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Experiences of the Pre and Post Retirement Period of Female Elite Artistic Gymnasts:

An Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

This study explored retirement experiences of eight, female, former elite artistic gymnasts. Particular attention was afforded to coping strategies employed and dynamics of gymnast's relationships with significant members of their social support network, in light of identity impact, across the retirement transition period. Retrospective, semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcripts were analysed through content analysis, and represented via pen profiles. Pre-retirement planning emerged as fundamental to the quality of the retirement transition. Keeping in contact with sport was the most frequently cited coping strategy. Social support networks adjusted pre- to post-retirement, identifying parents and partners as the consistent members of these networks across the transition. Findings provide formative recommendations to enhance the post-career education within current lifestyle management programmes, and for the design of a transitional support programme for gymnasts. The study findings may be of relevance for policy and practice in elite sport transitions more generally.

*Keywords:* retirement, social support network, elite gymnasts, coping, identity

Experiences of the Pre and Post Retirement Period of Female Elite Artistic Gymnasts:

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Elite artistic gymnastics requires dedication and internalisation of the sport ethic at an extremely young age (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) often causing gymnasts' role of 'athlete' to become particularly salient to their identity (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Retirement from competitive sport is one of the only inevitabilities elite athletes face (Lavallee, 2005) and demands a degree of adjustment and initiates substantial changes in priorities, interests and goals. Gymnasts are vulnerable to unique challenges associated with career termination due to their age, their limited power and control within the coach-gymnast relationship, and discouragement of role experimentation enforced by coaches attempting to minimise performance distractions (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Reiteration of a one-dimensional self-concept (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) can impact upon the development and maintenance of social support systems surrounding gymnasts, often restricting them to that of the sport setting only. Upon retirement, a significant re-evaluation of interpersonal relationships is required. Support networks have been identified as influential coping mechanisms for helping athletes stabilise their identities post-retirement (Park, Tod & Lavallee, 2012). Currently, within the literature, there appears to be insufficient examination of the dynamics and temporal modifications to 'significant members' of artistic gymnasts social support networks across the pre- to post-retirement transition process.

Retirement transitions are idiosyncratic and depend upon the individual's perception of the situation and available resources. Some athletes experience stress-free disengagement from sport and as Coakley (1983) highlighted, retirement may comprise positive dimensions, such as a chance for social rebirth, opportunity to explore new roles, and potential for growth and development. In contrast, Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavallee (2004) review suggested many athletes are vulnerable to various psychological and emotional adjustment difficulties

such as: depression, identity crises, eating disorders, decreased self-confidence, social isolation, and alcohol/substance abuse. Whilst the authors, by virtue of their review, offered no resultant explanation as to these difficulties, they may relate to the sudden loss of something meaningful to athletes that was consuming for the majority of their lives and also a process that is inevitable for every athlete. This therefore emphasises the immediacy and importance of this topic and highlighting the need for future exploration.

When attempting to manage career termination, the quality of an athlete's adaptation to the process of retirement will be influenced by one's coping resources (Lavalley, 2007). Coping is a dynamic process and compels an integration of multiple mechanisms to enable effective and fluent transitions (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004). Previous research highlights continuation of recreational exercise (e.g., Stambulova, Stephan & Jäphag, 2007; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot & Delignières, 2003); accepting the reality of retirement (e.g., Park et al., 2012); new life focus (e.g., Richardson, 2009; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993); avoidance/distraction techniques (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004); gradual withdrawal and finding a meaningful replacement for sport (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007) as effective methods for managing retirement transitions. Research with former elite athletes (Gilmore, 2008; Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008) has revealed the most prevalent strategy of coping with retirement was that of 'keeping in touch with sport', or remaining involved via a new role. Other elite athletes employed mental disengagement strategies (Park et al., 2012) and isolated themselves from the sport world when forced to terminate their careers (Gilmore, 2008). The characteristics of the transition may, influence the type of coping strategies employed, reflecting the idiosyncratic nature of the complex interaction of personal and situational factors representative of career termination (McPherson, 1984).

Pre-retirement planning is valuable to transition-related coping by elite athletes (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Lally, 2007; Lavalley & Andersen, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2007).

Lally (2007) tracked changes in identity for Canadian student-athletes at time points pre- to one-year post-retirement. Athletes who proactively discussed expectations and preparations for retirement with retired former teammates, and who consciously decreased athletic identity in preparation for sport disengagement, experienced smooth, more straightforward transitions. The only athletes to describe difficulties during retirement reportedly failed to prepare for the loss of their athletic role. Similar evidence was reported by Gilmore (2008) whereby perceived 'easier transitions' could be attributed to intentional pre-emptive development of post-sport careers and futures away from sport, and athletes who did not generate similar plans faced a difficult period of distress and alternative role exploration. Despite the certainty of athletic retirement, a recurrent theme in the literature relates to resistance of athletes, and discouragement from coaches, to anticipate, plan for and develop post-sport career options before retirement. Elite sport structure clearly demands excessive time and energy engagement, leaving athletes with minimal time to plan outside of sport (Lavalley, 2007). Athletes can display low levels of awareness of the need for pre-retirement planning whilst still active in sport (Park et al., 2012). Coaches perceive such planning is distractive and thus they avoid broaching the subject of retirement with their athletes (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

Existing literature reports the importance of social support in coping with adjustment related to career termination (e.g., Lavalley, Gordon, & Grove, 1997; Park et al., 2012; Richardson, 2009; Stephan et al., 2003). Family members and friends are highlighted as positive facilitators to the transition (e.g., Gilmore, 2008; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008), because they provide athletes with someone who will listen, show compassion, and distract them if needed (Richardson, 2009). Kadlcik and Flemr (2008) revealed parents as most facilitative to their athlete-children, whereby relationships became closer and some offered employment within the family to those who possessed inadequate occupational experience. In

contrast, elite Australian Rules footballers who experienced negative career terminations reported their family and friends did not truly understand what they were going through (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999) thus they found it difficult to turn to them for support (Gilmore, 2008). Receiving support from, and confiding in, someone who can empathise with the complexity and struggle that retirement transitions have potential to create is important (Lavalley et al., 1997). Athletes' partners/spouses have also ranked highly in support provision (Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) contributing to the smoothness of the retirement transition through facilitating athletes with finding a new focus (Gilmore, 2008).

Within-sport members of the support networks have displayed contrasting results relating to their presence and effectiveness in supporting career termination. Athletes have reported sourcing support from coaches due to having good, close relationships (e.g., Park et al., 2012; Richardson, 2009), and teammates (present and former) who remain connected to their sport social circle, due to shared understanding for the meaning attached to the retirement transition, or experience and familiarity with the same process. In contrast, others have reported losing contact with the majority of significant members from their active sport-career support networks, such as coaches and teammates receiving limited interaction and little support from them (Lally, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) resulting in prolonged and difficult transitions. Although the negative effects of losing within-sport relationships are clear for transitional athletes, adjustment to the retirement process has been facilitated for those who prioritised the formation of new friendships and expanded their social circles (Gilmore, 2008; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008).

Adding to the influence of within-sport support, research has documented athletes' collective expression of a lack of institutional support following disengagement from sport. Sports clubs left deselected athletes feeling abandoned, isolated, and forgotten (e.g., Brown &

Potrac, 2009). Gymnasts in a study by Warriner and Lavallee (2008) distinguished between complete support during their careers, to feeling discarded of with a lack of support or direction from their institution upon cessation of their sport involvement. Gilmore (2008) revealed comparable findings relating to the absence of governing bodies post-retirement, and athletes displayed upset at the 'lack of thanks' and acknowledgement they received for their contribution to the sport. Impact from the loss of within-sport members from athletes' social support networks is thought to relate to the extent of their identification with the athletic role. Close relationships formed with sport-related others are often lost, or notably strained, upon sport disengagement (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). This highlights the importance of a diverse range of interpersonal relationships for the gymnast beyond the sport setting whilst training to prevent the prospect of them feeling socially inhibited and avoid identity confusion upon retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), especially as decreased identification with the athlete role is not inevitably detrimental to sport performance (Lally, 2007).

Awareness of process and impact of athletic career termination has increased in recent years in the UK through the introduction of Performance Lifestyle Advisors. For British Gymnastics these personnel have been formally delivering services from April 2009. At present, however, there remains only anecdotal evaluation of provision for support of athletic disengagement for elite gymnasts in the United Kingdom. It is important to explore retirement experiences of recent elite gymnasts to inform guidance for agencies who support the transition process. Sport agency support typically ends a few months post retirement due to funding with general health and wellbeing support at that point transferring back to that of primary care services. Other early specialization sports such as football have similarly emphasised the need for the development of appropriate intervention programmes allowing athletes to acquire skills required to cope with future events, anticipate future transitions, and



identify transferable skills applicable outside the sport domain (Brown & Potrac, 2009). The purpose of the present research aims to explore the temporal transformation of the disengagement process for recently retired gymnasts, with reference to prevalent coping strategies employed and significant influential relationships within surrounding social support networks. The study aims to provide ideas to inform future lifestyle management programs, post-career preparation and career termination support.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were eight former elite level female gymnasts who were all previous members of the British Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) World Class Performance Programme. Respondents were between 18 to 25 years of age ( $M = 21.6$ ,  $SD = 2.4$ ), had retired from gymnastics between the ages of 18 to 21 years ( $M = 18.9$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ), and had been retired between four months and five years ( $M = 2.8$  yrs,  $SD = 1.6$ ). Participants had an average athletic career length of 13.3 years ( $SD = 1.5$ ) and trained for an average of 31.9 hours ( $SD = 2.7$ ) per week at the peak of their career. Inclusion criteria were set to allow for exploration of elite sport disengagement following significant involvement and performance at the highest level. Criteria for inclusion was thus that participants must have been members of the Great Britain artistic national senior squad for a minimum of 18 months during their career, have competed internationally on one or more occasion, and have retired from senior ranks no earlier than the last Olympic cycle (Beijing 2008) to minimise recall bias. All participants had competed internationally; one gymnast competed at the Olympics, others at World Championships, Junior/Senior European Championships, Commonwealth and Commonwealth Youth Games, and Australian or European Youth Olympic Festivals.

### **Procedures**

Before contacting participants, ethical approval was obtained from a University Research Ethics Committee. 18 gymnasts who self-reported their retirement were contacted via British Gymnastics (BG), the National Governing Body for gymnastics in the UK, by telephone and email. These participants were first purposely selected (Berg, 2009) from the BG database as matching selection criteria and consent was gained, from six individuals, to send their details to the principal researcher, with further participants recruited via snowball sampling techniques (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife, 1995). Eight participants were recruited. Upon confirmation of participation, participants completed a consent form, which placed emphasis on voluntary involvement, highlighted the right to withdraw from the study, and assured confidentiality and anonymity of all data to be collected.

**Interview.** For the purposes of this study, a qualitative approach was adopted, employing retrospective, semi-structured interviews aligned with qualitative design and procedures set out previously (see Clowes & Knowles, 2013, p31-32). Before the interview, participants were required to complete a sociogram highlighting person/s they had significant relationships with whilst training (pre-retirement period). This sociogram was used to assist the structure of part of the interview and a means of discussing relevant relationships for that period. Mutually convenient times were arranged to conduct each one-to-one interview in locations, with only interviewer and participant present. Interviews lasted between 35 and 105 minutes ( $M = 58.5$ ) dependent on detail of participants' responses. All interviews were audio recorded using a Dictaphone (OLYMPUS, WS-321 M, China), and were transcribed verbatim, into 134 pages of text, Arial size 12 font. Due to the geographical location of participants, some interviews were conducted via FaceTime<sup>®</sup>/ Skype<sup>™</sup>/telephone, for the purpose of convenience, and to maximise participation. Although face-to-face interviews were the preferred method, recent studies have demonstrated that self-disclosure and

responses via telephone, acquire data equivalent to that acquired face-to-face (e.g., Warriner & Lavalley, 2008).

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was developed based on previous studies with ex-gymnasts and piloted with a non-study participant with similar demographics and retirement experience. The interview had a phased structure with the opening phase which employed 'straightforward' rapport building questions to create a frame of reference for subsequent retirement-based questions and comparable to those of Lavalley and Robinson (2007) such as "Tell me about what a typical week was like as an elite gymnast". The core of the interview was split into two sections. Content of the initial section was influenced previous work by Pummel, Harwood and Lavalley (2008) and Warriner and Lavalley (2008) to expand upon general retirement experiences. A temporal structure was adopted to gather information about the nature of retirement and surrounding feelings at time-points across the transition. The latter section focused on psychosocial aspects of relationship dynamics and social support networks (family, peers, coaches, organisations etc.) during training and across retirement. Final questions focused on summarising participants' retirement, about their view of themselves now, whether their retirement transition was complete, and factors they believed to be beneficial in assisting the retirement process.

The researcher was a 22-year-old female former elite gymnast who had competed at international level and had rapport with participants, having trained with them previously. This rapport was significant because this relationship may have influenced the depth and honesty of answers from participants, and may also have induced bias as the researcher had been through the retirement process herself. Control for the potential influence of bias was evident through interview guide content, requisite training and analysis of the pilot interview by the supervisor.

### **Data Analysis**

To condense and classify textual information into relevant and more manageable categories, data were systematically explored through content analysis and analysed using deductive and inductive processes of reasoning (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Content analysis is designed to look for inductive/deductive themes from the interviews and thus is appreciative of both the individual nature of the transition experiences and commonalities that may exist (and are thus represented in frequency on the profiles). Content analysis outcomes represented as pen profiles provide an efficient representation of these processes. In the deductive phase, pre-existing categories (influenced by research questions, content of interview guide, and existing literature) were used to organise quotes, whilst in the inductive phase, novel themes and dimensions were freely generated from interview transcripts (Patton, 2002). Raw data units, consisting of participants' direct quotations, were classified into sub-themes, higher-order themes, and general dimensions. Deductive analysis was re-applied by re-reading transcripts, ensuring all identified categories were present in the data, thus providing a true representation of participant perceptions. A manual pen profile technique was used to represent analysis outcomes of data sets, via diagrams of multiple key emergent themes. Pen profiles were expanded with verbatim quotations abstracted directly from transcripts. Pen profiling has been used to represent analysis of data sets in the exercise domain such as focus groups (Ridgers, Knowles & Sayers, 2012) and interviews (Mackintosh et al., 2011) and more recently in sport (Clowes & Knowles, 2013; Briegel-Jones, Knowles, Eubank, Giannoulatos & Elliot, 2013). Further, these methodological processes were based on the study framework of Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000).

Multiple steps were taken to enhance trustworthiness of data and thus, establish methodological rigour. Credibility and transferability were demonstrated through verbatim transcription of data; member checks, whereby participants reviewed their transcripts and

conceptualisations, and were offered the opportunity to validate the accuracy and representativeness of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994); and triangulation of interpretations with an experienced qualitative researcher was demonstrated through comparison of pen profiles with verbatim citations and triangular consensus methods (Patton, 2002). All eight participants confirmed their transcripts and one participant made additional comments regarding support provided by coaches and organisations, and importance of strong relationships away from gymnastics.

### **Results**

Most participants revealed multiple factors influenced their retirement decision by means of planning to voluntarily terminate their careers following a major event (n=6) in pursuit of time for other things (n=5) or their education (n=3). Fitness/age related stagnation (n=2), loss of enjoyment (n=2) and career satisfaction (n=2) were revealed as other contributors to the voluntary retirement decision-making process. Two participants retired involuntarily because of serious/prolonged injury. All participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss experiences, with some reporting reflecting on their retirement in such detail was therapeutic.

### **Coping Strategies**

Figure 1 represents ways or activities perceived by the participants to assist in coping with the transitional process. Six higher order themes emerged, with the highest number of raw data units (22) being 'keeping in touch with sport'. All eight participants reported the sub-theme 'staying in contact with sport-related friends' as beneficial to the transition. Gradual disengagement (n=5), transferring to alternative roles within the sport (n=4), and casual exercise/sport involvement (n=4) were also highlighted. One gymnast also reported becoming a gymnastics fan to compensate for her lack of physical involvement.

Other high frequency themes were building new relationships (n=6) and having someone to talk to (n=5) within the 'seeking social support' category (15), having a plan

(n=6) and having something of interest to transfer into (coaching n=4; education n=5) within the 'preparation' category (15), and keeping busy (n=6) within the 'avoidance' category (9). Further, within the higher order theme of 'denial/escape', two strategies were cited under the sub-themes of 'cutting contact from the gymnastics world' (n=2): "I walked away and I didn't want any contact with anyone" (P6); and 'hiding the gymnast identity' (n=2): "I didn't tell anyone I used to be a gymnast" (P1). **[Insert Figure 1 here]**

### **Social Support Network**

Coaches were significant members of gymnasts' support networks during training (see Figure 2). Personal and national coaches displayed equal frequency for 'supportive' (n=7) and 'emotional support' (n=4) sub-themes. Participants were 'close' (n=5) to personal coaches and had 'generally good' (n=5) relationships with national coaches. Further emergent sub-themes include personal coach's 'dominant/controlling' (n=3) nature, for example "they have so much control over what you do" (P1), and 'detrimental closeness' (n=3), for example "because you are so close to them, with that relationship it affects you a lot more if they're shouting at you" (P1). Post-retirement, coaches became less significant to support networks. High frequency sub-themes of 'diminished contact' (n=6) with personal coaches and 'lost contact' (n=7) with national coaches were reported. Mixed feelings emerged regarding satisfaction of contact with coaches post-retirement, reflected in high frequency sub-themes of 'happy with current contact' (n=4) with personal coaches, 'not bothered by lack of contact' (n=4) and 'would have liked more' (n=3) from national coaches.

Additionally, three gymnasts were unhappy at loss of contact with personal coaches: "I would have liked more contact, because I'd spent so many years with her, every day of my life for 12 years... and to cut all contact... it was quite hard" (P6). Further high frequency sub-themes included 'indefinite' (n=5), and 'less formal' (n=5) friendship with personal coaches, and being 'on good terms' (n=4) with national coaches. No longer being controlled by personal

coach (n=2) also emerged as a key sub-theme, for example “I wasn't her gymnast any more, so she couldn't and didn't have to tell me what I should be doing, eating, when I should be sleeping, so I didn't feel restricted for what I could do. I felt like I had that freedom” (P2).

**[Insert Figure 2 & 3 here]**

Figure 3 represents how organisations within the sport environment demonstrated high frequency ‘supportive’ sub-themes during training: club (n=7), NGB (n=8). Clubs displayed an additional sub-theme of ‘communal support’ (n=3). Post-retirement sub-themes revealed clubs had changed (n=3), gymnasts felt forgotten (n=2) and expressed a lack of recognition (n=2). Participants had no contact (n=4) with the NGB and felt a lack of support (n=4) from them. Two gymnasts did not anticipate support or recognition from the governing body.

Figure 4 indicates high frequency ‘supportive’ sub-themes for gymnast’s partners during training (n=3) and through the transition (n=5). Emotional support (n=3) was key during training, as well as understanding sport commitments (n=2) and having a lack of time together (n=2). Partners were significant in retirement transitions as sub-themes demonstrated their assistance in allowing gymnasts to remain busy/fill free time (n=3) and move on (n=2).

**[Insert figure 4 & 5 here]**

Parents were integral to gymnasts’ support networks during training (Figure 5). High frequency sub-themes highlighted ‘supportive’ roles (n=8) and close relationships (n=8), providing practical (n=8) and emotional (n=5) support. Four gymnasts expressed sacrifices parents made for them and three gymnasts highlighted that parents did not pressure them. ‘Unwanted involvement at times’ (n=4) also emerged as a sub-theme. Except for one participant who revealed direct parental support for post-retirement employment (P7), parental relationships offered post-retirement support by way of increased contact (n=3), becoming closer (n=4) and allowing gymnasts to be less reliant on them (n=4).

Friends played significant roles within support networks during training and across the transition (Figure 6). All eight participants described relationships with sport-related friends during training under sub-themes of very close/like family, and expressed spending a lot of time with them. Additional high frequency sub-themes exhibited gym-friends as being 'supportive' (n=7) and truly understanding (n=5) their lives. Participants reported diminished contact with these friends post-retirement (n=8) and highlighted effects of distance (n=5) and 'moving on' (n=6) upon the relationships. Six gymnasts expressed 'nothing changes' despite passage of time. Non sport-related friends were less meaningful to support networks during training. High frequency sub-themes demonstrated gymnast's lack of time to socialise (n=6), resulting in lack of close friends (n=4) beyond sport, as these friends did not truly understand their training commitments (n=3). Additionally, three participants reported the importance of having another social dimension (n=3) to balance their lives. Post-retirement, non sport-related friends were central to the transition. Gymnasts had increased free time to socialise (n=5), became closer to current friends (n=3) and created new friendships (n=4). Friends away from the sport environment significantly enhanced the retirement process (n=6).

**[Insert Figure 6 here]**

Participants revealed numerous other relationships within social support networks including community support (G.P, church minister, school/teachers, employer, online support) and athlete support (physiotherapist, psychologist, strength & conditioning coach, nutritionist). No further detail is displayed for these relationships due to lack of significance within the retirement transition. Perhaps many of such roles are deemed as being consultant based or elective, and not integral, thus infrequent contact within these relationships may relate to how they are perceived.



**Recommendations for future retirement provision/support**

Participants made suggestions regarding what could be most beneficial within the provision of support strategies to improve retirement transitions. Assistance discovering/developing other options, such as helping to continue education, general guidance, transfer to role within sport, and transfer/guidance into a career were suggested. One gymnast also proposed helping to transfer to another sport. Having someone to talk to, such as a psychologist, or simply someone who has been through the same transition was highlighted, as well as assistance in understanding what retirement may bring and improving the communication of retirement decisions.

**Discussion**

We explored the retirement experiences of elite, female artistic gymnasts, with a focus on factors contributing to the coping process. Findings overall indicated equal incidences of smoothly navigated and distressful career terminations. Participants forced to retire through injury experienced significant distress upon disengagement because they had limited control over the decision; however, adjustment difficulties did not exist exclusively for involuntary retirement. Quality of the sport disengagement transition in the present study appeared to be fundamentally correlated to the presence or absence of pre-retirement planning as noted previously (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Stambulova et al., 2007). Despite claims that relatively few athletes prepare sufficiently for life after retirement (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008), most of the current sample had some form of plan in place post-disengagement, which acted as a means of self-protection, and seemingly precluded major identity crises (Lally, 2007). Planning primarily consisted of continuing prearranged educational plans and gaining coaching qualifications; however, no specific career-focused development, or investment to decrease athletic identity before retirement occurred. This lack of preparation was perhaps a determining factor for those who perceived the most traumatic retirement. Participants were

no longer in the education system and did not wish to remain in the sport immediately, therefore identity issues emerged as their career ended leaving them lost in a world without sport. Such experiences highlight a need for a diverse range of services and support to be offered to gymnasts within Performance Lifestyle (PL) provision to accommodate for the idiosyncratic nature of each athlete's retirement situation. It is accepted that the retirement of some of the gymnasts in this study occurred before the introduction of PL support for gymnasts in the UK. Despite the perhaps anticipated difference in perceptions of the retirement transition between those who retired recently compared with those who had been retired for a few years, there was no collective trend in the adaptation response to retirement. The recent introduction of PL support did not translate to a direct association with more positive, smooth transitions for recent retirees and more negative, troublesome transitions for long-time retirees. The present study findings, particularly those about the personal nature/experience of the transitional process may, however, be of value to inform PL service delivery. Participants experiences suggest that transitional support (perhaps through the now established PL service) may be best served being initiated earlier in the sports career and adopt a more athlete-centred approach (Miller & Kerr, 2002). PL programs could benefit from a more holistically based service extending beyond that of encouragement towards maintaining education, and focusing too on awareness and understanding of transferable life skills and developing alternative career plans and goals (Alfermann et al., 2004).

Coaches have previously expressed concern for detraction of athletes' concentration and restricted the development of outside roles and interests accordingly (Park et al., 2012). It is, in part, the responsibility of coaches to ensure gymnasts are aware of available lifestyle development programmes that enrich and stimulate life balance, especially as decreased identification with athletic roles may not inevitably translate to detrimental sport performance (Lally, 2007). PL guidance should continue for post-retirement because our research and

previous research established transformation takes in excess of three months to fully accept and stabilise one's identity, life direction and life-satisfaction after sport cessation.

Results also demonstrated the significance of 'keeping in contact with sport' for transition-related coping. For the study participants, gradual disengagement eased the retirement process, supporting previous research by Gilmore (2008) as active participation levels and emotional involvement tapered. Casual exercise or recreational sport involvement, was highlighted as useful for easing the fitness decline and physical transformation associated with retirement, supporting experiences of other elite athletes who took up physically active leisure activities to compensate for lack of training and deregulation of daily habits (e.g., Richardson, 2009). Contrary to the notion that gradual disengagement or continued sport/exercise was beneficial to the retirement coping process, some gymnasts in the present study expressed how an immediate break from physical activity was required to counteract the constant training that filled their lives until retirement (Gilmore, 2008), but that after some time the necessity of a physically active lifestyle re-emerged. Contrasting with previous findings of Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) and Lavalley and Robinson (2007) these gymnasts did not suffer lasting preoccupation related to physical retirement adaptations, and averted the crisis stage concerning deterioration of physical capabilities (Stephan et al., 2003). A degree of challenge emerged for all in accepting loss of their athletic physique, highlighting the beneficial potential for organisations to intervene with the provision of a progressive physiological and nutritional detraining programme (Gilmore, 2008). Advice attenuating training and developing a healthy lifestyle, and guidance on how to exercise independently (Richardson, 2009) could alleviate substantial changes associated with retirement and perhaps prevent reliance on avoidance type strategies, which heighten physical modifications.

Similar to previous research (Gilmore, 2008; Kadlcik & Flehr, 2008), sport remained an important element in many gymnasts' lives for at least a period following retirement, as

they transferred to new roles within gymnastics such as coaching or even becoming ‘a fan’. This continued involvement was expected because most gymnasts highlighted their lasting passion for gymnastics and expressed the desire for some form of future involvement. Adopting new within-sport positions provided gymnasts with distinctly fresh roles, which may have been seen as opportunities to reinvent themselves within the confines and security of the sport, whilst remaining within a familiar environment. Adopting these new roles within the sport post-retirement may have also buffered identity threats, eased emotional adjustment, and avoided the loss of social recognition associated with sport disengagement (Stambulova et al., 2007). Nevertheless, it is possible for these previously avoided adaptation tasks to cause delayed issues upon cessation of new roles (Lavalley et al., 1997). One participant immediately transferred to a different within-sport coaching role and subsequently questioned her retirement decision as her coaching role diminished. Those who remain involved with the sport post-retirement may not face up in a timely manner to the reality of change associated with the retirement task. Dealing with the loss of their athletic identity and experiment with outside roles at the same time as their career termination may be advantageous.

The availability of social support is key to the adaptation process along with modifications to interpersonal relationships across the retirement transition, which is reflected in the current study. Results displayed significant temporal adjustments to gymnasts’ social support networks across retirement. Relationships with within-sport members of the support network, all of which were high in significance as sources of support for gymnasts during their careers, suffered substantial adjustment upon retirement. Despite having good/close coach-athlete relationships, reported as an influential factor for sourcing retirement support (Park et al., 2012) and in line with previous research gymnasts in the present study lost, or considerably diminished contact with coaches and were unable to receive support from them. Mixed feelings arose relating to satisfaction of post-retirement contact with coaches. Those

who desired beyond what they received from coaches may have experienced considerably more difficult disengagements as they struggled to take control of their own lives and adjust to their own independence and decision-making, since their athletic careers were defined by dependence and instruction from coaches (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Furthermore, dissatisfaction may have related to the fact they had lost a member of their social support network who they would normally turn to for support and advice in times of trouble. Post-retirement, there is considerably less opportunity for ex-gymnasts to interact with coaches because of their continuing commitments within the sport (Lavalley et al., 1997). Coaches could be instrumental then to encourage some diversity to gymnasts' identities, so that retirement and reduce the negative impact at the loss of the coach-athlete relationship.

In agreement with consistent findings of previous research (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gilmore, 2008), the current study clearly reveals a loss of support provision from organisations such as clubs and NGB's. For the majority of gymnasts, sport disengagement signified the end of their involvement with clubs and NGB's. While some gymnasts expressed the lack of recognition for their achievements, and sensed feelings of being forgotten upon career termination, others noted they did not expect support or acknowledgement from organisations due to the level of their achievements and status upon retirement. The presence of 'post-retirement neglect' potentially highlights that clubs locally and NGB's could, by overtly appreciating gymnasts' contributions to the sport (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993, alleviate resentment felt towards organisations, minimise retirement-related distress through closure, and increase the chance of gymnasts wanting to remain within the sport. Organisations could perhaps develop more recognised and diverse pathways for retaining ex-gymnasts in sporting roles beyond the standard coaching roles, for example mentoring younger gymnasts. This would have a dual benefit, with that of transferring

knowledge and expertise of ex-athletes, and the retired gymnasts feeling valued and with a sense of role.

Results indicated a considerable reduction in contact with sport-related friends post-retirement, which supports earlier literature (e.g., Lally, 2007; Richardson, 2009). Teammate relationships were affected by post-retirement geographical distance along with the inevitability that life moves on after sport. These relationships affected gymnasts negatively, with many reporting missing their sport-related friends who were previously supportive, key members of their social networks. The contention that adaptation to retirement is partially dependent on the degree of difference between pre- and post-transition environments is reinforced here. Despite decreased contact, gymnasts reported maintaining a close connection to their teammates linked to a lack of relationships beyond the sporting realm, thus explaining their continued connection to sport social circles (Gilmore, 2008).

Gymnasts' primary social support was centred on their athletic involvement whilst training and these relationships evidently changed upon retirement. Results demonstrated the value, to the retirement coping process, of accommodating for the impact of a restricted identity by strengthening existing friendships and establishing brand new relationships with individuals outside of the sport social circle, providing support for previous work (Gilmore, 2008; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). It is these relationships that were perceived as suffering most during their sport careers. Time to invest in and socialise with these individuals was constrained as a result of training dedication and the saliency of the gymnast's athletic identity. Data displayed how participants denied or concealed their gymnast identity from those who were unaware of their athletic past or achievements and who did not identify them as retired athletes, supporting the notion that retirement can be used as a mechanism for social rebirth (Coakley, 1983) as gymnasts' reinvented their identity through a different social environment. As part of pre-retirement provision, gymnasts should be encouraged to broaden

support networks beyond the sport milieu, to form meaningful interpersonal relationships outside of the sport setting, so they are already in place on arrival of retirement and may ease the retirement transition process.

Parents and partners emerged as most consistent members of social support networks across retirement transitions, supporting previous findings (Gilmore, 2008; Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008). Gymnasts depended on these members of their social circle for support. Career transition satisfaction also increased as these relationships were strengthened and facilitated gymnasts with discovering new life focus. Linking back to the notion that differences between the pre- and post- retirement environment influences the quality of transitions it appeared essential for gymnasts to have some *consistency* in their sources of support whilst dealing with identity transformation. Those surrounding the gymnast need to be aware of the ‘changing person’ and must also adjust accordingly, as retirement includes not only emotional adjustment but also adaptation of the social context. Parents and partners should be targeted with education services to increase their awareness about their responsibilities fundamental to enhancing the quality of gymnasts’ retirement experiences. Furthermore, the pertinence of educating athletes understanding for utilisation of significant individuals within their existing support networks (Lavallee, 2005) is equally important.

### **Study limitations**

Inherent limitations related to retrospective data collection employed within the methodological design and thus reliance on self-reported responses. Despite the established nature of retrospective techniques in acquiring knowledge, self-report responses are susceptible to respondent bias, poor articulation/description, and influenced by inaccurate selection/reconstruction of past experiences as a result of inevitably decayed memory recall. Employing this approach for the current study was, however, deemed to be beneficial in terms

of allowing participants to reflect upon experiences with the benefit of hindsight and subsequently draw out the most relevant and challenging issues (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Prospective, longitudinal studies using temporal interviews with gymnasts on approach to and across retirement periods would be pertinent replacements for retrospective methods by enabling research to capture the dynamic nature of the social support network more accurately. Restricted access to active gymnasts in light of broaching the sensitive retirement subject, and difficulty of selecting and recruiting a suitably sized sample retiring together, meant this was not incorporated for the current study.

The small sample size and gender restriction of the current sample of gymnasts delimited the present study. Attempts were made to recruit males but to no avail and as such generalisations from this sample to other populations, including male gymnasts and athletes from other sports or nations, may not be justified. Depth of participants' experiences in the present study may enhance understanding of others in comparable situations, however future research should explore the under-represented population of male gymnasts - a neglected population in gymnastics retirement literature-despite several researcher's attempts to recruit willing male participants (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Gymnasts revealed a multitude of coping strategies and significant transitional adjustments to social support networks, suggesting that retirement from gymnastics is a complex, dynamic process. Pre-retirement planning was integral to smooth transitions; however, those systems or individuals who support career transitions should diversify their PL support provision to accommodate idiosyncratic needs. Keeping in contact with sport appeared valuable to the coping process, and highlighted the potential benefit of



implementing a physiological de-training programme, but also the need for gymnasts to confront identity disruption at the time of disengagement as opposed to delaying such tasks. During their careers, gymnasts generally had strong connections to within-sport members of the support network, at the expense of meaningful outside relationships, however the majority of sport-related support ceased or considerably diminished upon retirement, presenting challenges and identity issues. Parents and partners provided the most consistent support for athletes across their career termination suggesting that they should be targeted for educational interventions focusing on their roles and responsibilities to related athletes. Findings provide formative recommendations to enhance the post-career preparation provision within current PL programs and for the design of a transitional support program for gymnasts.

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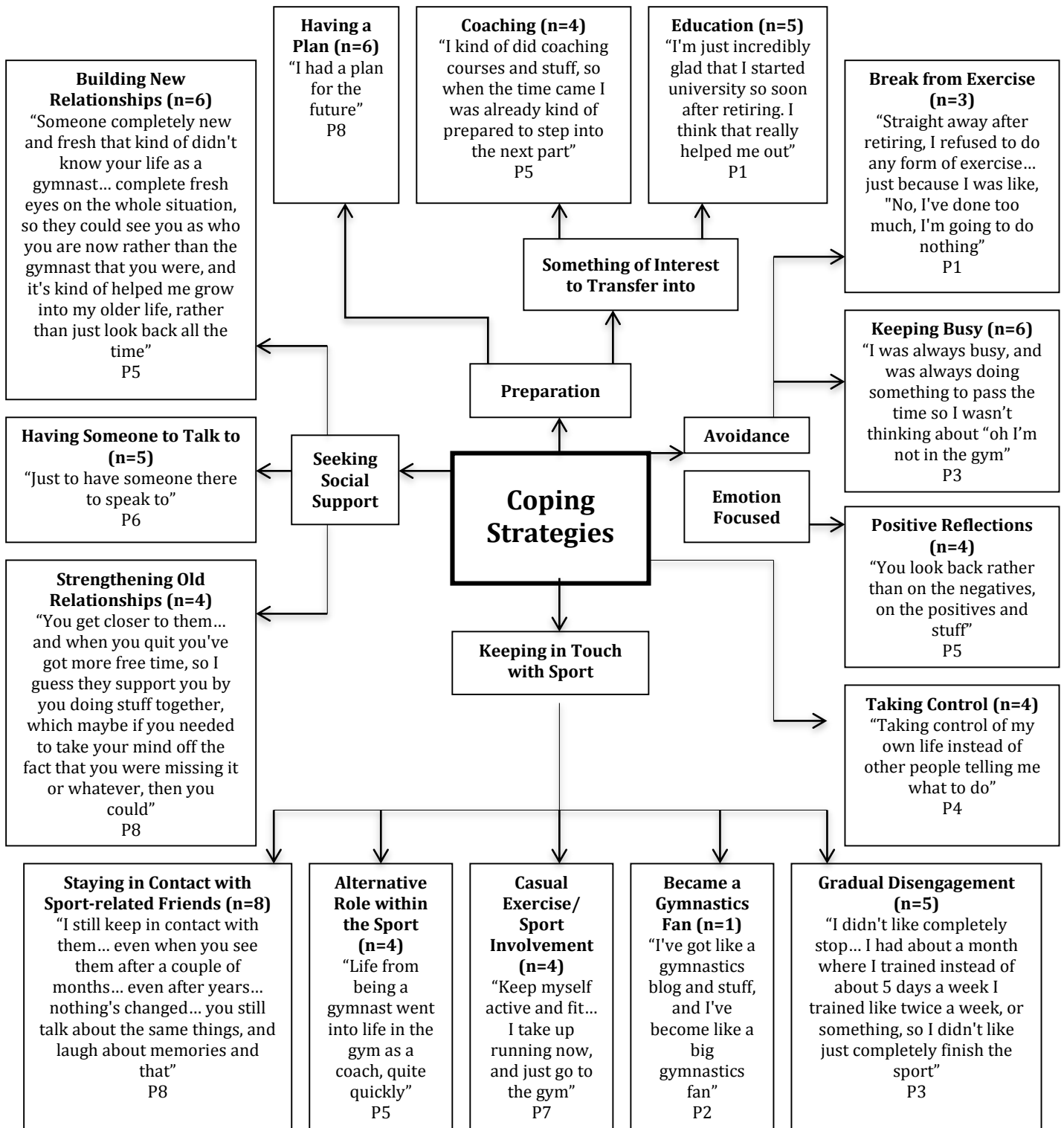


Figure 1. Gymnasts' coping strategies during the retirement transition. P = Participant

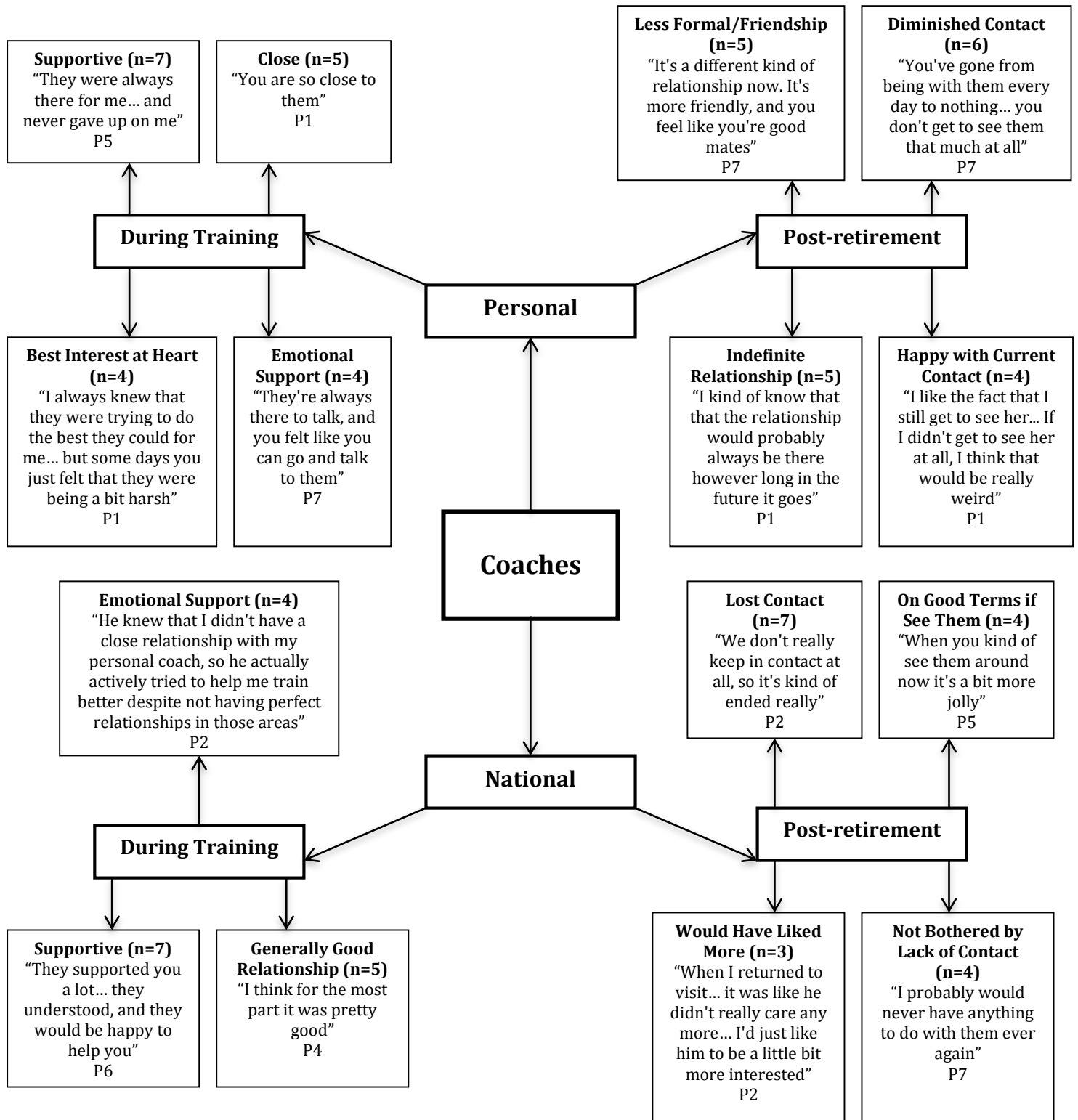


Figure 2. Dynamics of the gymnasts' relationships with personal and national coaches during training and post-retirement. P = Participant

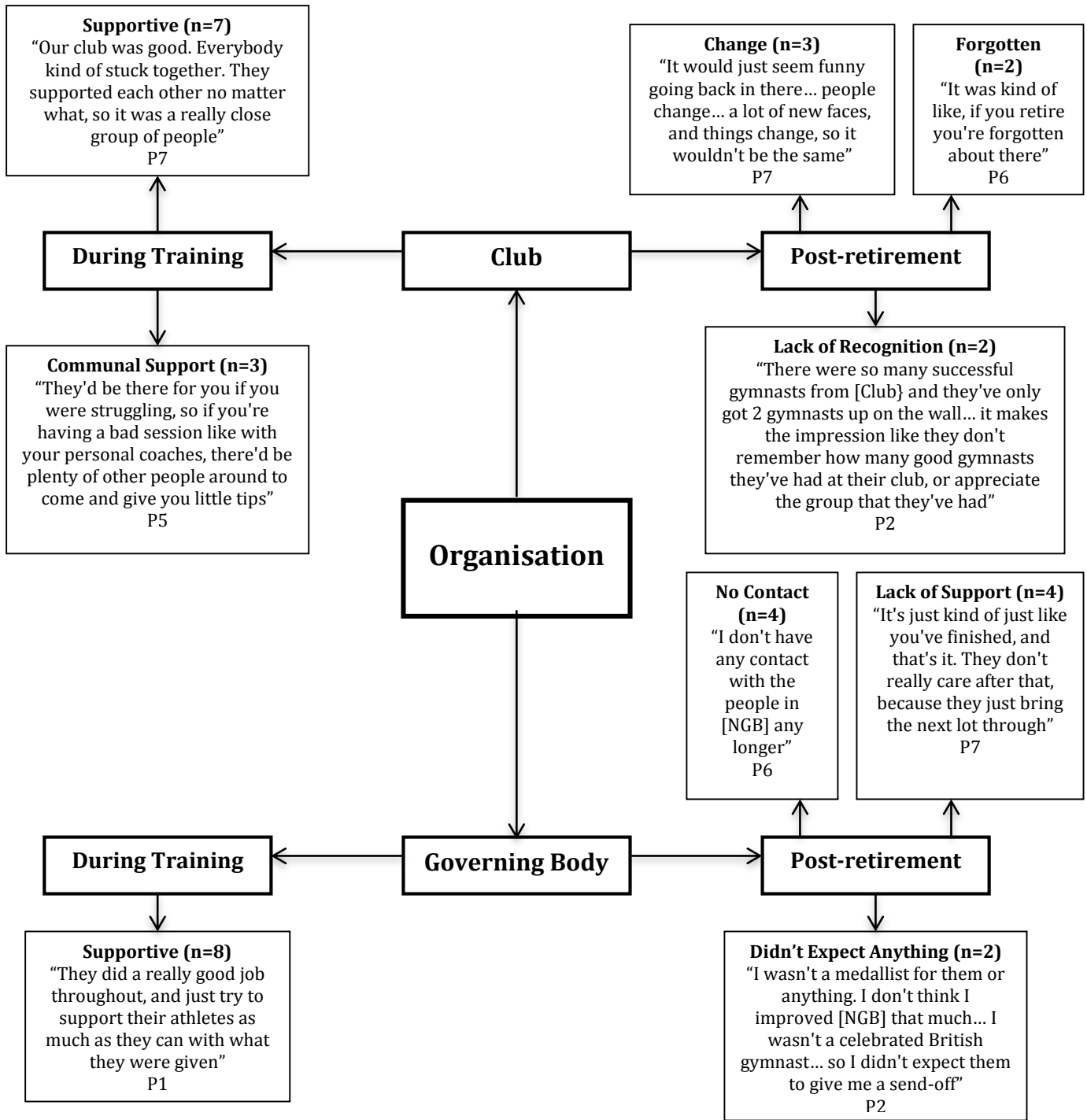


Figure 3. Dynamics of the gymnasts' relationships with their club and the National Governing Body during training and post-retirement. P = Participant



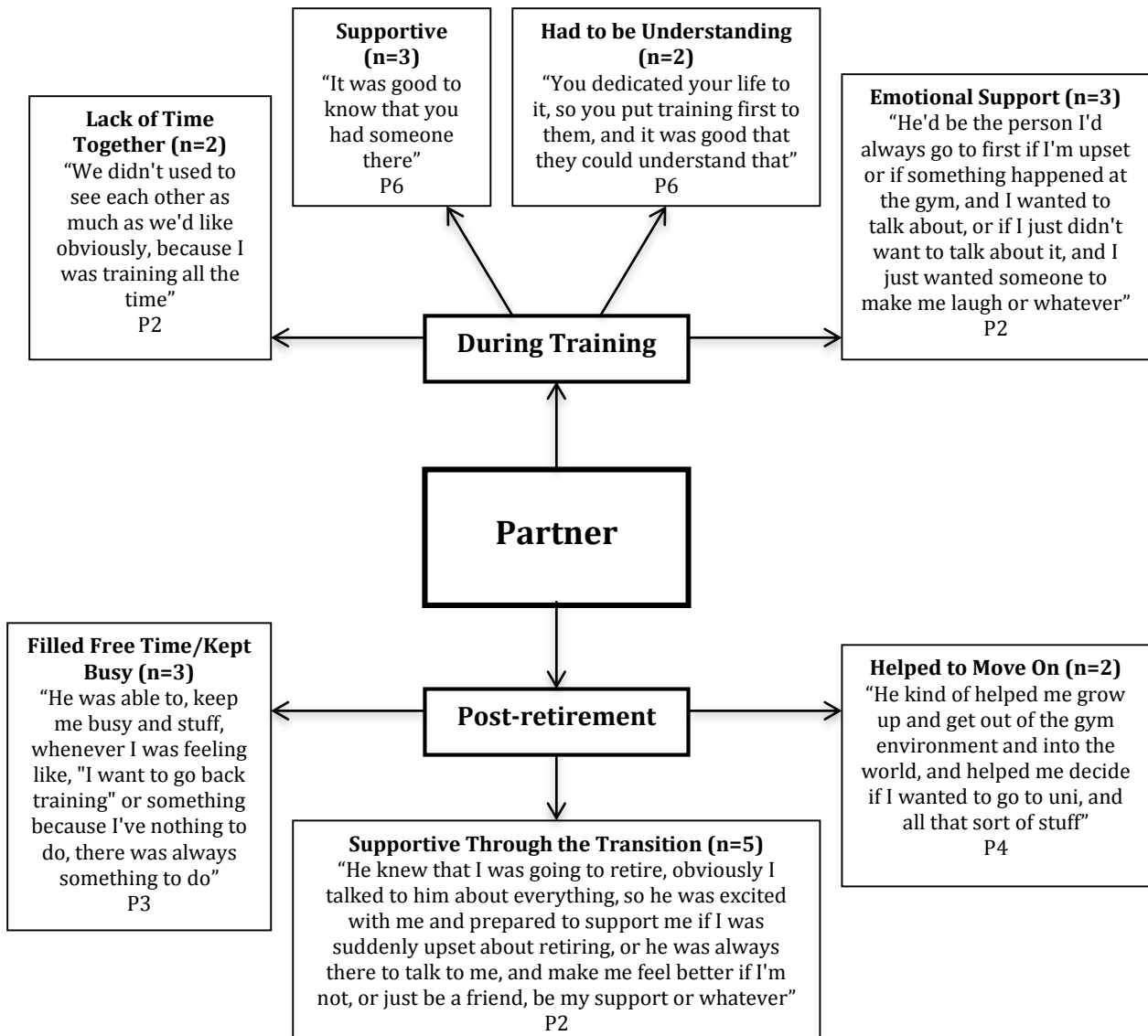


Figure 4. Dynamics of the gymnasts' relationships with their partner during training and post-retirement. P = Participant

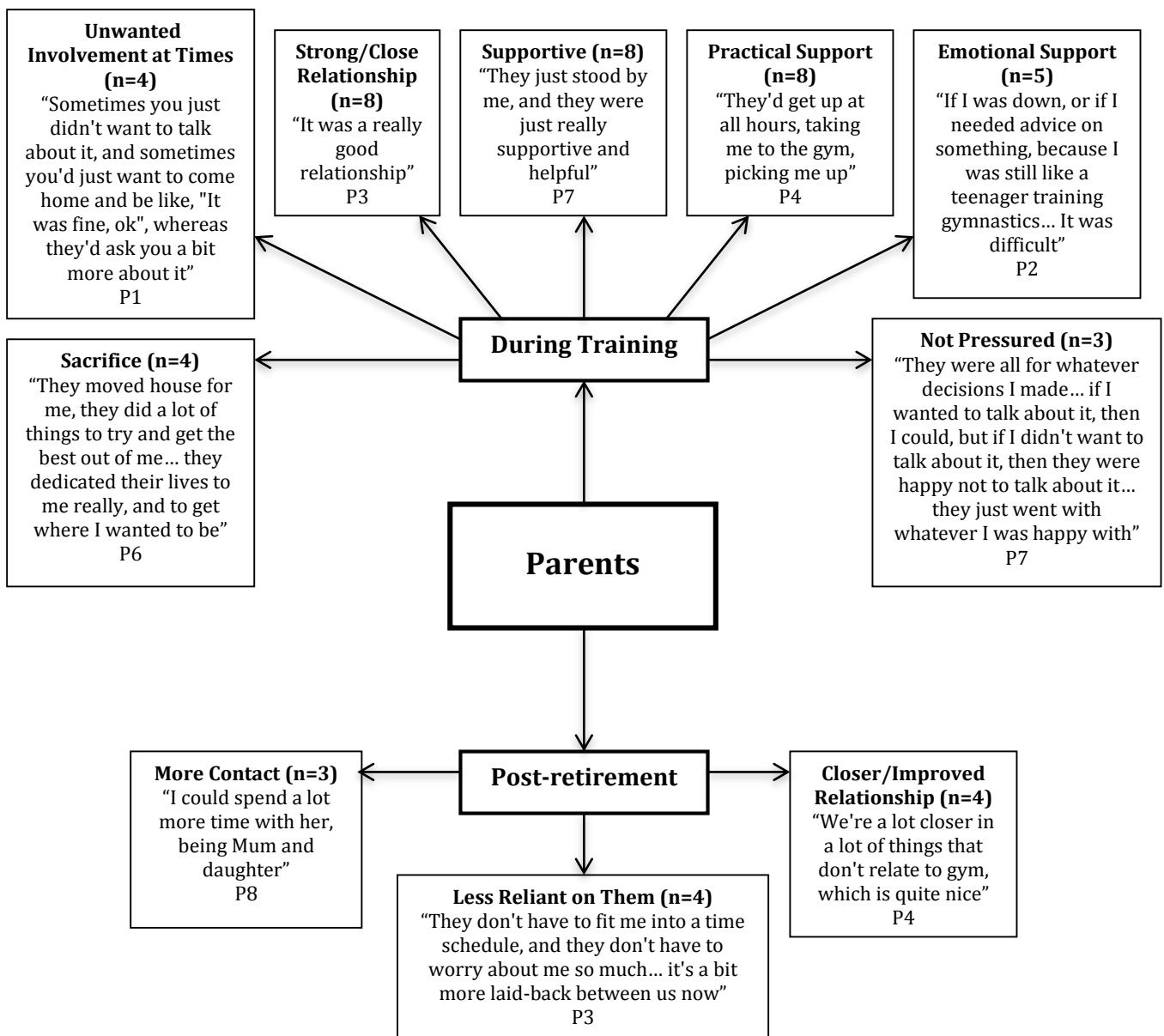
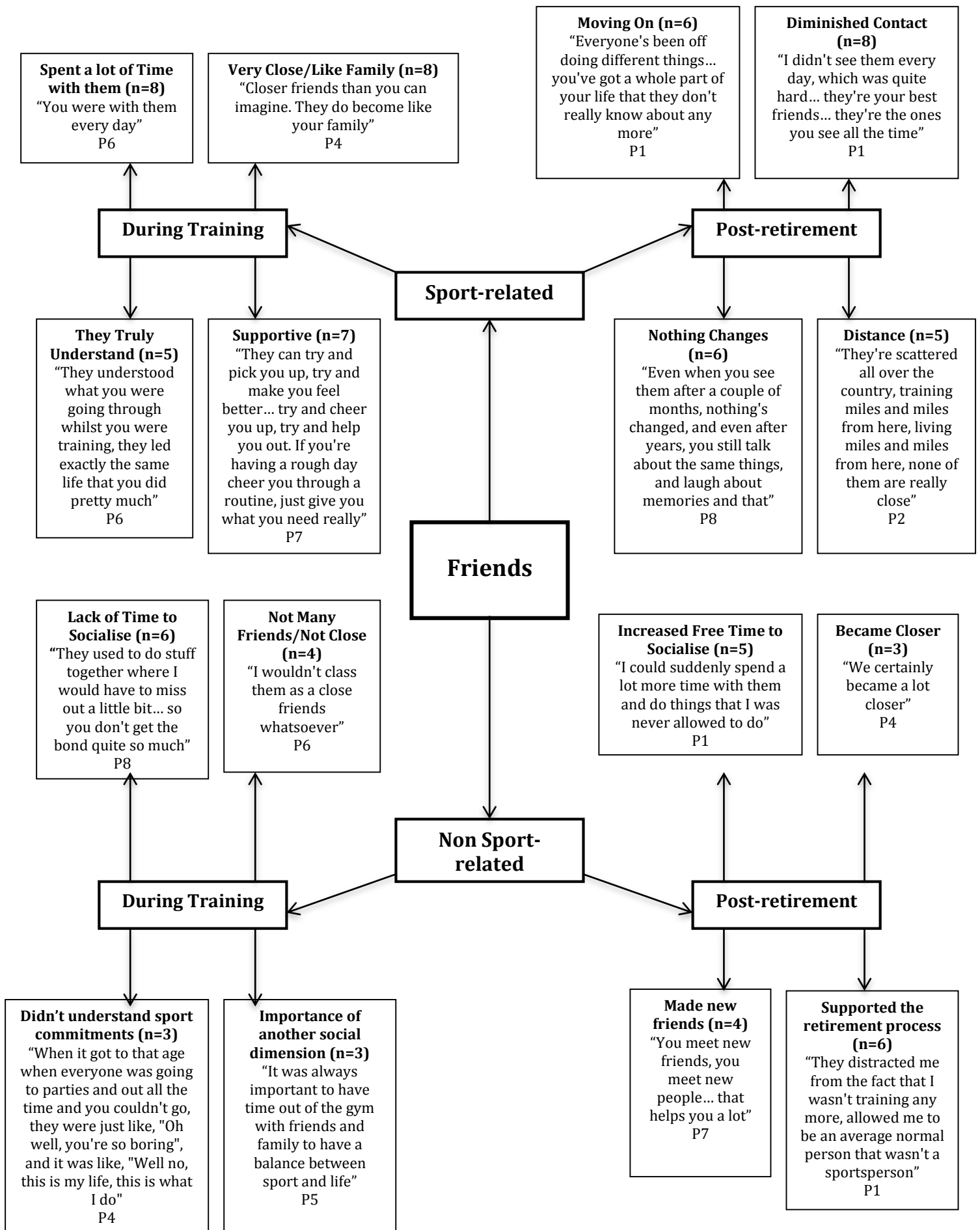


Figure 5. Dynamics of the gymnasts' relationships with their parents during training and post-retirement. P = Participant



*Figure 6.* Dynamics of the gymnasts' relationships with sport-related and non sport-related friends during training and post-retirement. P = Participant