasingly less important and thus did no longer offset the costs. At that time, being involved wasn't 'worth it' anymore and alternative activities seemed to draw the participants away from the demanding routine of competitive gymnastics.

The results of this study have many practical implications, indicating that when major participation motives or psychological needs such as developing skills or making friends are not achieved, the costs of involvement exceed the benefits, resulting in sport termination.

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INTRODUCTION

General Overview

Sport is demanding more and more from its performers. In order to excel in highly demanding competitive sports, many young athletes are required to sacrifice increasing amounts of their time and energy. Athletes are encouraged to do whatever it takes in the pursuit of excellence, regardless of the consequences. This 'win at all costs' attitude has also been cited as one of the major reasons for athletes to withdraw from sport (Petlichkoff, 1992).

Sport retirement at a later age is an inevitable process, much like occupational retirement where individuals are 'forced' to withdraw from the labour force due to chronological age. However, the high sport attrition rates during childhood and adolescence are alarming (Martin, 1997). It has been estimated that one- to two-thirds of children between the ages of 7-18 withdraw from their particular sport every year (Gould, 1987; Petlichkoff, 1996). Consequently, sport science researchers have identified youth sport dropout as an area of concern (e.g., Brustad, Babkes, & Smith, 2001; Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982).

Even though a significant amount of research has been conducted on the retirement from competitive sport, it is not yet fully understood why athletes drop out and what problems they face during and after their withdrawal. While much of

the current research has focused on the athletes' experiences of the retirement process itself and the subsequent adjustment to life after sport (e.g., Allison & Meyer, 1988; Brewer, VanRaalte & Linder, 1993; Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998), there has been growing interest in understanding the reasons why athletes leave sport, as motives for retirement "seem to play a crucial role for adjustment to post-career life" (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004, p. 62). The challenge for future research however is to identify the factors associated with athletes' decision to cease their participation from competitive sport.

Theoretical Framework

Athletes have indicated that a major factor in withdrawing from sport is involvement in other activities or a conflict of interests. The social exchange theory (Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) provides a means for understanding the process associated with decisions to continue or leave competitive sport. Smith (1986), as well as Weiss and Chaumeton (1992) recommended the use of the social exchange framework for studying sport withdrawal among athletes.

The basic premise of social exchange theory is that behaviour is motivated

by the desire to maximize positive experiences and minimize negative experiences through social interactions (Schmidt & Stein, 1991). Essentially, the social exchange model views social behaviour similar to an economic transaction (Carron, 1980). Thus, just as there are costs and profits associated with an economic exchange, there are also costs and benefits associated with a social exchange. As an individual seeks to maximize positive and minimize negative experiences, an assessment of the costs and benefits for activities occurs, ultimately resulting in either a favourable or unfavourable outcome regarding the continuance of or attrition from an activity (Huang, 2002). Smith (1986) describes the rewards and costs a person experiences in an activity as 'outcomes', and the greater the rewards relative to the costs, the higher the outcomes. In terms of sport, rewards include "tangible consequences such as money, property, or trophies, as well as psychological ones such as the achievement of desired goals, feelings of competence and mastery, [and] the admiration and esteem of others" (Smith, 1986, p. 37). On the other hand, costs include "the amount of time and effort expended, feelings of failure or disapproval of others, negative emotions such as anxiety or depression, feelings of helplessness or lack of control, or the inability to engage in other activities or relationships" (Smith, 1986, p. 37).

However, the decision to continue an activity is not based exclusively on the balance between rewards and costs (Smith, 1986). The decision to persist or to

drop out also depends on the availability and attractiveness of alternative activities. In order to determine one's satisfaction with an activity or one's ability to discontinue participation in an activity, outcomes are compared against two standards (Schmidt & Stein, 1991). The first standard, the comparison level (CL), has been defined as a neutral point on a scale of goodness and badness. CL can also be viewed as an individual's expectations about a given activity. Satisfaction with or attraction to an activity is determined by comparing outcomes to the CL. The individual is thought to be satisfied with the activity when outcomes exceed the CL. Conversely as outcomes fall below the CL, the person becomes dissatisfied with the activity. The second standard, the comparison level for alternatives (CLALT), is the lowest level of outcomes a person will accept without leaving an activity in favour of another. Dependence is determined by the relationship between outcomes and the CLALT. As outcomes increase relative to the CLALT, dependence increases; when outcomes fall below the CLALT, there is no longer any dependence on the activity and the person leaves. In sum, if an athlete is dissatisfied with a sport, but nothing else is available, they may opt to continue to participate. Alternatively, if they are happy with the sport, but another activity is more appealing, they may withdraw to devote more time to the preferred activity. Social exchange theory makes the important theoretical point that attraction and dependence are conceptually distinct (Schmidt & Stein, 1991).

It explains the more obvious observations that individuals who enjoy an activity often stay while those who find little enjoyment in activities typically choose to leave. More importantly, the theory also illustrates why a person who is satisfied sometimes leaves and why someone who is dissatisfied continues to participate.

A number of studies have been conducted to determine the perceived benefits and costs of sport participation. Johns, Lindner, & Wolko (1990) used parts of social exchange theory to examine reasons for withdrawal in female gymnasts. A total of 76 former gymnasts, average age of 14 with 6.29 years of experience, were asked to complete a Likert scale questionnaire on reasons for leaving gymnastics. The researchers found that time demands, injury, loss of interest, pressure, other options, and expense were some of the major reasons or costs leading these athletes to withdraw from gymnastics. When asked about their overall sport experience, most former gymnasts reported that they had enjoyed learning new skills, making new friends, and meeting the new challenges that gymnastics presented. Most respondents said they liked their coaches and felt that their coaches thought of them as competent athletes. However, when asked about time demands, most respondents said that since they stopped participating in gymnastics, they now had time to spend with their other friends outside of gymnastics, engage in hobbies, and participate in youth culture activities that were restricted by the time demands of participation.

Guillet, Sarrazin, Carpenter, Trouilloud, and Cury (2002) looked at perceived benefits of sport participation in a study done with French female handball players. A cost versus benefit analysis found that perceived benefits gained from participation can come from a number of sources such as learned competence, sport progress, coach's support, relatedness, autonomy, and time of play. The researchers correlated high levels of perceived benefits with high levels of sport enjoyment. The study also showed that athlete commitment (or continued participation) was high as long as the benefits to participate outweighed the costs, attractiveness to other options remained lower than the attractiveness of handball, and perceived social constraints were low. Perceived benefits carried the most weight out of the three components, therefore having a strong influence on the commitment of the athlete to continued participation. The study found that when commitment levels fell as a result of a significant shift in balance of the four commitment components, withdrawal from the sport occurred. Other factors accounting for discontinued sport participation in sport outside the athlete's control included injury, sickness, or deselection from a team.

Statement of Purpose and Rationale of the Study

According to Butcher, Lindner, and Johns (2002), gymnastics is one of the top three sports with the highest percentages of dropouts per total participants in

Canada. Competitive artistic gymnastics differs from other popular sports such as soccer, hockey, and basketball, in that it is an individual, year-round, and very high investment sport with regards to time and commitment. Most competitive artistic gymnasts begin intensive training by the age of eight or nine years and retire from gymnastics between 15 and 20 years of age. A question arises as to whether the young ages at which these gymnasts begin competing and retire have an impact on their reasons to withdraw from sport. The fact that competitive gymnasts are children and young adolescents during most of their athletic careers may affect the nature of their sport experience and therefore their reasons for withdrawal. Understanding what gymnasts believe participation in gymnastics will gain and cost them is critical in understanding their decisions to discontinue participation.

The present study will investigate the withdrawal of athletes from artistic gymnastics by employing a social exchange theoretical perspective. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to explore, identify, describe, and understand the factors associated with athletes' decisions to withdraw from the sport of competitive artistic gymnastics in Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as to investigate whether the reasons for discontinuing involvement vary as a function of gender, level of competition reached, and age at the time of dropping out. An additional aim of this investigation is to provide recommendations to coaches,

administrators, clubs, and the provincial governing body on how to adapt their programs and strategies to the needs of the athletes.

More specifically, the following five research questions will be addressed:

1. What are the perceived benefits associated with participation in competitive artistic gymnastics?
2. What are the perceived costs associated with participation in competitive artistic gymnastics?
3. What other factors impacted or influenced the participants' decision to continue or terminate participation?
4. What are the participants' perceived reasons for retirement?
5. What are the participants' personal reflections regarding their decision to retire?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In a considerable number of studies sport dropouts have been questioned on their reasons for withdrawing from their sport. Some of these studies were sport specific to soccer (Narciso, Otto & Mielke, 1984), swimming (Gould et al., 1982), hockey (Fry, McClements & Sefton, 1981), football (Robinson & Carron, 1982), gymnastics (Johns et al., 1990; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Seye & Salmela, 1987), tennis (Allison & Meyer, 1988), and wrestling (Burton & Martens, 1986), while others spanned across various sporting disciplines (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996; Orlick, 1974; Petlichkoff, 1982; Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978; Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1991). Study participants represent a broad range of individual and team sports at the collegiate, high performance amateur, semi-professional, and professional levels (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; North & Lavallee, 2004; Swain, 1991).

Reasons for Sport Participation

In order to understand the reasons for retirement, it is helpful to understand why athletes take part in sport in the first place. Gill, Gross, and Huddleston (1983) were some of the first researchers to investigate individuals' motives for

sport participation. They identified eight factors for youth sport participation: achievement/status, team, fitness, energy release, others, skill, friends, and fun. Gould and Horn (1984) stated six reasons for initial participation in sport: potential for improving skills, having fun, playing with friends, thrills and pleasures, achieving and maintaining levels of fitness, and achieving success in a socially desirable activity. Similarly, Gould, Feltz, and Weiss (1985) identified athletes' reasons for participating, including: fun, skill development, excitement and personal challenge, achievement and status, fitness, energy or tension release, and friendship. In a review of literature by Klint and Weiss (1987), children's reasons for sport involvement was classified into six general categories: affiliation, skill development, excitement/challenge, success/status, fitness, and energy release. A study by Seefeldt et al. (1991) listed the top reasons to participate in sports for girls, including: having fun, improving skills, excitement and challenge of competition, doing something they are good at, staying in shape, playing as part of a team, winning, parents or close friends wanting them to play, and advancing to a higher level of competition. A consistent and positive competitive environment was shown to keep athletes involved in competitive gymnastics in a study of Australian youth gymnasts by Cooley, Hohensee, Jones and Ryska (2002). Kolt et al. (1999) investigated cross-cultural motives for participation specific to gymnastics. A total of 701 gymnasts from Australia,

Canada, China, India, and Israel were given the Participation Motivation Questionnaire (PMQ) and the researchers found that, in general, most kids wanted to improve skills, be fit, and learn new things. The main reasons for participation in gymnastics at the beginning levels were fun, fitness and learning and improving sport specific skills. Reasons for participating in gymnastics were also investigated in a cross-cultural study with Australian and Chinese youth. Kirkby, Kolt, and Liu (1999) found that the Australian gymnasts rated having fun and liking the rewards as more important than their Chinese counterparts. Chinese athletes allocated higher importance to being part of a club, having a good body, wanting to win, and wanting to be popular. Both groups assigned high values to reasons associated with improving skills, being fit, and getting exercise.

Motives for Sport Withdrawal

While disengagement commonalities likely exist across athlete groups, it is possible that between group differences outweigh similarities. Consistent with previous findings (Koukouris, 1994; Stambulova, 1994; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004) no single factor has primary responsibility for ceasing participation in sport. The reasons for athletic career termination are manifold, and thus, some researchers have tried to classify those reasons (Alfermann, 2000; Alfermann et al., 2004; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Erpic, et al., 2004; Webb, et

al., 1998; Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Webb and colleagues (1998) placed the causes of career termination into two categories: "retirements that are freely chosen and those that are forced by circumstances (p. 341)". Most athletes leave sport voluntarily (Koukouris, 1994), as they freely elect to disengage from sport for a combination of reasons. According to a number of studies (Lavalley, Grove, & Gordon, 1997; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1986) athletes may wish to assume a new direction in life, seek new challenges, have a change in values, want to spend more time with family and friends, or retire due to a lack of enjoyment or fulfilment from sport. Athletes also leave sport involuntarily due to circumstances out of their control, considered involuntary retirement (Alfermann, 1995). According to Taylor and Ogilvie (1998) the three main involuntary causes of career termination are age, deselection, and injury or illness. Baillie (1993) also indicated that not making or being cut from the team and injury are major involuntary factors in withdrawal and retirement from sport. Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) however demonstrated that the distinction between voluntary and involuntary retirement is not always clear because of the diversity and the nature of the athlete's retirement motives. Koukouris (1994) also showed that although a surprisingly large number of athletes leave sport voluntarily, their decisions might only appear to be voluntary since retirement was the only course of action open to

them. It is also interesting to note here that research shows that voluntary withdrawal is correlated with a decreased amount of difficulties in adapting to a life after sport (Alfermann, 2000; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Involuntary retirement can lead to psychological difficulties such as lower self-control (Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), lower self-respect (Crook & Robertson, 1991), and more frequent feelings of anger, anxiety, and depression (Alfermann, 2000).

Motives for discontinuing sport participation may also be categorized as either intrinsic or extrinsic in nature (Rystka, Hohensee, Cooley, & Jones, 2002). Being bored, not having fun, and not improving one's skills are the most common intrinsic reasons for sport withdrawal (Burton & Martens, 1986; Gould, et al., 1982; Petlichkoff, 1992). In contrast, extrinsic reasons for sport withdrawal tend to focus on coaching behaviours and the sport program structure such as an overemphasis on winning and inadequate playing time (Klint & Weiss, 1986). Rystka, et al. (2002) sought to extend the youth sport attrition research by distinguishing current and former youth gymnasts on the basis of their participation motives. The sample consisted of 349 Australian youth gymnasts (9-18 years) with average of 5.9 years of competitive gymnastics experience. Rystka et al. (2002) demonstrated that children may withdraw from sport because their intrinsic needs remain unfulfilled, which is typically reflected in statements such

as 'not having fun,' 'being too bored,' and 'not getting enough playing time' (Burton & Martens, 1986; Petlichkoff, 1993). Rystka et al. (2002) also found in their study that the motives of continuing gymnasts appeared to be more intrinsically based, whereas dropouts reported more extrinsic motives for their participation.

Reasons for sport termination are also often categorized into sport and non-sport related reasons. In a study conducted by Kadlcik and Flemr (2008), sport related reasons, such as decrease in performance, feelings of underachievement in sports-related goals, and coach-athlete conflicts, dominated over non-sport related reasons (72% and 28% respectively). The three most important non-sport related reasons for career termination were study/job related reasons, mobility/moving to another place, and family-related reasons (Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008). There is a general agreement that a comprehensive approach to the study of withdrawal from competitive sport should include both sport and non-sport influences to provide an complete view of reasons for withdrawal (Lindner, Johns & Butcher, 1991; Swain, 1991).

Other Interests and Responsibilities

"Conflicts of interest and interest in other activities have been found to be the most consistently cited motives for sport withdrawal" (Gould, 1987, p. 67).

Much of the research in this area has concluded that conflicts of interest are the primary reason for sport attrition (Dixon, 2001; Fry, et al., 1981; Gould, et al., 1981; McPherson, Marteniek, Tihanyi, & Clark, 1980; Petlichkoff, 1982; Robinson & Carron, 1982; Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978). The most frequently encountered response, 'having other things to do' is the number one reason in many investigations (Burton & Martens, 1986; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Narciso et al., 1984; Gould et al., 1982; Frey et al., 1981, Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978; Orlick, 1974). Another closely related response to this reason is 'it took too much time' or 'wanting more time for other activities' (Butcher, et al., 2002; Johns et al., 1990; Roberts & McKelvain, 1987; LeBlanc & Salmela, 1987; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Tippin, VanHooft & Bratton, 1983; Sefton & Fry, 1981).

For example, interviews by Gould and his colleagues (1982) with 50 competitive youth swimming dropouts revealed that having other things to do was the major reason reported for dropping out of age-group swimming programs. Although swimmers also considered several ability-related reasons important such as 'I was not as good as I wanted to be', 'I did not have enough fun', and 'I did not like the pressure', the authors concluded that the majority of swimmers dropped out because of "other interests and not because of excessive pressure, lack of fun or overemphasis on winning" (Gould et al., 1982, p. 162). Similarly, Johns et al. (1990) found through questionnaire and interview techniques that

dropout gymnasts were very positive about their previous sport involvement, including their perceived competence and the enjoyment they derived from participating. 'Other interests' became more prominent in the gymnasts' lives and appeared to be the main reason for retiring. 'Having other things to do' was also the most important reason for attrition in a study of a sample consisting of 561 young Spanish athletes who competed in the sports of athletics, basketball, gymnastics, handball, karate, soccer, Judo, tennis, swimming, and volleyball by Molinero, Salguero, Tuero, Alvarez, and Marquez (2006). Difficulty of balancing other life concerns, such as schoolwork, with the demands of sport was also found to be an important factor that contributed to sport withdrawal.

The double strain caused by education or work and sport participation is generally acknowledged to be a major concern for adolescent and adult competitive athletes. The time of optimal training and peak performances in competitive sport often coincides with the phases of school and/or higher education and starting a professional career. Therefore, a frequently cited reason for attrition found in many of the investigations is the time problem which occurs when trying to coordinate school/study/job and competitive sport and the claiming that other activities prevented participation (Burton & Martens, 1989; Evans, 2008; Gould et al., 1982; Johns, et al., 1990; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Martin, 1997; Salguero, Gonzalez-Boto, Tuero, & Marquez, 2003). DuRant, Pendergrast,

Donner, Seymore, & Gaillard (1991) reported that while injury was the leading reason for discontinuing participation of a sample of adolescents participating in school-sponsored sports, thirteen percent quit to get a job, eleven percent reported inconvenience associated with the game or practice schedule, and ten percent needed more time to study. Martin (1997) examined reasons given by a sample of 518 female and male college students for terminating or maintaining participation in competitive athletics. According to the study's participants, termination was most likely due to other activities that interfered with their sport participation. Twenty-six percent of the subjects who terminated due to other activities mentioned the importance of academics as their reason for terminating, and twenty-three percent cited work as their reason for quitting sports. The time-consuming and demanding training of competitive sport is a very important factor driving athletes away from organized sport (Koukouris, 1991, 1994). Du and Tsai (2007) examined Hong Kong elite athletes' reasons for retirement. Their analysis of self-administered questionnaires from 75 retired athletes suggested that the athletes in this study retired from elite sport predominantly because of other role demands, such as difficulties in coordinating sport and work or study demands.

In their investigation, Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä, and Johansson (2008) describe a closely related theme of 'other interests' where the participants describe themselves as 24-hour athletes. The athletes expressed how their whole

life was organized around sport, with little or no time for a social life (Gustafsson, et al., 2008). Gordon (1989) also reported that 'other interests' and 'work, study and family commitments' were more prominent than sport-related reasons given by dropouts. However, her survey of over 1300 participating young athletes indicated that 'lack of fun' would rank first as the motive for eventually dropping out, with conflicting interests and injury as second and third.

Loss of Interest and Lack of Fun

The reason for dropping out of sport with the highest number of responses by Australian female athletes was simply that the sport was not fun anymore (Evans, 2008). Ewing and Seefeldt (1996) cited loss of interest and lack of fun as the primary reasons for discontinuing sport involvement by young United States youth sport participants, which have been identified by numerous other studies (Boothby, Tungatt, & Townsend, 1981; Gould et al., 1982; Johns et al., 1990; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Narciso et al., 1984; Roberts & McKelvain, 1987; Sands, 1978; Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978). These findings support Weiss' (2000) contention that fun/enjoyment is one of the three major motives for participation in sports. However Gould (1987) suggested that 'lack of enjoyment' is a surface-level response, and that in future research this reason should be made more specific to determine what aspects of the competitive sport experience were not

enjoyable.

Structure of Sport Programs

In one of the earliest studies conducted on youth sport dropout by Orlick (1974), athletes were dropping out of sport because the programs were too serious, too focused on winning, and not enjoyable. In team sports such as soccer, the reason 'not enough playing time' is often heard, while negative aspects pertaining to the coach and the club were also reasons for dropping out (Gould, 1987; Gould et al., 1982; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Mihovilovic, 1968; Narciso et al., 1984; Orlick, 1974; Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978; Seye & Salmela, 1987; Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

According to Petlichkoff (1993), participation patterns may also be influenced by the coach-athlete relationship from the previous year. If the athlete and coach have historically had a poor relationship, it will influence the athlete to seek out a more satisfying environment.

Along with an overemphasis on competition, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) as well as Smith and Smoll (1990) also cited negative coach behaviours as reasons for sport termination. Dislike of the coach was the reason rated second and third in importance for withdrawal from a variety of sports in Molinero et al.'s (2006) and Evans' (2008) studies respectively. The behaviours of coaches, in particular,

have an important influence on the attitude and mental growth of young athletes and numerous studies clearly show the great significance of the relationship between the athlete and his or her coach for prematurely ending a competitive sport career (Martin, Dale, & Jackson, 2001). Conflicts with the coaches were determined to be among the main reasons for dropout in competitive swimmers (Martin, 1997; Petlichkoff, 1992; Salguero et al., 2003). In rhythmic gymnastics, the authoritarian behaviour of the coaches and officials, as well as their lack of openness and readiness to discuss things have been identified as important reasons for dropout (Bussmann, 2004). Controlling coaches who are in charge of all matters related to training and competition has been shown to affect the athletes' willingness to participate (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Many coaches are indifferent to their athletes' personal needs inside and outside the club, unable to perceive their athletes from a holistic perspective. Thus, withdrawal from competitive sport can also be the result of some coaches' desire to satisfy their own interests and egotism (Koukouris, 1994) as less encouraging and more controlling and autocratic coaches as well as low autonomy in training have been prominent features associated with dropout (Gustafsson, et al., 2008; Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Briere, 2001; Robinson & Carron, 1982).

Early Specialization and Burnout

Early sport specialization has been criticized because factors such as high training volume and time demands, as well as high performance expectations can lead to athletes burning out or dropping out of sport before reaching their peak (Gould, 1993). Moreover, early specialization can negatively influence long-term physical activity participation, thereby increasing the risks associated with inadequate physical activity (Baker & Robertson-Wilson, 2003). Rowland (1998) states that the hours of training and commitment required for early athletic achievement interferes with the normal childhood processes of social-awareness, self-identity, and interpersonal development, and suggests that early specialization is related to not only increased competitive stress and sport dropout but also to family disruptions, sibling rivalry, and vulnerabilities to health disorders and abuse.

If specialization occurs at a developmentally inappropriate age, benefits such as improved performance are outweighed by physical, psychological, and social 'costs' such as overtraining, injury, failure to develop transferable skills, decreased enjoyment, burnout, depression, decreased self-esteem, increased sensitivity to stress, fear of competition, sense of failure, and missed social opportunities (Boyd & Yin, 1996; Côté, 2004). Not surprisingly, early specialization has also been linked to early withdrawal from sport. Wall & Côté

(2007) studied dropout in high-level youth hockey players and found that dropout athletes participated in a higher quantity of off-ice training and began off-ice training at a younger age than hockey players who stayed involved. Barynina and Vaitsekhovskii (1992) also found that Russian national team swimmers who specialized earlier took more time to reach international status, did not stay on the national team as long, and retired younger than those who specialized later. A pattern of early specialization among dropout athletes was also observed by Fraser-Thomas (2006). Dropout athletes specialized earlier in competitive swimming, as demonstrated by their earlier start ages in dryland training and training camps, their earlier achievement of peak performance milestones, and their earlier close and extended relationships with coaches (Fraser-Thomas, 2006).

Due to the ever-increasing demands of competitive sport, the number of athletes suffering from burnout may be on the rise (Gould & Dieffenbach, 2002). Cohn (1990) defined burnout as "a negative reaction to physical or psychological stress leading to withdrawal from activity" (p. 98). Smith (1986) defined athlete burnout from sport as a psychological, emotional, and sometimes even physical withdrawal from a formerly pursued and enjoyable sport as a result of excessive chronic stress. Complete physical withdrawal due to burnout, however, is theorized to be driven by the athlete's perceptions of excessive stress. Athletes,

then, discontinue sport participation for any number of reasons (Gould, 1993). Cohn (1990) interviewed 10 active high school golfers and asked them if they had ever burned out of golf. All participants stated that they had burned out of golf at some time during their careers, and 'too much practice or playing', 'lack of enjoyment', 'no new goals to strive for', 'going into a slump', and 'pressure from self and others' were identified as causes of burnout. "Although many athletes do drop out due to burnout, most do so for other reasons, often related to conflicts or change of interest and a desire to practice other activities" (Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, Lundqvist, & Durand-Bush, 2007, p. 801).

Injury and Deselection

Injury plays an important role in deciding to withdraw from sport (Johns et al., 1990; Klint & Weiss, 1986; Seye & Salmela, 1987). Even though injury was rated very low as a reason for sport withdrawal by all respondents in the research by Burton & Martens (1986), Gould et al. (1982), and Orlick (1974), injury was also named as one of the main reasons for career termination in a study by Kadlick and Flemr (2008). Other research indicates that 14-32% of athletes have their careers prematurely ended because of injury (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). One in five athletes interviewed by Butcher et al. (2002) gave injury as their main reason for

withdrawal, and 31.8% of Yugoslavian elite soccer players mentioned sport injuries as the single most important reason for their withdrawal (Mihovilovic, 1968). Sport injuries can be the result of incorrect training programs, excessive training of beginners at an early age, athletes' inadequate warm-up, and a lack of proper medical supervision of athletes. Even if injuries do not lead directly to an athlete's sport termination, the often associated decrease in performance and the accompanying stress can lead to the disengagement from sport (Koukouris, 1994).

The exclusion of athletes from the decision-making process in clubs, discrimination between favoured athletes and others, and the administrators' interventions in the selection of teams is also cited as a contributor to disengagement in a study of 34 former advanced and elite athletes from various sports (Koukouris, 1994). In a study of 48 former elite-amateur Australian athletes from sports of basketball, cycling, diving, gymnastics, hockey, netball, rowing, shooting, squash, swimming, track and field, volleyball, and water polo, Lavallee et al. (1997) reported that an unanticipated cut from the team was an important contributor to sports career termination. The harsh deselection process that occurs in sport is also one of the most significant contributors to retirement difficulties (Svoboda & Vanek, 1982).

Age Related Reasons

Age, or more specifically, the decline in performance due to advancing age, is typically considered to be a primary cause of retirement. Empirical research has demonstrated that a substantial proportion of professional athletes retire because of age associated decreased performance (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Research findings by Mihovilovic (1968) on Yugoslavian professional soccer players and Svoboda and Vanek (1982) on Czechoslovakian national team athletes indicate that age plays a dominant role in athletic retirement. The athlete exhibits a decline in performance due to advancing age. Changes in the ability of athletes have implications for both young and older athletes. Lindner, Caine, and Johns (1991) compared dropouts and continuing female competitive gymnasts with respect to their physical, performance and injury characteristics. The results indicated that the dropouts were as a group distinguishable from the continuing gymnasts in that they were significantly older, taller and heavier. Athletes that participate in sport such as gymnastics and figure skating, have to deal with the physical changes that accompany puberty, such as height and weight gain. This leads to a situation where they find it more difficult to execute skills that were previously a matter of routine. This may force them into a premature conclusion of their careers. In addition, Taylor and Ogilvie (2001) suggest that age is one of the most significant reasons for retirement

because psychological motivation and social status can complicate an individual's ability to perform at the competitive level.

Financial Difficulties

Finally, financial aspects of the sport involvement are also frequently found to play a role in sport withdrawal (Chow, 2001; Du and Tsai, 2007; Johns et al., 1990; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Sapp & Haubenstricker, 1978; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). For example, 'There was not much money' and 'It was better to find a good job' are statements often cited by athletes (Kadlcik & Flemer, 2008). Koukouris (1991) studied a sample of 113 Greek former athletes, of which 55 disengaged from athletics, 35 from rowing, and 23 from volleyball. The respondents identified inadequate financial support from the club or the federation as the primary factor to withdraw from competitive sport.

Other Reasons

Low perceived ability. Several respondents in a study conducted by Martin (1997) claimed their athletic ability was not sufficient for competing in high school sports and was cited as their reason to retire from competitive high school athletics. Responses fitting this category included 'not being a good athlete' and 'not being good enough to compete.' Gould, Feltz, Weiss, & Petlichkoff (1982)

also found that 52% of the competitive swimmers in their study did not believe they were improving their skills and felt that they were not as good as they needed or wanted to be.

Inadequate infrastructure. Inadequate sport facilities and services prevent some athletes from reaching their full potential, which can in turn influence them in their decisions to withdraw from sport. Very little research has given recognition to the importance of inadequate and poor athletic facilities or equipment in some athletes' decisions to withdraw from sport (Koukouris, 1994).

Gender Differences

Adolescent girls drop out of sport participation at twice the rate than adolescent boys in the United States, yet little is known about the reasons for this (Paprin, 2005). Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies show dramatic decline in physical activity and sport participation for both boys and girls between elementary school and high school, with a significantly greater decline in activity for girls. It has been shown that the most pronounced period of sport participation decline among girls is between 12-19 years of age (Aaron, Storti, Robertson, Kriska, & Laporte, 2002; Evans, 2008; Kimm, Glynn, Kriska, & Barton, 2002).

With regards to sport participation, males traditionally express a higher interest in competition and fitness motives; however, such reports have been

based on surveys of youth involved in a wide range of activities (Kirkby, et al., 1999). Gill et al. (1983) reported that for a multisport North American sample (including gymnasts), females placed a greater emphasis than males on items related to fitness. The findings of Wang and Wiese-Bjornstal (1996), however, indicated that Chinese male gymnasts and other athletes rated fitness reasons higher than their female counterparts. Although no previous gymnastic studies have reported similar findings, Weinberg et al. (1997) indicated in their cross-cultural investigation that male athletes participated in sport for more extrinsic reasons.

In a retrospective ten-year study of adolescent sport dropouts, females reported that lack of competence and pressure to perform well are more important reasons for withdrawal than for males. Females more often felt that they were not good enough and that they had more pressure on them to perform well. They also were more likely than their male counterparts to identify the need for more time to study as a reason for withdrawal (Butcher, et al., 2002). Cooley et al. (2002) studied attrition in Australian youth sport, examining a sample of 349 gymnasts between the ages of nine and eighteen at a competitive level. They found the gymnast's sex, age, and competitive experience were major influences in their retirement or withdrawal. For female gymnasts, age was a major factor. Gymnasts' bodies can only take intense training for so long. Unfortunately, the

bigger an athlete is, the harder it becomes to move the body around, and the more easily one can get injured. Gender differences in motives have also been reported with boys being more likely to discontinue their participation given the competitive philosophy of the particular program as well as time conflicts with other sports (Weiss & Glenn, 1992).

Developmental Concerns

Athletes of varying ages also tend to report different reasons for sport withdrawal. Whereas younger sport dropouts typically cite reasons associated with the program structure such as little success, lack of playing time, and overemphasis on winning, as well as reasons related to the social context of the sport such as no teamwork, not meeting new friends, and not feeling important enough, older athletes report conflicting interests between sport and non-sport activities such as no free time, conflicts with social life, difficulty balancing work or school schedule with the demands of training and competition (Cooley et al., 2002; Fry, et al., 1981; Petlichkoff, 1992). Adolescents may also choose to participate in other activities such as watching television, playing video games, and hanging out with friends, which can lead to them dropping out of sport (Evans, 2008).

In a study conducted by Butcher et al. (2002), lack of enjoyment was the

most important reason for dropping out cited by the younger athletes. On the other hand, for older athletes the most important reason was that they needed more time for studying. Jobs, injury, other sports, and the coach were also more important for older athletes. As students grow older, academic and job concerns increase leaving less time for competitive sport, and the impact of work or academics on spare time for training may be a very important factor in the disengagement process of older athletes (Koukouris, 1994). For example, Alfermann et al. (2004) studied a sample of 256 former amateur athletes from Lithuania, Russia, and Germany. The athletes differed significantly in age: Lithuanian athletes were older ($M=13.5$, $SD=3.7$) than both German and Russian athletes ($M=10.5$, $S=3.9$; $M=9.6$, $SD=3.2$) when they started their career. Russian athletes were younger ($M=17.1$, $SD=2.9$) than both German and Lithuanian athletes ($M=23.6$, $SD=3.8$; $M=22.3$, $SD=4.0$) at the age of best performance. Consequently, at the time of career termination, Russian athletes were also younger ($M=19.6$, $SD=2.8$) than the other two groups ($M=27.0$ and 27.2 , $SD=5.2$ and 4.2) who did not differ from each other. Due to their differing ages, the athletes of the three nations differed in their reasons for career termination. Lithuanian and Russian athletes mention sport-related reasons most often, whereas German athletes focus on job-related reasons. Stambulova, Stephan, and Jäpähag (2007) also conducted a cross-national study, comparing Swedish and French athletes. In contrast to the Swedish

athletes, French athletes retired from sports at a younger age ($M=29.72$) mainly because of sport-, health- and family-related reasons, and because of low satisfaction levels with their athletic careers. Swedish athletes terminated their careers at an older age ($M=31.35$) mainly because of health-, work- and relationship-related reasons, and the satisfaction with their athletic careers was high (Stambulova, et al., 2007).

Differences According to Dropout Type

Lindner et al. (1991) developed a classification system that recognizes different drop out types. This system includes the sampler, low level participant, high level participant, as well as elite, and is based on length of time in the sport, competitive level, and amount of time spent training and competing. Using Lindner et al.'s (1991) classification system, Butcher et al. (2002) found that there were significant differences in the withdrawal reasons. For short duration participants (samplers), lack of enjoyment was an important reason followed by lack of competence. On the other hand, elite participants had different concerns. Their major reasons for withdrawal were too much pressure to perform well and injury.

A type of dropout often ignored in research studies is an athlete who moves to another sport or, alternatively, to a lower competitive level of the same sport.

The *Transfer Participant* (Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989) is a person who has previously left a sport after it no longer satisfied his/her needs and has become involved in another sport. Involvement in the transfer sport may be exploratory, or may become as serious and ambitious as that of the previous sport. In Klint and Weiss' (1987) study, 95% of gymnasts sampled changed competitive levels rather than withdrawing from the sport. This shows that athletes did not want to withdraw from their sport, they were just unhappy in their present situation.

Retirement Experiences and Adjustment

The sport retirement and dropout literature has also described the psychological repercussions of the withdrawal experience and adjustment transition as a whole. Some research has shown that retirement for athletes is traumatic and negative, involving identity crisis (Brewer, et al., 1993; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982), emotional difficulties (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Grove, Lavalley, Gordon & Harvey, 1998; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007) and decreased self-confidence and life satisfaction (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Warriner and Lavalley (2008) explored experiences of retirement from elite sport among a sample of retired female gymnasts. Given the young age at which female gymnasts begin (some athletes will begin highly specialized training as young as 5 or 6 years of age) and end their sport careers ($M=18$,

SD=0.82) (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008), the researchers paid particular attention to the role of identity and the physical self in the process of adaptation. Retrospective, semi-structured interviews were conducted and interview transcripts analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Analysis indicated that retirement from gymnastics resulted in adjustment difficulties for six of the seven participants. Identity loss was particularly prominent, and for two gymnasts, physical changes associated with retirement were a further source of distress. The challenge of athletic retirement was intensified because the gymnasts had heavily invested in sport during adolescence, a period demarcated for the pursuit of an identity. A qualitative investigation by Lawrence (2007) designed to explore the process that female gymnasts go through upon retirement, and to offer suggestions for an intervention to help retiring athletes, also found that retirement proved to be a long, emotional and difficult process.

However, others have found contrary results, finding no evidence of adjustment difficulties (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Coakley, 1983; Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985). Athletes may feel relieved from the high demand of competitive sport and that retirement from high-level competition may lead to positive life changes (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Lally (2007) examined the phenomenon of identity reorganization as it takes place during athletic retirement. The study involved in-depth interviews with three male and

three female Canadian university student-athletes that were approaching their final year of playing eligibility. All participants were interviewed at three different times; the beginning of their final season (prior to their retirement), one month after retirement, and again one year after retirement (following their sport withdrawal). The participants in this study did not experience identity crises following the end of their sporting careers and even enjoyed exploring other neglected identity dimensions.

Conclusion

This current review of the existing literature in the realm of sport retirement clearly demonstrates that no single factor can be identified for being primarily responsible for ceasing participation in sport. The factors associated with the reasons to withdraw from sport are manifold and will likely differ depending on the athlete's gender, age, type of participation, and the sport discipline. There are clearly a wide variety of factors to consider and evaluate when examining the decisions to continue or terminate sport participation.

RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena through the meaning people allocate to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Through qualitative research, "the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Cresswell, 1998, p. 15). Qualitative methodology also subscribes to the idea that there are multiple realities, as things are defined differently by each individual (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Methodology

Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy and a research method that offers the opportunity to gain an understanding of the meaning of a phenomenon as it really is (Munhall, 2007). The aim of phenomenology is to study the life-world, as experienced rather than as conceptualized, categorized, or theorized, and in terms of a research method, it is the study of essences of experience (VanManen, 1997). In other words, phenomenological research aims to clarify situations lived through by individuals in everyday life. Rather than trying to reduce a particular situation to a convenient number of identifiable variables and to control the context in which the situation will be studied, phenomenology aims to remain as faithful as possible to the phenomenon and to the context in which it appears in the world (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Phenomenological researchers attempt to

study the participants' perspective on their world; attempt to describe in detail the content and structure of their experiences and to explain their essential meanings (Kvale, 1996). From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). According to von Eckartsberg (1986), phenomenological research studies involve a phenomenon, or problem, where the researcher delineates a focus of investigation, formulates a question in such a way that it is understandable to others; the data generating situation, where the researcher starts with descriptive narrative provided by subjects who are viewed as co-researchers; and the data analysis or interpretation, whereas once collected, the data are read and scrutinized so as to reveal their structure, meaning, configuration, coherence, and the circumstances of their occurrence and clustering.

This current study was to explore and understand, in-depth, the withdrawal motives of former competitive gymnasts from Newfoundland and Labrador, and was conducted using phenomenology as the guiding methodological orientation. Phenomenology fits well with this study, which allows participants to focus on their individual lived experiences. This enables the researcher to capture the human experiences to provide a better understanding and present the participants' subjective perceptions with clarity and meaning (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

My Gymnastics Background

Qualitative research is based on the idea that "knowledge is laced with personal bias and values" (Cresswell, 1998, p. 19), and it is thus essential for the researcher to bracket any preconceptions to ensure that these do not interfere with the study. Moustakas (1994) uses the term *epoche* to describe this bracketing process. In a phenomenological study, the researcher brackets her or his experience prior to data collection by setting aside all prejudgments in order to enter into the interview with an unbiased presence (Cresswell, 1998).

Describing my background in gymnastics helps to give credibility to this research. I was a national level competitive gymnast for 20 years. Recently I went through the process of retiring from the sport of gymnastics, however I am still actively involved as a competitive coach. Although I did not coach any of the participants in this research, I was acquainted with many of the participants and athletes. My knowledge of gymnastics and friendship with the participants I was interviewing helped to extend and clarify my understanding of their experiences and helped provide a more detailed analysis. According to Creswell (2003), personal experience is invaluable in qualitative research, as "the qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study." (p. 182)

It was important for me to be objective, and ensure the situations and

suggestions described were from the participants' point of view. It was essential to differentiate between my thoughts and the thoughts of the participants, while allowing my knowledge and experience in the sport to provide direction and ideas for the research. My personal experience allowed me to be more understanding and clear about the experiences the participants discussed. Also, having experience in the sport and having worked with many athletes over the years allowed me to develop the key questions and topics I asked the participants. I also have an understanding of the athletes' levels, the competitions they went to, and the skills they were working on. Knowing all of those things helped me to understand the experiences of the participants.

Participants

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used for this study to collect in-depth information from participants who are able to give authentic accounts. Phenomenological studies are conducted on small sample sizes as the aim of the study is to "say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings" of the participants, rather than to make general claims for a larger population (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 54). In qualitative studies, it is difficult to determine in advance how many persons should be part of the study. The decisive factor is the point where

variation comes to an end (Kvale, 1996). In his own words: "Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (Kvale, 1996, p.101). Accordingly, the number of participants for the present study was determined when data saturation was reached, where further interviews yielded no or little new knowledge. After preliminary analysis of the interviews, it was decided that after the eleventh participant, we had sufficiently rich data to conclude the data collection.

Participant Recruitment

After obtaining ethical approval from the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, a letter explaining the study in detail, was sent to Gymnastics Newfoundland and Labrador (GNL), and all gymnastics clubs in the province (*see* Appendix A for Letter to Gymnastics Clubs and Organizations), asking for potential contact information of former competitive athletes. Personal contacts were also used to recruit former gymnasts that are currently active as coaches, judges, and administrators within the gymnastics community. Potential participants were provided with an initial recruitment letter (*see* Appendix B for Letter to Participants) outlining the details and the purpose of the study, as well as information regarding the participation criteria and contact information. In the

letter, those interested in taking part in the study were requested to contact the researcher by phone or email, where the study was explained to the potential participant and the criteria to determine the participant's eligibility for the study was reviewed. At this time, arrangements for the first interview were made. Written consent was obtained at the time of the first interview.

Participant Characteristics

The participants were both adult males ($n=4$) and females ($n=7$) who ranged in age from 19 to 29 years ($M=23.09$, $SD=3.26$) at the time of the interview. The participants' gymnastics career lasted for an average of 11.73 years ($SD=2.83$), with a starting age of anywhere between 3 to 9 years old ($M=5.36$, $SD=2.11$), and retired at an average age of 17.18 years ($SD=1.40$). All of the participants were retired national level competitive artistic gymnast from Newfoundland and Labrador. For the purpose of this study, a national level competitive athlete was considered an individual that took part in a highly specialized artistic gymnastics training program for more than 12 hours per week, and who, in the past, had competed at the national level (e.g., Canadian Championships, Canada Games, Eastern and/or Atlantic Canadian Championships). Recently, some researchers have expressed concern about viewing sport retirement as a terminal event (Coakley 1983). Instead, they have

suggested that retirement should be viewed as a transition, and that the athlete may find alternative avenues to maintain identification with the sport, and thus sport retirement should not be viewed as an end to the sport role (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). It should be remembered that the term 'retirement' is primarily concerned with disengagement and relinquishing formal roles, in this case, disengagement from the role as a national level competitive artistic gymnast. Thus, for the purpose of the current investigation, an athlete is considered 'retired' when he or she no longer competes or trains to compete in the sport of artistic gymnastics. As the current study seeks to investigate the withdrawal motives from competitive artistic gymnastics, individuals that are presently involved in a recreational based gymnastics program, or are actively involved in gymnastics as a coach, judge, and/or volunteer, were also considered.

Procedures

Pilot Study

Before commencing this study, a pilot interview was conducted. Consequently, a preliminary interview guide was developed based on the related literature and personal experience (*see Appendix C for Interview Guide*). With the permission of the participant, the pilot interview was audio-taped, but not included in the analysis of the research. Rather, the pilot interview was simply

used to guide the structure of the interview process and the initial interview guide that was later utilized to collect data from the study's participants. The pilot interview allowed for the assessment of the comprehensibility and directness of the questions and the flow of the interview process. The pilot interview also provided an opportunity to refine the researcher's personal interview skills, and showed the potential to bring any potential unidentified ethical or procedural considerations to light.

Data Collection

An interview guide approach is a common way to steer the interview, while getting the most out of the information from the participant. According to Patton (1990), an interview guide approach provides the initial focus for the interview, but still allows for the freedom of adding more thought or detail in particular areas. The researcher can probe further if needed, and clarify the participants' responses whenever it is necessary. It was decided that the information gathered would be more extensive using an interview approach rather than with questionnaires. This way the participants were able to talk freely, quickly and expressions could be observed, eliminating the tedious task of them trying to write out their answers. Following the guides provided in Smith and

Osborn (2008), an interview guide was used in this investigation (*see Appendix C for Interview Guide*).

The participants partook in one 45-60 minute long interview that was audio-taped. The interviews were arranged at the participant's convenience and took place at a site that was mutually agreed upon by the participant and the researcher. At the time of the first interview, the study was reviewed and written consent was obtained from each participant (*see Appendix D for consent form*). Each participant was provided with the opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form and agreeing to take part in the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis started during the interview process. Observational notes were kept throughout each interview, which provide the researcher with ideas for the questioning in any subsequent interviews. All interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed or generalized and names were replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect the participants' confidentiality.

To analyze and gain a greater understanding and interpretation of the lived experience, Smith and Osborn (2008) describe a step-by-step process of data analysis, which was used to guide the interpretation and analysis of the data

gathered. After reading the transcript numerous times in order to become familiar with the participant's account, the researcher used the right-hand margin to annotate anything interesting or significant about the responses. This process was continued for all the transcripts. Then the initial notes were transformed into summarizing phrases and ultimately into emerging theme titles. The emergent themes were then listed on a sheet of paper, and the researcher tries to make sense of the connections between the themes. The themes were then logically ordered into clusters and were given a name to represent superordinate themes. The entire process of analysis was then continued with all of the different research questions and was considered complete when no additional meaningful groupings emerged.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the withdrawal of athletes from artistic gymnastics by employing a social exchange theoretical perspective. Data was collected in order to explore, identify, describe, and understand the factors associated with athletes' decisions to withdraw from the sport of competitive artistic gymnastics in Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as to investigate whether the reasons for discontinuing involvement vary as a function of gender, level of competition reached, and age at the time of dropping out. The researcher conducted one 45-60 minute in-depth interview with eleven former gymnasts who met the criteria for this study and a phenomenological approach was used to analyze the qualitative data. The gymnasts' personal stories allowed the researcher to gain knowledge of the perceived experiences. This chapter outlines the common themes that emerged during the data analysis. The quotes and examples selected are those that best illustrate and clarify each theme. The researcher replaced participants' names with pseudonyms, in order to protect their confidentiality. Results of the data analysis are presented in the following sections: The first section addresses the perceived benefits associated with participation in competitive artistic gymnastics. The second section concentrates on the perceived costs associated with participation. The third section focuses on other factors impacted or influenced the participants' decision to continue or

terminate participation. The fourth section describes the participants' perceived reasons for retirement and the fifth section describes the participants' personal reflections regarding their decision to retire.

Perceived Benefits

This section outlines several themes describing the perceived benefits to participating in competitive artistic gymnastics. The themes can be categorized into four major themes: social, physical, psychological, and affective.

Social Benefits

All eleven participants indicated that they enjoyed the social aspects of their involvement in gymnastics. Social benefits included a range of responses, including social relationships with other gymnasts and coaches, meeting new people at competitions and training camps, and being involved in social activities with their athlete-friends either in conjunction with or outside of regular training hours.

"Ehm, so you now we used to always eh we'd always hang out together. We'd go out to movies, we'd go, like we'd go to the fair if it was here. We'd go, you know, we'd go bike riding. Sometimes our coaches would take us to, like he'd take us out to Sunshine camp for a day. And we'd just hang out and I remember one year,

one of our coaches took us to the Regatta. Like we did lots of stuff." (Participant 10)

Many indicated that most friends they had were gymnasts,

"But it's very wonderful, because the social aspect of it is great. Most of my best friends come from gymnastics." (Participant 8)

and some described what it was like having a second family.

"Some of my best friends were in the gym, you know what I mean, these were sort of my family." (Participant 7)

Meeting new people was also identified as a social benefit.

"Ehm I guess, like I met a lot of new people. Like it taught me to meet new people, like at different competitions and stuff." (Participant 5)

Physical Benefits

All participants indicated that they gained many favourable physical attributes through their participation in gymnastics, such as being physically fit: *"[...] you gained physical benefits like the strength and flexibility" (Participant 1)*, and learning about how to lead a healthy lifestyle.

"It taught me, you know the importance of being healthy and physical activity, daily activity and stuff like that." (Participant 4)

Psychological Benefits

Several themes of psychological benefits emerged. The participants' responses tended to identify internal psychological benefits such as personality traits and characteristics, and other advantageous life skills, as well as external psychological benefits, dealing mostly with the participants' personal identity development.

The following personal qualities were perceived by the participants as being internally developed as a result of their involvement in competitive gymnastics, with the most prevalent being time management skills.

"Ehh yeah I think ... yeah for sure, definitely. In terms of just learning commitment to one thing and eh or many things. Time management was a huge thing because as a kid you're kinda, you know you got all that time at the gym, you got allot some time for studying." (Participant 3)

"Ehm everything, because you had to budget your time so well that you needed a very ridged schedule because otherwise you would get nothing done outside the gym." (Participant 11)

Other character traits were perseverance, discipline, dedication, good work ethic, as well as self-confidence and mental toughness.

"Well, perseverance ... you've experienced plenty of their frustrations and their fears. And also in other parts like I learned lot of different like small life lessons I suppose from the gym, about like, about perseverance, about never giving up and how like things can be very, very difficult and very frustrating but if you work hard and stuff it will work out." (Participant 8)

"I think gymnastics gives people like discipline cause like it takes a lot of discipline to be a gymnast, and that's probably carried on into other things." (Participant 1)

"Definitely. I think it made me more self-confident. During competitions you have to, you have to look self-confident when you're competing, so you have to learn how to be self-confident." (Participant 6)

Leadership skills, sportsmanship, maturity and independence, and future career objectives were also mentioned by some of the participants.

Most of the participants also mentioned that these skills seemed to transfer to other aspects in their lives. For example Participant 3 found that performing as an individual in front of spectators made it easy for him to speak or otherwise perform in public.

"I guess you are always performing as an individual in front of a crowd, right? So anytime that that was, anytime that I had to do that, it wasn't a big deal so anytime I had to give presentations in school or especially with ... in high school when I was involved in musicals it was kinda, if they said, [Stan], you gotta go out on stage and do this, it wasn't a big shock to me, so then you could kind ... you know." (Participant 3)

Identity development, feeling special, and a feeling of belonging to a team were indicated as external psychological benefits by most of the participants. Most participants explained that they defined themselves or were known by others as 'a gymnast'.

"You know you defined yourself as being a gymnast back then, like: 'What do you do?', 'I'm in gymnastics', so that was a big part of it and you know." (Participant 1)

"I don't know it was kind you, that almost defined you, who you were, you were (Stan) oh he can do flips." (Participant 3)

Many of the participants also enjoyed representing the club, province or nation, and felt as if they were part of a team. All of the participants also took pleasure in receiving awards and recognition for their success in gymnastics.

Affective Benefits

Having fun was the most important thing to Participant 6 in her gymnastics career.

"We had lots, and lots of fun. That's why I loved gymnastics so much ..." (Participant 6)

Others felt similarly about liking gymnastics and there were several common ways of experiencing enjoyment, such as overall enjoyment of training and competing, travelling and going on trips with the team, learning and developing new skills, as well as improving and performing the skills and routines.

"To travel away as a kid and think still the travelling was my, I loved the ability to just getting on a plane and fly away somewhere different, seeing the sites, doing gymnastics, and then come back just for a weekend." (Participant 2)

"[...] you know you did wanna get those moves there you know just a kinda as a trophy to put in your own case and: 'yeah, I got that move or that routine.'" (Participant 3)

"Learning new skills. Yeah I loved learning new skills, I loved putting routines together. It wasn't really about competing. I wasn't, I didn't love competing, I liked competing, but I loved like to learn new skills and stuff." (Participant 10)

Other benefits mentioned by only three of the participants were that gymnastics kept them out of trouble, keeping them "off the streets", and "with like good kids who were working hard and stuff." (Participant 5) Only one participant mentioned the benefit of feeling energetic and better able to concentrate and think after his training sessions.

"I'd get home ehm I was already energetic from that practice so I still sort of had blood stimulation going on ... it was eh I was able to think clearly so I would go home I'd do my math homework because that's usually all I really had, I'd do most of my homework in school." (Participant 2)

Perceived Costs

This section outlines several themes describing the perceived costs to participating in competitive artistic gymnastics. The costs identified by the study's participants can be categorized into four major themes: social, physical, emotional, and environmental.

Social Costs

Because of the vast time commitment needed to perform high-level gymnastics, all eleven participants indicated that they missed out on many social activities such as school sports and other extra-curricular activities, and spending

time with friends from outside the gymnastics community, as well as their family. All indicated that they were training between 16 to 20 hours a week at the peak of their careers, and thus felt as if they were missing out on various opportunities to partake in different activities.

"Ehm like I said in High School I had probably less of a social life than some of the other people in school with me, but I'm not sure that young an age anyways that I was social enough to have, made it much of a difference. Ehm I don't know that was because I started gymnastics at such a young age I didn't have a very big group of friends." (Participant 4)

Participating in such a time demanding sport also seemed to lead to a very structured and strict daily regime with little or no time for other activities.

"Eh well when I was, before the coaching I'd say it wasn't too difficult. Like I said it was from Grade 3 on so it was life, right? Eh you get off school, you go home, you have enough time to grab a bite to eat and then you have to beat it to the gym. After the gym you come home, you eat again, and you do your homework and then it's time to go to bed. Right, so it was, it was a pretty strict schedule, school, gym, homework, bed, school, gym, homework, bed." (Participant 7)

Several participants also put gymnastics above everything else, basing many decision on their training schedules and commitment to their gymnastics performance.

"Ehm I guess because it took away from doing stuff with my friends and outside of the gym, but I'm still a very social person. [...] And then I'd have gymnastic Sunday mornings so I probably wouldn't be able to go out late with my friends on a Saturday night. I'd have to come home and I would make myself come home and go to bed because I knew I had to get up early and train, so" (Participant 6)

Another social cost mentioned by three participants was the lack of same age peers involved in gymnastics.

"I think like, I was in a group and I was the oldest with like my sister. So it was my sister and her friends and then me by myself. So that was like kind of odd. Like, like I didn't really fit in, like with a bunch of like Grade 8s and I was in Grade 10 and 11." (Participant 5)

Physical Costs

All participants indicated injuries and physical pain as a major drawback regarding their involvement in gymnastics. Some continued training with chronic

repetitive stress injuries and as a result either couldn't perform at an intensity or level that they would have liked to, or training simply became not 'fun' anymore.

"I think the main thing like it ended up with like where my ankles were hurting so much and my back like I didn't it wasn't fun anymore because like I had to sit down all the time or just not do or you know do ankle exercises or whatever." (Participant 1)

"I had a lot serious injuries at that up to that point ehm and it was just kind of, I just knew I physically couldn't take anymore of it." (Participant 4)

"Ehm it was a lot of impact on my body so I had a lot of lower body injuries and back injuries and stuff, I spent a lot of time at physio. [...] I did have a lot of injuries from the gym." (Participant 8)

Emotional Costs

All participants seemed to experience a great deal of emotional distress as a result of training and competing. Being frustrated, not being able to perform well, and fears about doing specific skills or competing were among the most cited of the emotional costs mentioned.

"I used to freak out all the time. I used to be so frustrated all the time I couldn't get something, because I guess I would pressure myself and if I was scared to do it I would get really annoyed at myself and frustrated. So emotionally, I would leave the gym upset a lot of the time." (Participant 6)

Many also found that training become so monotonous to the extent that it became no longer enjoyable.

"It just got to a point where I was doing, I would go there every single practice and I would do the same thing over and over and over again. And it wasn't just for like a month period of time, it was for 6-month period of time, so it was for a long time yeah. So I was, I really, it wasn't that I got bored at practices." (Participant 2)

"Just because it was getting to the point where gymnastics was being more, well going to the gym and training was starting to become more of a chore than it was a pleasure." (Participant 4)

Disappointment of not making the team, inability to perform a skill or do well at a competition, not progressing, and lack of success also led to negative emotional reactions.

"Failing at getting a skill. Slowly getting a skill, and watching other people getting it faster around you. Ehm, there was times when I would have fights with people within my group because we got too competitive with each other. And that was very emotionally draining." (Participant 8)

Participant 9 also mentioned this inter-peer competition:

"Like you are training with people, but you're competing against them in the end and if you are training with people that often, sometimes you just get into fights. I didn't like that. Ehm, well there is times when like we came back from a meet and then this girl won't talk to me kind of a thing. Yeah, won't answer a single question because of whatever happened. And there is also the whole jealousy part of it, like oh she got a new skill I'm not gonna be happy for her." (Participant 9)

One participant only also felt embarrassed when competing out of province because of feeling unprepared and not able to compete at the same high standard as other individuals.

"I got the lowest mark I ever received in ehhh in pommels. It was eh I got a two, just a two and it was a funny thing because one of the judges came up to me and showed me what I was doing wrong

during warm-up, and I still did what I was doing during the competition. I looked over and he like shook his head like: 'What are you doing?' And it was, I felt kind of embarrassed. So that was bad." (Participant 2)

Environmental Costs

External forces were also identified by all of the participants. Some felt pressured by their parents and coaches. Most participants also mentioned coaching practices and behaviour as one of the major negative environmental factors. Coaches were described as unenthusiastic, impatient, too serious and focused on performance and competition, spending more time in the office rather than with the athletes in the gym, unsympathetic, and imposing impossible training standards that are not developmentally appropriate. For example Participant 11 was expected to successfully perform a tricky move five times in a row, and had to continue doing so until she was successful, on one occasion spending an entire practice on the same skill. Others felt that the coaches were either unknowledgeable,

"I remember like at the end where I like tried to figure out how to do skills myself, or like, you know it was, no one was really pushing me to do that, I'd feel like I was kinda pushing myself.

Having to self-motivate, as opposed to like be motivated by your coach to do things. And then like your coach not really knowing like what things to put together, or like sometimes you're like: Ok, I should do this combination like oh yeah, I never thought of that. Like you're the coach, you should know more." (Participant 9)

or unwilling to perform a regular duty of a caring coach.

"I remember we used to time him sometimes, and see how long he spend down with us, and see how long he spend up in his office doing whatever he did up there. And 1/3 or the time he was down with us, 2/3 of the time, I was coaching the other boys."

(Participant 7)

All participants included financial costs in their interviews. Most of the costs that occurred were due to training fees, competition registration and travel costs, as well as training and competition attire.

"Yeah on top of training fees, travel fees, all that stuff, registration fees, just couldn't do it. So ehm, they asked, [my coach at the time] if, ehm, which was more important, the body suit or the tracksuit, and obviously the body suit is the more important of the two, so that's what I got my first year competing. I didn't get the tracksuit." (Participant 11)

Other external costs mentioned by two participants were a lack of infrastructure and properly trained coaches, and only one participant mentioned an incident of hazing.

One perceived cost about being involved in gymnastics that was mentioned by male participants only was the social stigma about the sport itself, where gymnastics was associated with the female gender by their peers and the general public.

"Eh, I think being in a very closed minded society in Newfoundland, the stigma of being a gymnast and everyone assuming that you're, that you're gay or whatever, or girlie, you know?" (Participant 6)

Other Influential Factors

This section focuses on other factors that impacted or influenced the participants' decision to continue or terminate participation. Participants identified coaching, parents and peers, and environmental factors. These external elements seemed to influence the participants in both positive and negative ways, which is why they are grouped separately from the perceived costs and benefits.

Coaching

Coaches were both a positive and a negative deciding factor. Coaching practices and behaviours were perceived as having a negative effect on the participants' sport experience. As mentioned in the previous section, most participants stated that their coaches were too serious, uncaring, uncooperative, and unsupportive.

*"It was, it was all coaching related. The coach would get very frustrated with me and tell me to leave the gym because I wouldn't do a certain skill I was terrified of flyaway off high bar. I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't let go of the bar, and [my coach] got frustrated and just told me to get the hell out if I wasn't gonna do anything."
(Participant 7)*

The same participant also revealed his disappointment when his coach held him back by from a performance perspective and didn't allow him to compete at the National Championships. However a few participants viewed their coaches as being an important support system.

*"Ehm I'd say my group for sure and [my coach]. I used to get frustrated: so many days at the gym and just cry, and [she] would be so supportive of me, so definitely [my coach] was my biggest support."
(Participant 6)*

Parents and Peers

When asked about their support systems, all participants either mentioned their parents or their athlete-friends. Parents influenced the athletes' involvement in competitive gymnastics with emotional support such as encouragement and guiding their decision-process.

"Yeah cause you are well I think mom and dad kinda seen that happening I guess to them you get less interested in going to the gym and less interested, less interested ehm so I think they brought it up say said you know 'are you still interested in going to the gym? Is that really something you wanna be at anymore?' And not pressuring you to quit they would have seen me you know go on for another 10 years if, if I wanted to." (Participant 3)

Through tangible support such as driving participants to practice sessions, paying for training fees, and going to competitions, parents also nurtured their child's athletic endeavours.

"Well they came, they drove me to every single practice and picked me up from every practice. Paid for all my training and all my trips and my dad never missed a competition." (Participant 8)

Athlete-peers were also described as being an important support system by three participants.

"Yeah, I mean we were pretty close when we trained together. There was probably 4 or 5 of us that were about the same age. And we were all pretty good buddies, and yeah so, we could always count on each other, and we always you know give each other a hard time and that too, it was fun. We had a lot of fun, and eh, I'd say you could definitely say that that was a good support system."

(Participant 10)

Environmental Factors

External factors that influenced the participants' self-assessment whether or not to withdraw from competitive gymnastics were that they had nothing left to train for,

"Well my biggest goal as I said was to go to Canada Games, so then once I made it to my Canada Games, we kind of have this view from being from Newfoundland, like that, there is only so far and so good you can be I guess, training with the facilities that we have and the money that we have and the coaching professionals that we have I guess. Ehm, the I guess that I had the idea that as a Newfoundland athlete, that was the furthest I was gonna get. So

that's where I lost my motivation to continue training."

(Participant 8)

geographical and infrastructural limitations,

"There needs to be more in this province for senior athletes. There is nothing in this province for senior athletes and it's very sad. There is no gym time; there is no respect for the fact that you need senior athletes in your gym for the younger kids. They need to look up to somebody. Even if those senior athletes don't want to compete anymore, you need to have something for them."

(Participant 9)

and one participant described a situation where other athlete-friends were also contemplating about leaving or had already made the decision to leave the sport.

"I remember talking to my friends like a few of the friends in my groups being like: 'Well are you quitting this year', because it'd make a difference to me if I was gonna be the oldest one. Like we were the oldest people in the gym that so if I was gonna be the oldest person left there I'd probably wouldn't stay in it. But if my friends were sticking around maybe I would have too. I don't know." (Participant 1)

Reasons for Retirement

The following section describes the participants' perceived reasons for their retirement. Responses illustrate that the participants' reasons seemed to stem from restrictions placed on their ability to continue to participate in competitive gymnastics. These restrictions could be classified into three themes: social restrictions, personal restrictions, and environmental restrictions.

Social Restrictions

The most frequently cited reasons for deciding to retire were social restrictions such as time constraints and having other responsibilities. Many participants found it difficult to coordinate school, training and even a part-time job and thus opted to terminate their gymnastics career. Wanting more time for themselves, not wanting to miss out on activities outside of gymnastics, and wanting to experience other sports and activities were identified as major reasons.

Three participants had or wanted to get a part-time job when they entered their last year of high school, making it near impossible to maintain the intense time commitment associated with participation in competitive gymnastics.

"Once I turned 16 I wanted to get a job so that took up as much time." (Participant 1)

"So when I started Grade 12 I started focusing on getting money for University and a getting my own job during the school year. So that's when I quit." (Participant 2)

"Ehmm you know you do want to have your own life 23 hours in a week is a pretty big hit on a 16 year old schedule when they wanna get a job." (Participant 3)

The participants also wanted to focus on their studies,

"I did wanna focus more on my school work." (Participant 2)

or wanted to get involved in other sports or other realms of gymnastics.

*"But then, that was the same sort of eh, that was the same sort of period I was starting coaching, so I was training 18.5 hours a week, I was coaching 20 hours a week, and I was entering my last year of high school, hoping, hoping to go to University."
(Participant 7)*

"I wanted to try other sports and I didn't have time and so I did that and that's when I got involved with volleyball and cheerleading." (Participant 11)

Four participants also cited that their athlete-friends were thinking about quitting or had already left the sport. These individuals were no longer having

fun, as they were no longer able to train with age-match peers they knew and liked, and had to train with athletes that were younger than them.

"I was kinda like: 'Well it's not worth it if my friends aren't gonna be there [...] I'm not gonna stay there if there is no one else there either.'" (Participant 1)

"Like I was one of the oldest ones in the group and there was no one to look up to anymore." (Participant 5)

"I think the main reason why I quit was because all the other girls were quitting." (Participant 6)

"A lot of the guys that I trained with going up through quit before I did. We went to Canada Games in '95 and a lot of those guys that I grew up with in gymnastics quit right after that. So I was kind of the older the older kid in the gym then and I was only like 15 years old, 14 years old. But eh, it just kinda got boring I was, you know I was training with all these little young fellows and it just wasn't the same for me." (Participant 10)

Wanting to spend more time with friends and family, or wanting more time for themselves, as well as not having to miss out on social activities due to gymnastics were also described as reasons for retirement by four participants.

"One of many yes, I did, I wanted to have a social life. I also wanted to ehh see if I could start a relationship with someone ehm I wanted to spend more time with my family. [...]. Minor reason would be like the me time like I would finally get a chance to be by myself, you know, have a little bit of cool down time sit down and just think about whatever." (Participant 2)

" [...] you knew in the back of your mind you're missing out on a bunch of stuff that's going on with your friends." (Participant 3)

"Well I never got to see any friends, I never got to go to parties, I never got to hang out, I never, you know if I was seeing a girl, you know how often did you get to see her really? Yeah, you know, gymnastics is not life, like there is so much more to it, and I'm missing all of it." (Participant 7)

" [...] the last year of like Junior High and into High School when it was, you know when you're a pre-teen/teenager and you're, it's all about hanging out with your friends and you know going to parties and that kind of thing and there is a lot of stuff I missed out of because of gymnastics." (Participant 10)

After being asked if he was happy to retire, Participant 3 responded:

"It was good because I got to do a bunch of that stuff I was missing out on. But you know going out with the guys or you know, going, having a game of golf with the guys you know you wouldn't have done that if you were involved in, you know or eh what else? Yeah it was happy time for a while cause then you, you didn't have to go to the gym everyday [...] you knew in the back of your mind you're missing out on a bunch of stuff that's going on with your friends." (Participant 3)

Personal Restrictions

Personal restrictions cited as reasons for withdrawing from gymnastics included performance limitations, physical limitations and injury, having nothing left to train for, and lack of motivation and interest.

Many participants felt as if they had reached their limits and did not improve any further.

"And I could train for Nationals but I never felt a thought I would like do any better at Nationals than I had before. I had reached my peak." (Participant 8)

"Honestly, at, it got to a point where the eh novelty of doing gymnastics had worn off, and I honestly didn't know why I was

doing gymnastics later on, that was when I was about eh 12 years old ehm I was sort of, I, I kinda plateaued I don't think I improved a whole lot at that point and ehm I honestly wasn't sure why I was continuing with it." (Participant 2)

"Like when I came back, it was always like I don't know how I'm gonna get any better, that's a huge thing, realizing that I pretty much like reached my limit here, no matter how hard I work, it's really not gonna do that much more." (Participant 9)

Physical limitations, such as lack of physical characteristics and being too old, and particularly injuries, were also one of the major reasons for retirement.

"[...] and it was because basically because I guess I'd been doing it for so long then, I had a lot serious injuries at that up to that point ehm and it was just kind of, I just knew I physically couldn't take anymore of it." (Participant 4)

Statements such as not being able to meet their goals, or already having met their goals indicated that the participants had nothing left to train for.

"Eh well I just didn't have motivation to go anymore. I wanted to compete and ... I wanted to do like Canada Games and I knew that I wasn't going to go to Nationals." (Participant 5)

"Biggest reasons: Getting to Canada Games, having no where else to reach for." (Participant 8)

Nine of the participant also lost their motivation and interest to continue. Towards the end of their career, workouts became repetitive, not enjoyable.

"In the end there, that was pretty much why, why I ended up quitting, because I wasn't having the same fun that I used to have at the gym." (Participant 10)

Environmental Restrictions

Eight participants revealed that geographic limitations and lack of infrastructure were reasons to retire from competitive gymnastics in Newfoundland and Labrador. Participants felt as if they had *"out-grown the program"* (Participant 9), getting little support from coaches and club administration. Not having a coach at all or coaches that could provide them with high quality assistance at a higher level, as well as other restrictions such as training time availability for older athletes and unavailability of same-level competition within the province were all reasons cited. Some participants also quoted coaching behaviours and practices as reasons for retirement.

"I'm not sure exactly when Coach I sort of eased into this whole I don't really know how to describe it, but the way it was, when we,

you know towards the end with Coach 1, it stopped being fun when he eh he was acting that way." (Participant 7)

Financial reasons were cited by two participants as a cause for retirement.

"I realized that I was, again I was being a burden on my family's financial situation so I said I'd give something up, voluntarily quit." (Participant 2)

Other Reasons

Seven participants also indicated that they were 'ready to retire', reaching a stage in their life where they opted to move on to the "*next chapter in their life*" (Participant 4). After being asked why she retired from gymnastics, Participant 4 simply answered, "*it was time*".

Participants' Personal Reflection

The participants of this study reacted both positively and negatively to their decision to retire from gymnastics.

Many participants were uncertain and had a difficult time making their decision to leave competitive gymnastics. Some had regrets and thought that they had retired too early.

"As time progressed like a year after, a year and a half after and like now I regret training, I mean I regret quitting all the time. I wish I would have trained longer." (Participant 8)

Six participants also described an empty feeling after their retirement, having difficulty filling the extra time gained.

"And you start saying, you sit down one evening and you say 'I should be going somewhere now' You know you're saying 'Oh no I'm not going to the gym what am I going to to?' The you got, you got the stress of it, well not the stress it wasn't stress, but you know the thing of 'jes, what am I gonna do now tonight?' You know and you're finding stuff you know and it doesn't take long for those voids to fill in but I think the first couple of months was probably the hardest." (Participant 3)

Most participants also mentioned a feeling of loss. In retrospect, participants longed for lost recognition, travel, friends, identity, as well as the positive physical aspects. While most participants seemed to adjust to their transition more easily, a few experienced more intense emotional reactions being extremely upset and disappointed.

Equally compared to negative reactions, many participants also found themselves very content, having an easy time deciding to withdraw and some

even felt a sense of relief. Many justified this feeling with gained time that they could now spend with other friends, family and other activities such as their studies.

"It gave me more time. That's a big thing" (Participant 3)

Seven out of the eleven participants also made a positive transition into other realms of their gymnastics such as coaching, judging, and life in general.

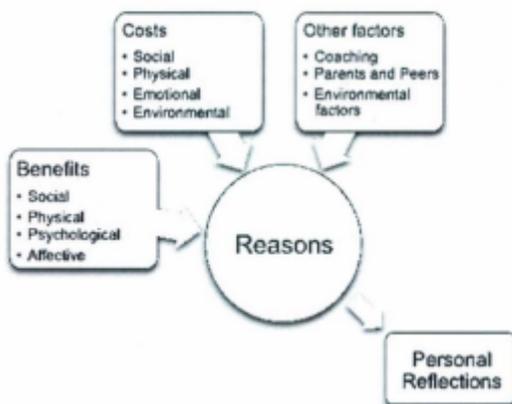


Figure 4.1. Summary overview of the results.

DISCUSSION

The overall motivation for completing this project was to explore, identify, describe, and understand the factors associated with the participants' decisions to withdraw from competitive artistic gymnastics, as well as to investigate whether the reasons for discontinuing involvement vary as a function of gender, level of competition reached, and age at the time of dropping out. Using a phenomenological research methodology, the researcher's attempt to study the participants' perspective on their world is translated into a comprehensive description of the content and structure of the participants' experiences and a rich account of their essential meanings (Kvale, 1996). The present qualitative interview-based study of eleven former high-level competitive gymnasts points to a few predominating factors that likely contributed to their decision to stop participating in competitive artistic gymnastics. The results of this study also provide great insight into what gymnasts believe the costs and benefits of participating in gymnastics are, which is critical in understanding their decisions to discontinue participation.

Specific questions surrounding the gymnast's participation and retirement experiences were addressed, focusing on perceived benefits and costs associated with participation in competitive artistic gymnastics, factors influencing the athletes' decision to continue or terminate participation, the perceived reasons for

retirement, and the participants' personal reflections regarding their decision. The results suggest that the study's participants did indeed engage in a personal assessment of the costs and benefits of being involved in competitive gymnastics, and as they came closer to their retirement, it became more apparent that they sought to maximize positive and minimize negative experiences. The following section will describe each of the major perceived costs and benefits as well as other factors that impacted the participants' decision to ultimately discontinue their involvement in competitive gymnastics.

Social Exchange Theory: Perceived Costs and Benefits

According to the social exchange framework, behaviour is motivated by a desire to maximize positive experiences and minimize negative experiences through social interactions (Schmidt & Stein, 1991). For the participants in this study, the perceived benefits became increasingly less important and thus did no longer offset the perceived costs to a point where it became no longer 'worth' being involved in competitive gymnastics. Perceived costs included social/time constraints, physical costs, negative emotional reactions, as well as environmental forces, and the perceived benefits included social, physical, psychological, and affective benefits. The benefits of participating in competitive gymnastics, weighed against the amount of energy, time, dedication, and other costs that the

athlete was willing to invest, were at first perceived as equitable, but as the participants got older an imbalance was perceived. Alternative activities seemed to draw the participants away from the demanding routine of competitive gymnastics.

Perceived Benefits, Costs, and Other Factors

Social benefits were enjoyed by all eleven participants, which described positive relationships with other gymnasts and coaches, meeting new people at gymnastics meets and training camps, as well as enjoying spending time with their athlete-friends during weekly training sessions or other social activities outside the gym setting. As in the research conducted by Johns, Lindner, & Wolko (1990), when asked about their overall sport experience, many participants reported that they had enjoyed meeting new people and making new friends. They also indicated that most friends they had were gymnasts, and some even described that through spending so much time with their athlete-friends and coaches made them feel as if they had a second family.

Physical benefits tended to include favourable physical characteristics such as overall physical fitness and learning how to lead a healthy lifestyle in the future, which have not been previously mentioned in the literature.

Several psychological benefits surfaced. The participants' responses tended to identify personal qualities gained through their involvement in competitive gymnastics, with the most prevalent being time management skills. Other character traits mentioned were perseverance, discipline, dedication and a good work ethic, as well as self-confidence and mental toughness. Leadership skills, sportsmanship, maturity and independence, and future career objectives were also mentioned by some of the participants. The identified psychological traits closely resemble 'learned competence' and 'autonomy', which were identified by the study participants in Guillet et al. (2002). Many of the characteristics identified above were also said to have transferred to other aspects of the participants' lives after their retirement. Identity development, feeling special, and a feeling of belonging to a team were indicated as external psychological benefits. Most participants explained that they defined themselves or were known by others as 'a gymnast'. Many of the participants also enjoyed representing their club, province or nation, and felt as if they were part of a team. All of the participants also took pleasure in receiving awards and recognition for their success in gymnastics. Smith (1986) also recognized trophies and other concrete awards as benefits, and found that affective benefits such as achieving desired goals, and feelings of competence and mastery were also acknowledged.

The present investigation also named many positive affective outcomes that related to the overall enjoyment of training and competing, travelling and going on trips with the team, learning and developing new skills, as well as improving and performing the skills and routines. Such feelings of satisfaction when learning new skills were also highlighted as a perceived benefit by Johns, Lindner, and Wolko (1990).

Similar to the participants' responses in a study conducted by Johns, Lindner, and Wolko (1990), the time commitment required in order to be a high-level competitive gymnast resulted in various social costs. Participants said that they missed out on many social activities such as school sports and other extra-curricular activities, and weren't able to spend much time with friends and family. Because all of the participants were training between 16 to 20 hours a week, they felt as though they missed out on various opportunities to partake in different activities. Following a very structured and strict daily regime with little or no time for other activities as well as scheduling all other things around the exhaustive training schedule was also cited. Although only highlighted by three participants, not having same age peers to train with was also a factor in deciding to terminate involvement. The perceived social costs identified in the current research project seemed to be more significant compared to the low social constraints found by Guillet, Sarrazin, Carpenter, Trouilloud, and Cury (2002).

All of the participants indicated that injuries and the resulting physical pain were major costs of being involved in competitive gymnastics, supporting the research of both Guillet et al. (2002), and Johns, Lindner, and Wolko (1990). Although some continued to train with injuries, they couldn't perform at the same level of skill that they would have liked to, or training simply became not 'fun' anymore, most likely due to the related pain.

A great deal of emotional distress as a result of training and competing was experienced by all of the participants. They revealed that they were frustrated, had fears about doing specific skills or competing, and felt badly about not being able to perform well. Many participants also found that training became so monotonous to the extent that it became no longer enjoyable. Disappointment associated with not making the team, similar to the cost of being deselected from the team by Guillet, et al. (2002), the inability to perform a skill or perform well at a competition, not progressing, and a lack of success also led to negative emotional reactions. One participant only felt embarrassed when competing out of province because he felt unprepared and not able to compete at the same performance level as other individuals.

The most central external forces that were also identified by Johns, Lindner, and Wolko (1990) were feelings of pressure applied by their parents and coaches, as well as negative coaching practices and behaviour. Coaches were

described as unenthusiastic, impatient, too serious, focused on performance and competition, unsympathetic, spending more time in the office rather than with the athletes in the gym, and imposing impossible training standards that are not developmentally appropriate. Some felt that the coaches were unknowledgeable and even disinclined to perform a regular duty of a caring coach. All participants included financial costs, which were due to training fees, competition registration and travel costs, as well as training and competition attire. Other external costs mentioned by two of the participants were a lack of infrastructure and properly trained coaches, and only one participant described a hazing incident. One perceived cost about being involved in gymnastics that was mentioned by male participants only was the social stigma about the sport itself, where gymnastics was associated with the female gender by their peers and the general public.

However, as Smith (1986) proposed, the decision to continue their involvement in competitive gymnastics was not based entirely on this balance between costs and benefits. Other factors also influenced the participants' decision to continue or to withdraw. The present study identified three external elements that influenced the participants in both positive and negative ways. These factors were coaching, parents and peers, and environmental factors. Especially noteworthy were the environmental factors, which were mostly geographical and infrastructural limitations, such as lack of opportunities to

compete within the province and lack of experienced coaching staff, making it extremely difficult, if not impossible to be a contender to compete at higher levels.

Perceived Reasons for Retirement

Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Stambulova, 1994; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004) no single reason for ceasing participation could be found after conducting the interviews. Like much of the previous literature examining sport withdrawal reasons (e.g., Dixon, 2001; Fry, et al., 1981; Gould, 1987; Petlichkoff, 1982; Robinson & Carron, 1982) the present study found that conflicts of interest and other social restrictions were very consistently cited motives for sport retirement. 'Wanting to try other sports, 'wanting to have a social life, and 'getting to do activities previously missed out on' were frequently encountered responses. Such social restrictions were most often cited as reasons for the participants' retirement in the current research, which were often related to the extreme time commitment that is associated with being a competitive gymnast. Other research (e.g., Butcher, et al., 2002; Dixon, 2001; Du and Tsai, 2007; Gould, et al., 1981; Johns et al., 1990; Petlichkoff, 1982) also concluded that conflicts of interest are the primary reason for sport attrition. Participants shared a desire to be involved in other activities such as other sports and social

activities including spending more time with friends and family, as well as felt as if they missed out on things such as hanging out with friends, going to parties and the ability to date. The time-consuming and demanding training schedule of competitive gymnastics seems to be an important factor driving athletes away, which was also supported by Koukouris (1991, 1994). In support of the research conducted by Gustafsson et al. (2008), the participants of the present research also described themselves as 24-hour athletes, describing how their whole life was organized around gymnastics with little or no time for other activities. Only a small number of participants retired because their athlete-friends had already left the sport and were thus forced to train with individuals much younger than them. According to Côté (2004) and Rowland (1998), the hours of training and commitment required for achievement in competitive gymnastics have been connected to missed social opportunities and could interfere with the normal childhood processes of social development.

Injury plays an important role in deciding to withdraw from sport.

Supported by previous research (e.g., DuRant et al., 1991; Gould et al. 1982; Johns et al., 1990; Klint & Weiss, 1986), injury also played an important role in the participants' decision to withdraw from competitive gymnastics. As described in the research by Koukouris (1994), even though the injuries did not lead directly to sport termination, it was associated with either a decrease in performance, or an

inability to continue to train or compete at a certain level or performance. Injuries and pain made it difficult to perform skills and the participants were thus not progressing any further. Chronic physical injury prevented some participants from training or competing, forcing them to constantly tape or brace their injured areas or having to train through physical pain. For these participants, the cost of physical pain became too high to continue.

Other personal limitations also included not getting new or improving one's skills and not progressing any further for other reasons, which were also intrinsic reasons for sport withdrawal in the studies conducted by Petlichkoff (1992) as well as Kadlcik and Flemr (2008). It is important to note that in this current study, the participants felt as though they had reached a peak in their career, and thus opted to retire. Almost all of the participants had set out to qualify to compete at Canada Games or the National Championships, and many retired because they either did not achieve this goal, or had already done so and were no longer age-eligible to compete at the next Canada Games. There seemed to be an underlying belief that once the participants competed at Canada Games, there was nothing further for them to work towards. The data showed that the participants believed that their athletic ability was not sufficient for competing at the higher level or they were not as good as they wanted to be.

Although the main reason for dropping out of sport was a loss of interest

and lack of fun in numerous studies (i.e., Evans, 2008; Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996; Roberts & McKelvain, 1987), Lindner et al., (1991) suggested that 'having other interests' and 'lack of fun' are merely superficial reasons and studies should focus instead on why individuals have other interests, and why the activity is no longer fun. The results of the present study provided further insight into what aspects of the competitive sport experience are not enjoyable. Training activities that became repetitive and thus no longer fun resulted in a loss of motivation. This loss of interest because training was no longer enjoyable seemed to be related to various other factors such as: some of the athlete-friends were no longer training; the coaching was too intense and other ill-advised behaviours of the coach; training became too hard due to physical pain; and not progressing, which led to frustrating and boredom. In one case, gymnastics became so unpleasant that it was compared to a chore.

Only one participant identified 'age' as a reason for terminating their involvement in competitive gymnastics, however contrary to previous research (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), this was not due to a decline in performance due to advancing age or physical changes that accompany puberty making it more difficult to execute skills that were previously a matter of routine.

Although financial aspects were found to play a role in sport withdrawal in some studies (i.e., Chow, 2001; Du and Tsai, 2007; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Kerr &

Dacyshyn, 2000), only two participants felt that financial reasons had a real impact on their decision to withdraw. Because all of the participants retired during high school or post-secondary studies, they still relied on their parents for financial support, and thus could also not provide much insight into their families' financial situation. It is also very likely that many families from Newfoundland and Labrador that have children involved in gymnastics may be from a higher socioeconomic background.

Coaches' conduct was one of the more often acknowledged reasons for retirement, which is also supported in existing literature (i.e., Evans, 2008; Molinero et al., 2006; Seye & Salmela, 1987; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). If the athlete and coach have a poor relationship, it could influence the athlete to seek out a more satisfying environment, and they might retire. Coaches were described as being too serious and too competitive, overly driven by success and results instead of the overall enjoyment of participating in gymnastics. Their inconsiderate behaviours made gymnastics no longer fun. Some coaches were described by numerous participants as being uninvolved and disinterested, spending more time in the office than actually spending time coaching on the floor, and even leaving athletes unattended for a considerable length of time. Other coaching behaviours associated with the participants' decision to retire

included picking favourites and differences between the athlete's and the coach's vision and personality.

Inadequate sport facilities and services can also prevent athletes from reaching their full potential, which can in turn influence them in their decisions to withdraw from sport, which according to Koukouris (1994) has been given little recognition in the current literature. A lack of infrastructure and limitations due to the participants' geographic location were also recognized as potential reasons for retirement. Opportunities to train more often to be able to match training hours of athletes from other provinces, as well as opportunities for older athletes to schedule training around their work or post-secondary studies seem to be required. Such assistance was not made available to the participants, making it too difficult to continue with their athletic career. There is a lack of high-level, technically experienced, full-time coaches in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Also associated with the participants' geographic location was the lack of opportunities to compete against other high level gymnasts in Newfoundland and Labrador, which was also a contributing factor to withdraw from competitive gymnastics. The participants were forced to travel outside the province, which is not only costly, but further contributed to the challenge of juggling work or school with their gymnastics endeavours. Overall, an overwhelming perception that it is

very difficult to be a high level gymnast in Newfoundland and Labrador was depicted in many of the transcripts.

Statements such as 'I was ready to be done', 'a stage in my life had finished and I was ready to move on to the next', and 'I wanted to move on to something new' are all evidence that for some participants, retirement was inevitable even in their minds. Some of the participants simply thought that it was simply time to retire, and the athletes were ready for a new direction in life.

The current study did not reveal any difference with regard to age, level of commitment, or gender.

Recommendations

Practical Implications

With an increased understanding in the reasons for athletic retirement, sport leaders (e.g., coaches, club administrators and provincial sport governing bodies) can take relevant measures to retain capable athletes. The results of this study have many practical implications, indicating that when major participation motives or psychological needs such as developing skills or making friends are not achieved, the costs of involvement exceed the benefits, resulting in sport termination. If sport leaders begin to consider some of the implications of this study and other current research, we may begin to see athletes stay involved in

competitive gymnastics beyond their adolescent years.

Coaches, administrators and other key players in the athletes' support system should maximize the perceived benefits and minimize the perceived costs to participating in competitive artistic gymnastics described in the previous sections.

Emphasising the social aspects of sport participation such as fostering positive relationships with other gymnasts and coaches, organizing team activities outside the gym setting, and providing the opportunity to meet new people are only some of the things that sport leaders could do to improve the athletes' overall enjoyment. Coaches and parents should be aware of and help facilitate healthy social networks for adolescent and young adult athletes, given that peers play an increasingly important role as children move into adolescence. The results of this study highlight how having a solid group of gymnastics friends, and a supporting group of school or non-gymnastics peers appears critical for continued involvement in competitive gymnastics during adolescence. Allowing athletes to train with other same age peers, even though they might not be at the same level, could also prove to be favourable in keeping older athletes involved longer.

Making the athletes aware of, and directing the attention to the physical and psychological benefits to be gained instead of the technical aspects and skills, could also lead to an increased sense of satisfaction. The results also suggest that

adopting a more team-sport oriented atmosphere and fostering cohesiveness within the closely-knit training group may also prove to be helpful in maximizing the perceived benefits of participation.

Incorporating appropriate and realistic goal setting strategies will also allow athletes to develop skills more gradually, and allowing them to feel successful at each of the steps toward the larger goal. Burton's (1984) suggestion that systematic, long-term goal-setting programs can be successful in developing performance-oriented athletes and in turn, to raise their perceived ability by learning to use personal performance rather than social comparison standards for evaluating success.

It also seems that coaches and other sport leaders alike tend to emphasize Canada Games as being the peak to reach for, often resulting in retirement simply because there is 'nothing further to train for'. Coaches need to identify other competitions or events for athletes to strive towards once the athletes are no longer eligible to attend Canada Games.

It is imperative the time commitment required by the coaches is carefully selected with each individual athlete's personal input. To avoid a conflict of interest with other activities, especially older athletes need to be given the opportunity to make decisions with regard to the amount of training hours, as well as the scheduling of the training sessions. For athletes in secondary and post-

secondary education, it could also be very beneficial to have a more flexible training schedule (e.g., offering training times in the morning, during the day, non-fixed schedule) to ensure that all athletes have ample opportunities to engage in social and other activities. Athletes should be encouraged to participate in a diversity of sporting and other activities during childhood, and be given opportunities to continue involvement in a few activities during adolescence. Wiersma (2000) even suggested that sport organizations may soon need to restrict hours of training based on age, to facilitate athletes' overall healthy development. One creative way of supporting other activity involvement was demonstrated by coaches in a recent study of high level adolescent track and field athletes, where coaches logged all of the athletes' sport involvement, rather than simply tracking attendance for their track and field practices (MacPhail and Kirk, 2006).

Although injuries can sometimes be an inevitable part of sport participation, training activities should be continued with caution. Training with injuries and pain will likely turn the athlete away from the sport. Thus, coaches should use regular rehabilitation and prevention strategies to minimize the risk or reoccurrence of injuries.

Clubs and provincial governing bodies should take special interest in monitoring poor and non athlete-centred coaching practices, which too often go unnoticed. An attempt to hire full-time high-level coaches with proper training

beyond simple coaching certification, such as a degree in sport science or education could also be beneficial. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of coaches and parents to keep their expectations realistic. De Knop et al. (1994) suggested that while it is natural for coaches and parents to have expectations for their children, these expectations should not be too high or inflexible, and should be for the purpose of achieving goals set by the athletes themselves, and not the coaches or other sport leaders. Coaches should also focus on the physically and psychosocially developing individual rather than simply on the performing athlete. As Horn et al. (2001) suggest, coaches must make an effort to interact frequently with all their athletes in order to learn about their perceptions, opinions, and attitudes regarding their sport involvement.

While the competitive gymnastics programs seem to be moving toward institutionalization, elitism, and early specialization (De Knop et al., 1996), the findings of the present study would support a more developmental approach as outlined in the research conducted by Côté and Fraser-Thomas (2007).

Finally, financial support for the highest-level athletes in the province needs to be increased to support their goals to perform on the National stage. Without the support of the clubs and the provincial governing bodies, the athletes are left to their own devices and will eventually have to give up on their goals.

In sum, the findings of this study significantly extend our understanding of

the factors that influence an athlete's decision to continue or terminate their participation in competitive gymnastics. The findings offer considerable implications for coaches, administrators, and sport organizations. As researchers continue to gain understanding of the factors contributing to positive and negative outcomes of sport involvement, we urge that sport organisations, coaches, and other sport leaders stay abreast of current research, and apply findings to sport programs. While being involved in competitive gymnastics has the potential to play a significant role in contributing to an individual's positive development, it is necessary to recognise that such development through sport is not guaranteed, but rather depends on many factors that must be considered when planning and designing sport programs for children, adolescents, and adults alike.

Table 5.1

Summary of Recommendations for Coaches, Administrators, and Sport Governing Bodies

Emphasize the social aspects of sport participation.

Adopt a more team-sport oriented atmosphere.

Implement systematic, long-term goal-setting programs.

Identify other competitions or events for athletes to strive towards once they are no longer eligible to attend Canada Games.

Avoid a conflict of interest with other activities by allowing athletes to make decisions about the amount and scheduling of training hours.

Provide more flexible practice schedules.

Provide academic credits for secondary students' involvement in high level sport.

Monitor and hold coaches accountable for poor and non athlete-centred behaviours and coaching practices.

Establish full-time coaches with proper training beyond simple coaching certification, such as a degree in sport science or education.

Increase financial support for older higher-level athletes.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

The validity of the present study is limited, as results directly apply only to the participants studied. The depth of the data obtained in interviews with participants however may contribute to a better understanding of this partly unexplored phenomenon. In addition to the small sample size of the present study, the data gathered depends on retrospective recollection. There is some potential for limitations in the information given. The chance for error may have been lessened somewhat, due to the information being obtained through in-depth interviews. Another factor that may influence the qualitative data is participants' hesitancy to make personal experiences public in the data-collection process. However, the researcher tried to ease concerns prior to and during the interview process, particularly regarding confidentiality.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Letter to Gymnastics Clubs and Organizations

Lukas Stritt
71 Hayward Avenue
St. John's, NL
A1C 3W3

Date

Dear Name of Organization/Club,

I am a graduate student at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador and I am currently working on my thesis in partial requirements for my master's degree in physical education. I am researching the withdrawal reasons of former competitive national level artistic gymnasts from Newfoundland, and would like to ask you for your assistance with the recruitment of participants for this study.

I have enclosed a copy of the recruitment letter, which may be distributed to any potential participants that you may be aware of. Any individuals that are interested in participating can then contact me directly. I have also included the inclusion criteria for the study.

I would also like to ask you if you to provide me with the contact information of any potential participants that you might be aware of.

Thank you for your assistance with the participant recruitment for my research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. I can be reached by phone at (709) 682-9745 or by email at lstritt@mun.ca.

Sincerely,

Lukas Stritt, B.P.E. (Hons), M.P.E. Candidate

Inclusion Criteria to Accompany Letter to Organizations/Clubs

Participants of the study:

- must be retired national level competitive artistic gymnast from Newfoundland that took part in a highly specialized artistic gymnastics training program for more than 12 hours per week, and who, in the past, had competed at the national level (e.g., Canadian Championships, Canada Games, Eastern and/or Atlantic Canadian Championships).
- shall be retired from competitive artistic gymnastics for no more than 10 years.
- must be at least 19 years of age at the present time
- must be able to read and verbally communicate in English
- must be able to tolerate two interviews that are 45-60 minutes in duration.

Appendix B – Letter to Participants

Lukas Stritt
71 Hayward Avenue
St. John's, NL
A1C 3W3

Date

Dear Name,

I am a graduate student at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador and I am working on my thesis in completion of my master's degree in physical education. I am doing research for my thesis on the retirement reasons of former national level artistic gymnasts from Newfoundland.

I am looking for retired national level competitive artistic gymnast from Newfoundland that would be willing to have me interview them twice over a period of 2 weeks. Each interview would last approximately 45 minutes to an hour and would take place in your home, work, or any other place of mutual agreement at a time that is convenient for you.

Participants of this study should be:

- retired national level competitive artistic gymnasts from Newfoundland that took part in a highly specialized artistic gymnastics training program for more than 12 hours per week, and who, in the past, had competed at the national level (e.g., Canadian Championships, Canada Games, Eastern and/or Atlantic Canadian Championships).
- retired from competitive artistic gymnastics for no more than 10 years.
- at least 19 years of age at the present time
- able to read and verbally communicate in English
- able to tolerate two interviews that are 45-60 minutes in duration.

If you are interested in participating or would like to learn more about this study, please feel free to contact me. I can be reached by phone at (709) 682-9745 or by email at l.stritt@mun.ca.

Thank you for your consideration.
Sincerely,

Lukas Stritt

Appendix C – Interview Guide

Section 1: Demographic Information

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____ Email: _____

Section 2: Personal Information

-Can you tell me a little bit about yourself.

-How old are you? Birth date: _____

-Do you work?

-Do you go to school?

Section 3: Life as a gymnast

-Can you tell me about your sport career?

-Describe what your life was like as a competitive gymnast?

-How old were you when you started gymnastics?

-How old were you when you began your competitive career?

-What got you into gymnastics to begin with?

-How many years were you in gymnastics?

-How many of those years were you involved in competitive gymnastics?

-What was your highest competitive level? How long did you compete at that level?

-What (if any) awards have you won related to gymnastics?

-How many hours did you train per week?

- Did the hours ever change?
- Which club(s) did you train with?
- Did anyone else in your family ever participate in gymnastics?
- How did you get to and from practices?
- What was the most important thing that has kept you involved in gymnastics all these years?
- What were your major goals as a gymnast?
- What are your most memorable moments (successes/failures) as a gymnast?
- Where did your support system come from? (what, when, where, how, why)
- What types of social activities did you participate in as gymnast? (extra-curricular activities, school sports, music, hobbies, etc.)
- How did competitive training affect you emotionally? (feelings before, during, after training, feelings about training)
- What were the physical consequences of training? (strength, flexibility, injuries, muscles soreness, health, etc.)
- How did competitive gymnastics affect you and your family financially?
- What kind of time commitment is necessary to be a competitive gymnast at the national level?
- Do you think being a competitive gymnast affected who you are as a person? If yes, can you describe in what ways?
- When did you retire from gymnastics?

Section 4: Cost and Benefits

- What aspects of being involved in competitive gymnastics were good?
- What aspects of being involved in competitive gymnastics were not so good?

- What, if anything, do you think you gained as a person from your participation in competitive gymnastics?
- What, if anything, do you think you lost as a person because of your participation in competitive gymnastics?
- What did you find most enjoyable about being a competitive gymnast?
- What did you find least enjoyable about being a competitive gymnast?

Section 5: Withdrawal from Competitive Gymnastics

- Tell me about your experience of deciding to retire from competitive gymnastics.
- Why did you retire from competitive gymnastics?
- What were the major/minor reasons for retiring?
- Was it an easy or difficult decision to retire?
- Did you retire voluntarily or involuntary? Explain.
- What made you the most upset about your retirement?
- What made you happy?
- How did you feel at the time of retirement?
- Did you have any injuries at the time of retirement?
- Were you under any pressures to retire? If yes, from who?
- If it stopped being fun, can you describe in what ways it changed for you?
- How has retiring from competitive gymnastics changed your life?
- What did you do with the extra time you had?
- How has your social life changed since you retired from gymnastics?
- Have you noticed any physical changes since retirement?
- Have you noticed any emotional changes since retirement?
- Have you (or your family) noticed any financial changes since retirement?
- What other activities have you participated in since retiring?

- Do you have any regrets about retiring?
- Do you feel it was a good or bad decision to retire? (pros and cons)
- Is there anything else of importance that you would like to share that we have not touched upon during this conversation? To really understand your experiences, what is the most important thing you feel I should focus on?
- Did you think of anything else that you would like to add in regards to any of the topics we talked about? E.g. did you leave anything out, do you have stronger (or less strong) feelings about anything now that you've had a chance to think it over?

Section 6: General Probes and Specifying Questions

At various times during the interviews the following probes will be used when deemed appropriate and necessary to elicit a more detailed and in-depth description of the co-researcher's experiences:

- Tell me more about that.
- Could you say something more about that?
- Can you give me a more detailed description of that?
- What was it like for you to experience that?
- How did your thoughts and feelings about that change over time?
- Explain how that impacted you.
- What happened exactly?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- What were the reactions of others?
- Do you have further examples of this?
- What did you think then?
- What did you do then?
- Can you say more about that?

Appendix D - Consent Form

Title: *Reasons of former gymnasts from Newfoundland to withdraw from national level competitive artistic gymnastics*

Researcher(s): *Lukas Stritt, M.P.E. Candidate, School of Human Kinetics and Recreation, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, Phone: 682-9745, Email: Lstritt@mun.ca. Supervisor: Dr. L. Rohr, School of Human Kinetics and Recreation, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, Room: PE2005, Phone: 737-6202, Email: lerohr@mun.ca*

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled "*Reasons of former gymnasts from Newfoundland to withdraw from national level competitive artistic gymnastics.*"

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any other information given to you by the researcher.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in the research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Introduction:

This study is conducted as part of the requirement for completion of a Master of Physical Education degree from the School of Human Kinetics and Recreation at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The present study will investigate the withdrawal of athletes from artistic gymnastics using in-depth interviews.

Purpose of study:

The purpose of the present study is to explore, identify, describe, and understand the factors associated with athletes' decisions to withdraw from the sport of competitive artistic gymnastics in Newfoundland and Labrador.

What you will do in this study:

You will partake in two in-depth interviews, which will be audio-taped. The interviews will be arranged at your convenience and will take place at a site that is mutually agreed upon by yourself and the researcher.

Length of time:

Each interview will last between 45-60 minutes, and will be conducted within a two-week period.

Possible Benefits:

There are no benefits to you by taking part in the research. However the results of this investigation may provide coaches, administrators, clubs, and the provincial governing body with recommendations on how to adapt their programs and strategies to the needs of the athletes.

Possible Risks:

There are no risks to you by taking part in the research, although in some cases it is possible that emotional stress may result from the interviews. If this occurs, the interviews will be suspended, postponed or terminated.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

The researcher will make the final report available to you. Your responses to the interview will be anonymous and the information will be kept confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym to be used in labelling all audiotapes and transcripts.

Recording of Data:

All interviews will be recorded to audio-tapes.

Reporting of Results:

The data from this research project will be published and presented as a master's thesis and a journal article; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although I will report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information will be removed from my report.

Storage of Data:

When not in use, all materials relating to the research will be stored in a locked drawer at the School of Human Kinetics and Recreation of Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, and only my supervisor and myself have access to the audio-tapes and the interview transcripts. The materials will be stored as such for 5 years, after which time the data is no longer required and will be appropriately destroyed. If the data are anonymous, this statement may be omitted.

Questions:

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact:

Lukas Stritt – Phone: 682-9745; Email: Lstritt@mun.ca or

Dr. Linda Rohr (Supervisor) – Phone: 737-6202; Email: lrohr@mun.ca

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icchr@mun.ca or by telephone at 737-8368.

Consent:

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research
- You have been able to ask questions about this study
- You are satisfied with the answers to all of your questions
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights, and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form for your records.

Your Signature:

I have read and understood the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records."

Signature of participant

Date

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of investigator

Date

Telephone number: _____

E-mail address: _____

