

**Pregnancy and Motherhood in Elite Sport:**  
**The Longitudinal Experiences of two Elite Athletes**

Kelly L. Massey and Amy E. Whitehead

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Student  
Life Building, Copperas Hill, Liverpool, UK, L3 5LD

**Author Note**

Kelly L. Massey  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8616-4687>

Amy E. Whitehead  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0611-364X>

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kelly Massey,  
School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United  
Kingdom, L3 5UG. Email: k.l.massey@ljmu.ac.uk

### Abstract

Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the elite athlete mother has been growing social phenomenon, with increasing numbers of female athletes returning to elite level sport postpartum. Allyson Felix and Serena Williams are two recent elite athletes who successfully transitioned into their new identity of elite athlete mother. However, there is no guarantee that all transitional journeys will be as successful. The purpose of the present study was to enhance current knowledge of the experiences during pregnancy and motherhood in elite sport by exploring how becoming a mother impacted on the perceived personal and physical identity of elite athletes. Two elite athletes who had recently given birth to their first child were interviewed at two-months, six-months, and 15-16 months post-birth. Interviews were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis to explore how identity may have changed over the initial 15-16 months of motherhood. Three themes were developed, comprising: *athlete identity*, *mother identity*, and *athlete mother identity*. The sub-themes of identity, physical identity, shifting of goals, juggling athlete and mother identity, dual identity, priorities, and lifestyle were generated and demonstrated both similarities and nuances in the experiences of the two athletes. This study is the first to provide longitudinal insights into the experiences of both para and non-para elite athlete mothers during the initial stages of motherhood. Findings highlight the individual nature of such an experience and illuminate some of the negotiations of the personal, athlete, and mother identity that an athlete mother may experience.

**Keywords:** Athlete mother; motherhood; sport psychology

## **Pregnancy and Motherhood in Elite Sport: The Longitudinal Experiences of two Elite Athletes**

Pregnancy and motherhood constitute a significant transition in the careers of many female athletes. Indeed, in some instances, giving birth to a child has resulted in the decision to step away from sport, as some mothers dedicate themselves solely to their child (Hays, 1996, as cited in Spowart et al., 2010). Despite this arguably now-dated rhetoric, success stories illustrating how elite athletes can simultaneously balance a flourishing sporting career with motherhood are increasingly prevalent. Prominent sportswomen who have chosen to be parents mid-career include elite marathon runner Paula Radcliffe (McGannon et al., 2012), multiple Olympic medal winning sprinter Allyson Felix, and former world number one tennis player Serena Williams to name just a few. However, there is an opportunity to expand upon what we already know in this area by conducting longitudinal qualitative research to explore how both elite Paralympic and Olympic female athletes may experience this potentially life-changing and career-changing transition. Thus, providing different perspectives of how elite athlete mothers navigate this possible shift in identity.

### **Personal Identity and Motherhood in Elite Sport**

Identity refers to how a person defines themselves and the social-cultural context contributes to the development of this identity (Märtsin, 2018). Within the general population, identity exists along a spectrum, ranging from the personal to the social (Turner & Norwood, 2013). Personal identity refers to how an individual defines their purpose and gives meaning to their life, whereas social identity is determined by how an individual fits into and behaves within different groups (Albareello et al., 2018). However, an individual's personal and social identities are not independent of one another, as social experiences play a role in the development of personal identity (Carr, 2021). Furthermore, personal identity is a product of an individual's experiences, personal beliefs, traits, and characteristics (Drummond, 2021). Within the context of elite sport, individuals articulate personal identity in terms of being elite athletes and the

degree of alignment to this identity, which is often referred to as athlete or athletic identity (Rasquinha & Cardinal, 2017).

Personal identity is developed throughout adolescence and adulthood, with life events being particularly influential to its development. For example, an employed woman who returns to work after becoming a mother will construct their new identity as a mother, while also renegotiating their identity as an employee, as one identity will influence the other (Märtsin, 2018). Thus, each identity is not stand-alone as they continuously interplay (Albareello et al., 2018). This may also be true of athletes who transition into athlete mothers. These individuals construct and negotiate the relationship between their athlete and new mother identities (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017; McGannon et al., 2015; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). When an athlete becomes pregnant, an automatic process of physical and psychological change takes place; however, the significance of this change is individualized. It would be difficult to generalize how elite athletes transition into elite athlete mothers as each sport, pregnancy and individual are unique. However, motherhood has been shown to change a woman's perspective on their life as to what is most important (Palmer & Leberman, 2009), and the management of time and space dedicated to each identity pose as challenges for elite athlete mothers.

### **Physical Identity and Motherhood in Elite Sport**

Physical identity plays a critical role in the development of an individual's identity (Negrin, 2008). It influences how an athlete perceives themselves in relation to performance control and body ideals, which subsequently influence an athlete's emotions, feelings, and overall identity (Martinez-Pascual et al., 2016). During pregnancy, the body changes dramatically in terms of appearance and performance, thus influencing the athlete's perception of their body and physical identity. Body dissatisfaction has been found to increase during pregnancy, particularly in first-time mothers (Goodwin et al., 2000). However, the physical transition can be viewed differently; while some pregnant athletes do indeed view physical changes during pregnancy as unwelcome and make comparisons with their former physique, others report enjoying their new body and view it as a temporary phase (Martinez-Pascual et al., 2016). Tekavc et al. (2020) provide further evidence that some pregnant athletes enjoy their new

body sensations and perceive pregnancy as an opportunity for recovery from sport and injury. This optimistic view can result from an athlete mother's motivation and their ability to exercise and maintain physical activity levels, which in turn supports positive perception of body image and overall well-being compared to those who do not and cannot exercise (Goodwin et al., 2000). As intrinsic factors such as motivation to exercise can affect perception of physical identity, so too can external influences such as society and media (Palmer & Leberman, 2009).

The dominant narrative within media coverage on elite athlete mothers is the 'come back,' whereby female athletes' bodies and abilities are positioned at the heart of the conversation about the meaning of becoming an elite athlete mother (McGannon et al., 2012; McGannon et al., 2015; McGannon et al., 2017). In many instances, their role as a mother or their ability to merge the athlete and mother spheres is questioned within society, as it goes against the traditional "good mother" ideals (Martinez-Pascual et al., 2016). Across the general population, there are mixed perspectives around training and competition during pregnancy and postpartum. As pregnant elite athletes often maintain performance-related training routines, this can result in a perceived need to justify these actions because such practices are not understood in wider society (Martínez-Pascual et al., 2017). The notion of an elite athlete mother can be considered unachievable and unsupported (Tekavc et al., 2020). Narratives including gender ideologies often state that the role of a woman is to be a mother and should focus on achieving "good mother" ideals (Martínez-Pascual & Palacios-Ceña, 2014).

Social constructs can influence the perceptions of those wishing to return to elite sport postpartum and dictate decisions and behaviours. Guilt and athletic sacrifice are common outcomes when applying such social constructions to "good mother" ideals (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Batey, 2014). For one athlete, the notion of combining being an athlete with being a mother developed such an extreme crisis narrative that it resulted in adoptions, abortions, and murder of a child (Cosh & Crabb, 2012). In modern day media, two constructions of the athlete mother identity have been highlighted. The first being the idea that the athlete and mother are in conflict, which may result in crisis narratives as forementioned. The second relates to the "superwoman" construct, which refers to the athlete mother successfully integrating these

identities by: rebelling against traditional ideals; renegotiating the meaning of “good mother”; identifying as a positive role model to their children; creating “me time” to recharge; and maintaining a sense of self through sport (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Batey, 2014; McGannon, 2018).

Athlete and mother identities have been previously described as incompatible, as pregnancy has previously resulted in career termination or failure (Nash, 2011). The strain between a mother giving their child what they need and managing the demands of competitive sport is evident, along with pressures to uphold traditional “good mother” ideals (Talbot & MacLennan, 2016). More recently, these dated ideals have been remodeled as some athletes express that rather than diminishing their mothering capabilities, returning to their athlete status enhanced them as a mother and vice versa (Talbot & MacLennan, 2016). Negotiating the pairing of these identities can involve compromise, sacrifice, balance, and organization, features that can be stretched further if factoring in additional employment, thus resulting in a third identity (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Being able to unite multiple identities can improve self-development, relieve stress, and provide the freedom to still participate in something considered essential to a way of life (Spowart et al., 2010). Indeed, when athlete mothers focus on the positive changes, they: have a greater sense of purpose; become more confident and relaxed; and reduce the pressure to perform (Talbot & MacLennan, 2016). Furthermore, motherhood has also been found to improve resilience; ability to cope with challenges; and sporting commitment (Martínez-Pascual et al., 2014; Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Tekavc et al., 2020). Participating in sport reaffirms the athlete identity but can also support mother identity by offering a space for escapism before returning their focus to motherhood (Martínez-Pascual et al., 2014; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Therefore, the two identities can work harmoniously as finding enjoyment and success in one can have the same positive effect on the other (McGannon et al., 2015).

Despite evidence suggesting the compatibility of the athlete and mother identity, the continued desire to train, compete, and keep a sense of self can be married with feelings of guilt, tension, and conflict, which can result in athlete mothers feeling a need to compromise

between their athlete and mother identities (McGannon et al., 2015; Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Talbot & MacLennan, 2016). Athlete mothers who have been found to successfully negotiate a space for these identities during this transition do so by avoiding narrative tensions. This can be achieved by merging the two identities through actions such as bringing the child to training (Appleby & Fisher, 2009) or adopting a dual identity by keeping sport separated from family life in order to spend quality time in each role (Palmer & Leberman, 2009).

### **Research Purpose**

The prominence and visibility of elite athlete mothers has grown since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pederson, 2001; Martínez-Pascual et al., 2017), with more female athletes such as Allyson Felix and Serena Williams successfully returning to elite level sport postpartum. There is no guarantee that all transitions will be as successful however, the presence of the mother identity no longer means the end of the athlete identity, as previously highlighted within research on retrospective experiences, secondary data (Martínez-Pascual et al., 2016; Tekavc et al., 2020) and media sources (McGannon et al., 2012; McGannon et al., 2015; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). There is an opportunity to expand upon earlier explorations of this unique population, with a call for more research to enhance the understanding of the psychosocial aspects of the transitional athlete mother journey (McGannon et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to identify the experiences of pregnancy and motherhood in elite sport by exploring how motherhood influences the perceived personal and physical identity of elite athletes. Using a longitudinal qualitative approach, we sought to generate an in-depth understanding of elite athletes who wish to continue in their sport postpartum. By doing so, findings from this study could help to increase awareness among policymakers about the circumstances facing elite athlete mothers. Furthermore, the findings could inform the development of initiatives designed to support elite female athletes to strive for success in their sport without compromising the desire to have a child.

### **Methodology**

#### **Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretical framework used in this study drew on two strands of identity theory;

firstly, the understanding of how external social structure affects the self and behaviours, and secondly, how the internal self and the process of self-efficacy affect behaviours (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity theory aligns with our views that individuals have unique roles, perspectives, and behaviours that are interconnected within groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). An individual can assign to multiple roles within different groups and attach meaning to these roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000), thus, making identity multifaceted and existent on a fluctuating hierarchy, influencing individual behaviours (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Udall et al., 2020).

Individuals self-categorise into roles to form identities, which come with expected behaviours and meaning (Stets & Burke, 2000). The following points selected from Stryker & Burke (2000) were used to inform the analysis surrounding identity within this study:

- How do identities work in their environment?
- The importance/commitment/salience of different identities in different environments.
- What standards are expected of different roles on a personal and social level?
- Links between identities, roles expectations and behaviours.
- What causes changes to identity?

### **Research Design and Positionality**

Data were collected via three semi-structured interviews per participant, which were conducted at two-months, six-months, and 15-16-months postpartum (Figure 1). Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of qualitative inquiry as this method is well-suited for exploring participants' perspectives, experiences, emotions, and personal meanings (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). A longitudinal approach was adopted to allow the researchers to explore the subjective experiences of athletes as they transition into motherhood. This study adopted a relativist ontological approach (Cosh et al., 2015; Sparkes & Smith, 2009) and the epistemological stance of subjectivism, which highlights that identity is open to diverse perceptions and meanings (Moshman, 2013).

The first author, who conducted the interviews (see Procedures) is a former elite 400m-track athlete who competed at European, Commonwealth, World, and Olympic level. Retiring from a 10-year international career in 2017, she has vast first-hand experience of the elite sport



environment and culture, thus creating an insider approach. We believed that the positionality of the first author aided the research process and enabled the research team to have an insider perspective, which supported the development of a good rapport between interviewer and interviewee (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). In addition, an insider research perspective can help researchers to gain trust (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). However, as a team, we also noted the importance of ensuring that the experiences of the first author were not amalgamated into the research process (e.g., in the interpretation of data). To avoid this, the second author acted as a critical friend to challenge the underlying assumptions (see rigor and quality section).

### **Participants and Sampling**

An Olympic discus thrower and a Paralympic sprinter in the early stages of motherhood took part in the study. Both participants were invited to take part by the first author, who was their former teammate. As the first author had experience of being immersed within their elite sport environment, this brought benefits, such as knowing the culture, language, and conditions (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). The potential for the development of, and participation in, a study took place during general conversations between the elite athletes and first author within a social setting. The inclusion criteria stipulated that the participants were: (i) within the first two-months of motherhood with their first child; (ii) an elite athlete who had competed for their senior first team within a non-friendly competition or their national senior team within an international championship during the past 24-months; and (iii) were still training with the aim of returning to elite sport postpartum. Based on the criteria for classifying elite performers (Swann et al., 2015), the athletes were classified as successful elite athletes. Following ethical approval at the first authors' institution, this author formally approached the participants to provide information on the study and invited them to participate. Both participants provided consent for their data to be collected, stored, and published (see below). Due to the unique participant characteristics and their openness in sharing their journeys through various media platforms, both participants were aware of the limit to their anonymity and willing to be identified within the study. In addition, both participants were sent a copy of the manuscript prior to submission and provided their consent again at this stage. Hereafter, the Olympic discus thrower, and the

Paralympic sprinter are referred to as Margaret and Enid, respectively, to comply with the conditions of ethical approval.

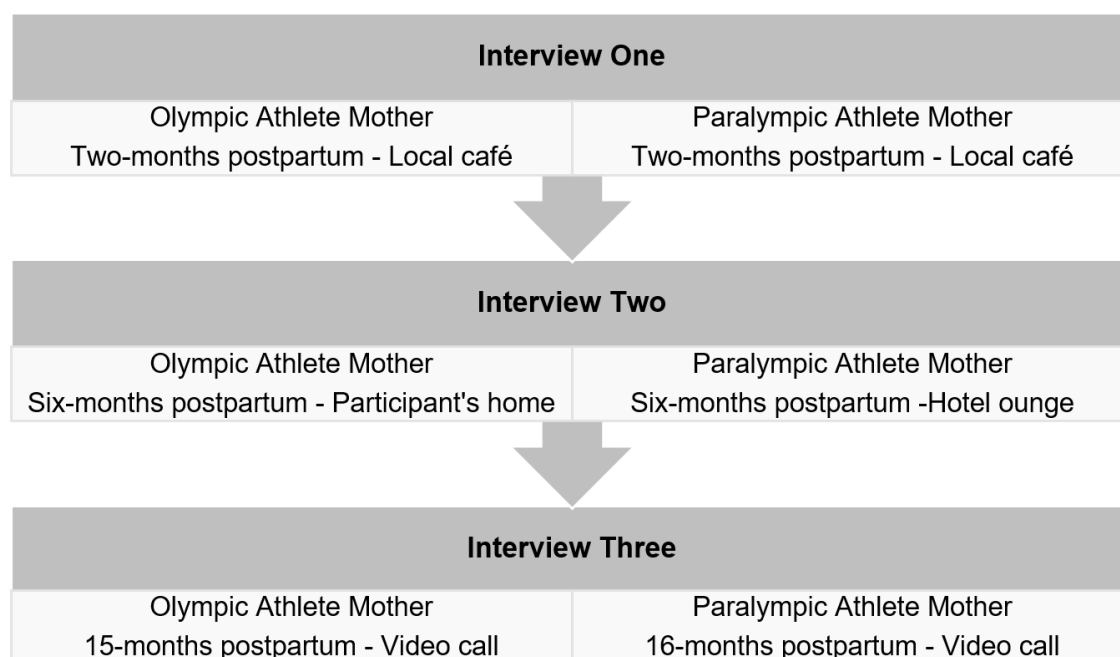
### **Procedures**

The interviews, conducted by the first author, took place at a location and time that was comfortable and convenient for the participant. During the first interview, participants were asked to retrospectively recall information on: pre-pregnancy; pregnancy; and birth of their child. The initial open-ended interview guide was developed from pre-existing knowledge of theory and the first author's understanding of the elite sporting environment. As the aim of the study was to explore elite athletes' personal perceptions of identity (personal and physical) longitudinally throughout the initial stages of motherhood and up to 16-months postpartum, the interview schedule was flexible to allow for the opportunity to explore the theoretical underpinnings of identity based on Stryker & Burke (2000), while still allowing space for the research team to explore and seek elaboration on additional insights that were not previously considered (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). All interviews began with asking the participant to define themselves at that stage, followed by questions such as "What is your lifestyle/routine like?", "What does the word motherhood mean to you or make you feel?" and "How has becoming a mother changed you?" The subsequent interview guides took a similar approach to interview one, however they were further informed from data generated within the earlier interviews and bespoke to each participant. All interviews were digitally recorded using a Dictaphone (*M* length = 64:37 minutes, range = 48:13 – 84:52 minutes) and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Prior to analysis, the transcripts were emailed to the participants to give them the opportunity to correct, delete, or add information in line with the member reflections process (Smith & McGannon, 2018), whilst also asking for their consent for information to be shared in the final report.

### **Data Analysis**

To generate themes around the shared meaning of athlete and mother identities, data analysis followed a six phased reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Phase one

involved the first author reading and rereading the transcripts to increase familiarity with the data, with brief notes made on potential codes throughout this process detailing initial impressions of the data. In phase two, the first author engaged in generating codes, by creating labels that were of interest to the data and potentially relevant to the research question (Braun et al., 2016). Within phase three 24 initial codes containing 649 references were generated and grouped together into preliminary themes by the first author. During this phase of analysis, author one revisited the literature and the research question to consider how these initial codes linked to the research aim. Specifically, they sought to consider how the interview data and codes generated at this stage linked to our underpinning theoretical framework (Stryker & Burke, 2000). This process highlighted the importance of changes in identity, feelings, characteristics, or explanations provided at the different interview stages, as well as alterations in the expected roles associated with being an athlete and mother that occurred from the beginning to the end of data collection. This process helped to develop the themes relevant to the research question. Phase four assessed if the analysis aligned with the data obtained to support the telling of each participants' narratives in an engaging, coherent, and veracious way. The second author challenged the first author in terms of the alignment of initial themes generated to the research question. More specifically, author two drew on the aims of the research to challenge author one to engage reflexively with their analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and consider what (if any) changes were generated in the participants identity over time. This resulted in author one revisiting the original codes and considering whether the initial coding addressed the research aims. Following this process, three overarching themes were generated by combining similar themes, before assigning them relatable names in phase five (athlete identity, mother identity, and athlete-mother identity). The sixth and final phase involved the creation of a report detailing the findings (Braun et al., 2016). Once the findings of the study were categorized into the themes (athlete identity, mother identity, and athlete mother identity), with a total of seven sub-themes, the transition of these across the retrospective course of pre-pregnancy, pregnancy and longitudinally up to 15- and 16-months postpartum was presented (see Results).

**Figure 1:***Data Collection Timescale and Location***Rigor and Quality**

To enhance the quality of this qualitative enquiry, a flexible process was applied comprising several quality markers that align with contemporary perspectives on rigor (Smith & McGannon, 2018). It has been highlighted that elite athlete mothers are a prevalent phenomenon, where current media representations and society provide support and hail these individuals as role models. However, key players such as governing bodies and sponsors are far slower to follow suit in terms of tangible and effective support (Darroch et al., 2019). In line with the forementioned quality markers, this topic is of worthy attention because of the status of these individuals but also due to the novel inclusion of a para-athlete and the longitudinal data collection process adding to the current landscape of research within this area. It is hoped that the findings from this study evoke support on a social, personal and policy level for elite athletes looking to adopt a dual identity by becoming a mother. It is also hoped that the data has potential for naturalistic generalizability as the findings might resonate with other elite athlete mothers due to the thick descriptions provided (see Stake, 1995; Smith, 2018).

As the first author is immersed within the culture of elite sport, in particular athletics, to enhance the quality of the first author's interpretations of the data, the marker of critical friend was selected and performed by the second researcher. As previously mentioned above in the data analysis, the second researcher, who is a non-athlete and therefore an outsider, provided a critical viewpoint by scrutinizing the methodological processes, reviewing, and discussing the first author's interpretation and encouraged reflexivity throughout (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

## **Results**

The results are presented through three main themes: athlete identity; mother identity; and athlete mother identity. The participants renegotiated their identities as a result of their new reality and each highlighted unique and shared experiences as they moved between and merged their identities with success and tension. The following three sections present each of the themes, with participant quotes used throughout to illuminate the voice of the participants and to show the shift in identity over time.

### **Theme 1: Athlete Identity**

The athlete identity theme represents the extent to which the participants associated themselves as athletes. Within this section, athlete identity is dissected into sub-themes of identity, physical identity, and goals to highlight and make sense of how these were influenced by the transition into an elite athlete mother.

#### ***Subtheme: Identity***

When observing both participants' personal identities, there appeared to be a shift in how both participants viewed themselves as athletes throughout the duration of this study. In addition, there were clear differences in terms of how both athletes initially viewed themselves and their athlete identity. At pre-pregnancy, Enid showed how she was fully immersed in her identity of a para-athlete, explaining how it was her 'whole world,' "I was just a Paralympic athlete, it is my whole world really, it's my entire life... So that's how I would have defined myself

as a person.” However, Margaret can be seen to have multiple pre-pregnancy identities:

I was an athlete; I think everyone knew me as that first. I would yep put myself in that category... I would call myself a personal trainer more than an athlete, because athletics is such a hobby, I would say I do that [athletics], but it's not my career.

Enid's pregnancy was planned to coincide with a natural break in her athletics career and she did not comment on her identity during this time suggesting that she was prepared for this shift and impact on her identity. Margaret however, experienced an unforeseen pregnancy and experienced an inability to connect with being an athlete as she stated that she "...was watching everybody else doing it and I couldn't, I wasn't an athlete, and I would like to get back to being an athlete. I was just a pregnant person." Although in this pre-pregnancy two-month interview, Margaret previously referred to athletics being a "hobby" it is clear here that she was conflicted in terms of her feelings towards being an athlete and being pregnant, suggesting athletics was a highly valued hobby and an important aspect of her desired identity.

Postpartum, both participants experienced a reduced association with being an athlete, caused by a renegotiated relationship or a loss of their position within sport. Enid stated at two-months postpartum: "I don't feel like I'm an athlete, but it's not that I don't feel like I am not an athlete, it's my job." Enid changed to athletics being "just a job," presenting a contrast to her earlier perceptions of defining herself as a Paralympic athlete, where being an athlete was her "whole life." Although Margaret did not solely identify as an athlete previously, here she explains at two-months postpartum how her whole athlete identity has changed from pre-pregnancy, and she became a new person: "I don't expect me to feel like an athlete like I did because I'm not that person any more. I am a different person, and I will have different experiences." The reduction of the athlete component of identity in relation to status remained throughout the early stages of motherhood for Margaret who developed a general association with being an athlete as she returned to sport. This is shown through a lacked conviction during Margaret's six-

month interview: “I don’t know what I called myself, someone trying. Yer I’d say I’m an athlete... When I get my GB vest again, I can say I am a current international athlete.” This demonstrates the management of her identity and the creation of a dual identity when Margaret is in the athlete environment. This governing of a dual identity could be eased through Margaret’s previous acknowledgement of already balancing multiple identities of personal trainer and athlete. In contrast, within her interview at six-months, Enid had an earlier return to competition which resulted in an earlier return of her being able to associate her identity with being an athlete:

I think being selected for World Champs has actually helped because it’s given me that opportunity to step back on the international stage again... I think for me identity wise it reiterated that I am an athlete and I’m not just doing this for nothing.

Stepping into this physical athlete environment (being at a competition) may have played a significant role uniting Enid with her athlete identity. However, for Margaret, the association with being an athlete remained unchanged later in postpartum despite a return to competition and the top of the British rankings. Here the status of the athlete identity that remained is downplayed by Margaret at 15-months as her lack of funding and sponsorship makes her feel less of an athlete rather than the experience of becoming a mother: “an athlete, not really a professional one because I’m not paid... Erm so I do feel like an athlete and obviously I’m competing... I feel like an athlete but not the same athlete.”

### ***Subtheme: Physical Identity***

Physical identity presented itself as a key influencer of athlete identity, as physical appearance and performance dictated the degree to which the participants identified as athletes. The reduction or loss of ability to identify as an athlete on a physical level brought about negative emotions for Margaret and lack of a physical connection for Enid. Margaret explained at her two-month postpartum interview how her physical identity had changed: “you are not you

anymore, you are a version of you. It might be better, probably not.” In addition, Enid too shared a similar experience at this time point as she explained: “It is weird how your body changes, going back to running, running now it jiggles where it didn’t jiggle before... it’s just a bit like it doesn’t feel like it’s yours.” The level of acceptance of the changes in physical identity varied between the two participants. Enid welcomed changes at two-months postpartum and viewed them as a sign of achievement: “it just takes you a bit of getting used to but I kinda feel like my body now is like a sign of my achievement of obviously having a baby. I’m not looking at it in negative way.” Whereas Margaret saw this change in her physical identity as a threat to the return to athletics at two-months:

I’m not throwing so I have no idea what kind of body I am left with now. There’s a lot more scars and there’s fatter bits on me and my physique is not great but what can I do?... I am trying to do athletics and I am trying to get back to where I was.

Margaret seemed to come to terms with this change and reframed how she viewed herself at six-months as she was “dealing with a new body. Not better, just different. And I still think I can achieve what I want to achieve if I do things sensible. I’m like pumped; I’m excited for everything.” When experiencing improvements in physique, both athletes felt a more positive association with their physical identity, which in turn developed their connection to their athlete identity. However, it is important to note that this occurred with slight differences between the athletes. The impact that this had for Margaret at six-months was that it made her “happy just that the numbers are better, visually is better, movements are better, I just look more athletic. So now I can say fairly confidently I am an athlete again.” In addition, at six-months, Enid explained that “my joints are actually attached to my body now, whereas before I felt like everything was a little bit loose... Physically I feel like an athlete.” However, within their final interviews, when both athletes reflected on their current physical identity compared to their pre-pregnancy standard and it became evident that there is a difference in pre- and postpartum



physical identity. Enid reflected on her physical shape prior to pregnancy and how she felt far from this, going back into competition at 16-months:

Normally when I compete on a world stage, I feel very ready and prepared. And obviously this time I wasn't ready, erm you know I wasn't in the best shape I could be in. Well, I was in the best shape I could be in for having a baby. Erm obviously not in terms of competitiveness.

Margaret reiterated this at 15-months when discussing returning to competition as being "not the level that I was at, but it's getting there. So, I'm happy enough with where it's at, at the moment so yer. I feel like an athlete but not the same athlete."

### ***Subtheme – Shifting of Goals***

Goals were shown to change from pre-pregnancy to postpartum. One of the main changes at two-months was that they were no longer solely outcome based; there was a bigger hurdle to overcome for both athletes before performing on a global stage. For example, at two-months both athletes had an aim to return to successful athletic performance. Enid had the goal of "just wanted my body to recover as quickly as possible that was my main aim, because I knew I wanted to come back and train." Margaret echoed a similar motivation as she "can't say for definite what's going to happen in the future. I just hope that I get back to the level that I was at." At two-months, Enid's pre-pregnancy goals were confused and lacked commitment due to feeling lost:

I didn't know what I wanted to achieve next. And I was thinking I want to go and repeat what I did in Rio but then it's like I've already sacrificed so many years to do that. Is it really worth doing?

However, at two-months postpartum Enid displayed a renewed and relaxed focus for athletic goals:

I want to go to the World championships this year. Get back on the international stage, get my feel for it again and then you know Tokyo will be what it will be. All I know is that I will give it my best and to be honest, obviously I want to go and repeat what I did in Rio but if that doesn't happen then it's not the end of the world.

Pre-pregnancy Margaret's goals remained relatively stable in terms of general focus, but the measurement of success changed, initially:

I was sort of hoping to regain my confidence really for Tokyo. So, I thought that I would be a fairly steady path those four years. And yer to go from Rio and then do better and get into a final. So that was my original goal. And really fight for a medal.

However, this goal shifted slightly at two-months as, "the goal was still to get to Tokyo but rather than medal it was to just make the team."

From six-months, both participants begin to set more outcome-based goals. For Enid, this was about achieving a medal at the Olympics:

Tokyo is going to be where my main focus is. Erm, so my relationship with athletics has changed in the sense that I'm going to do everything, I'm not, I'm not there to participate, I'm there to perform.

Similarly, at 16-months Enid's motivations remained:

I would ideally like to go to Tokyo and preferably be on the top of the podium and, so, you know. I just want to be able to perform to the best of my ability regardless of what that looks like.

For Margaret, this was being Britain's number one as demonstrated within her interview at six-months:

I do plan on being Great Britain's number one discus thrower this year. I plan on still going to the Olympics and then Europeans and being back to near my best... I think I'm going in with a new perspective. I don't just want to turn up and try my best of course. But it's different. The hard work is getting on the team the rest is a bonus.

Throughout the duration of the interview's goals changed for both athletes. Initially two-months postpartum goals seemed open and uncertain, however, as time passed both athletes demonstrated a mind-set of giving it their all to make participating worthwhile and become more outcome focused. Demonstrating that the driven, focused, and winning mindset of the athlete identity remained but the processes and experiences of the addition of the mother identity resulted in an initial period of uncertainty and adaptation.

## **Theme 2: Mother Identity**

The mother identity theme highlights the way in which each participant transitioned into or adopted this new role of being a 'mother or mum' and the process of renegotiation between personal, athlete and the new mother identity. A standalone sub-theme of juggling the athlete and mother identity has been included to illustrate how both athletes uniquely navigated their identity when becoming a mother.

### ***Subtheme: Juggling the Athlete and Mother Identity***

It appeared that Enid embraced this new identity by expressing readiness in her retrospective interview at two-months and continued to demonstrate strong and positive

feelings towards a mother identity while not being constrained: "It's weird thinking I'm a mum. But it's, again it doesn't define me though either and it made me realize that athletics doesn't define me and neither does being a mum, I'm still me." Here Enid can differentiate between her personal identity (me), her mother identity and her athlete identity. This perception of her mother identity was also evident at the six-month interview as Enid had the feelings of being "like a mum but I'm not like a 'mum mum'" and believed this was because "a lot of mums have maternity leave and that kind of thing. I obviously, I haven't got a year off work, and I've gone straight back into it." Enid seemed to continue to distinguish and separate her multiple identities as a mother, an athlete and as an individual person as at 16-months she stated: "I love my role as a being a mum, I love obviously being an athlete. But even separate from that I am enjoying being me, without being either of those things."

In contrast, Margaret struggled to associate with the language surrounding motherhood. Despite these difficulties and statements of not being maternal in nature, Margaret adopted behaviors associated with a mother identity and gradually became more comfortable with her new identity over time as during her pre-pregnancy interview at two-months she stated: "It took me probably about six-months for me to be comfortable with me saying I'm pregnant." At two-months postpartum there remained a reluctance to associate with language associated with motherhood as Margaret showed difficulties using words such as "the mum word. Anything that began with M I didn't like. Even when she was out."

Since giving birth, although Margaret explained how her feelings towards being a mother had changed. There remained difficulty around the language associated with motherhood but to a lesser degree as she became more familiar with her new reality. At two-months, Margaret questioned her maternal instinct:

Like maternal instinct. I donno what that is, I donno if I've got it, I donno if it's there. I don't know if it's there as sort of a defense mechanism. As in I'm there for the hard bit. I will defend and I will fight for you, that's easy. I can do that bit.

Similar thoughts were explained in her interviews at six- and 15-months shown respectively below:

My boyfriend kept calling me mother. And I was like no, I am not mother to a 6-month-old baby. I am mummy, surely I will be that. So, whilst it is still weird for me to say it, I do want other people to call me something that I would be happy with.

I don't really have any thoughts or feelings with that (motherhood). But like that's not me. That's something that I do... "I'm a mum" is still weird. It's not natural I don't think. And also, because I don't introduce myself every day, like when you go out and say this is my husband. You would say that more often than you would say I'm her mum or this is my daughter.

Both athletes had differing experiences of coming to terms with their role and identity associated with being a mother. Enid was more prepared for this and therefore, may have found it easier to adapt as she experienced a preparation stage prior to giving birth.

### **Theme 3: Athlete Mother Identity**

The athlete mother identity theme depicts how the participants negotiated and renegotiated space for the athlete identity and the mother identity and the challenge to work cooperatively, hence becoming the 'athlete mother identity'. The sub-themes included here are dual identity, priorities and lifestyle as an attempt is made to uncover how the combination or segregation of these two roles influence each other.

#### ***Subtheme: Dual Identity***

The participants highlighted a separation of their two identities, which was regarded positively as it enabled the athletes to flourish in both realms of their identity. For example, at

six-months, Margaret felt, “I can separate the two. Like I don’t feel exhausted by either one... So that’s why I don’t think it bothered me, I feel fresh as a mum, fresh as an athlete.” Enid also stated at 16-months the ability to compartmentalize both her mother and athlete identities:

I still kinda feel like I’ve got two separate identities... it’s quite nice that I am able to like sort of separate everything in some ways. Yer but I think in a healthy way not in like a dismissive way.

The participants explained how the addition of the ‘mother identity’ to the ‘athlete identity’ heightened their motivation and sense of achievement in sport, as being an elite athlete mother was “quite special.” This was due to the challenge of becoming a successful athlete being exacerbated by the challenges of being a new, first-time mother, making the elite athlete mother a powerful and unique identity. Enid expresses it at six-months as she stated: “it’s [being an athlete mum] quite special really.” She continued to explain that to her it seems normal but not to others for reasons such as “it’s my job to compete, train and perform, I just forget it’s not normal. It’s normal to me, but it’s not normal to 99% of the population.” In addition, in her final interview Margaret explained this dual identity, in terms of how she views being both an athlete and mother, and the benefit associated with this:

I am still a mum, and I can see my child over there but it’s still like I’m an athlete at that point and if there were any cameras on me it would be me as an athlete doing what I practice every day. Erm, but it’s just nice knowing that there’s a little support crew over there. A little crew of two and because that wasn’t there before.

Again, as previously highlighted within the *identity* subtheme in theme one, Margaret already had a dual identity through managing both her sport and her job as a personal trainer, therefore, Margaret may have found the balance of an additional identity easier to negotiate.

***Subtheme: Priorities***

As the participants developed these dual identities as presented above, their priorities as athletes and mothers, in turn, appeared to be directly shaped. Athletics was the primary priority for both participants pre-pregnancy. This changed two-months postpartum as they both negotiated where athletics was placed within their lives. Enid's athletics was unquestionably overtaken by the needs of her child, while Margaret demonstrated conflict in the ranking of priorities as she stated at two-months that being an athlete is "still a priority but I don't want to be a crap mum. So even today, I leave the house I try to make everything as good as it can be... It [Athletics] is number one." However, Enid's priorities prior to her motherhood were different and changed significantly as a result of having a child as demonstrated in her interview at two-months:

I would make decisions purely on that fact of whether it was going to affect my training or not, or competitions. Your priorities completely change and to be honest for me I don't think it's been a bad thing. I feel a lot more relaxed... making sure he is ok and that he is happy, and he is healthy is like my priority. Like everything else is just secondary.

Margaret reflected at six-months upon her previous priorities and demonstrated that tensions remained between athletic and mothering priorities as she recalled her original yet unrealistic thought of "athletics comes first, baby comes second. But of course, I didn't know the reality of that." Additionally, at six-months, Margaret still highlighted this conflict with athletics through notions that athletics is "still up there, but it can only be up there if, err, life allows it to be." However, at this time point Enid was able to become more focused as an athlete since becoming a mother, whilst still putting her family first:

I need to make it worthwhile so I am doing everything I can to make the most of that opportunity, even though technically my job is sprinting, and I still want to go to Tokyo, that's still my goal at that end. Erm but I need to look after me and my family and that is

more important than anything else.

Within her final interview Margaret rationalizes her commitment to being an athlete and it is evident that her priority was still very much focused on athletics, as she came to terms with accepting that she has chosen to make the sacrifice:

I mean I'm missing out but there's nothing I can do. I've chosen this. And I don't want to miss out for nothing. So, if I make the Tokyo team, she's not going to remember whether or not I went to the first beach with her or the first park.

### ***Subtheme: Lifestyle***

Despite highlighting the ability to separate the two identities, there was a crossover between the athlete and mother where they “juggle”, “prioritize” and “balance” to create a successful transition. Both participants expressed the desire, and even importance, for an integration between their mother and athlete lifestyle. Pre-pregnancy lifestyle revolved around their sport which dictated most of their day. This was true for Enid who was a full-time athlete and occasionally took part in various appearances as a form of employment:

You don't leave the track really. You socialize at the track. Your priority is training. You know, everything revolved around making sure you recover properly, eating better, like those kind of things... You've got all the time in the world to do it.

Conversely, Margaret needed to work several flexible jobs to support herself and her athletics career:

My lifestyle was kinda have to train twice a day... My job isn't just one job. I do PT and I



do that in a gym. I do PT outside of the gym. I do strength and conditioning for athletes outside of the gym environment and gym people.

Postpartum required lifestyle sacrifices to be made and would usually be within a domain outside of athletics or motherhood; for Margaret at six-months, this meant “social life has been limited because Sally [daughter] is here and I can’t do anything.” Enid at two-months also highlights this lifestyle shift because “you can’t really take a baby in the cinema so your whole lifestyle just changes in general. Erm but you know you just learn not to care about that stuff.”

Both athletes were focused, determined and independent pre- and during pregnancy. Postpartum, although still focused and determined, both participants showed a more laissez-faire mentality than at two-months. Enid explained that “what will be will be as long as I know I’ve put everything I can into it, I’m just playing everything by ear and just trying to be as relaxed as possible.” In addition, at six-months Margaret explained how she has had to adapt to this lifestyle change due to “different challenges that I am doing and facing and it’s ok. I’m not worried by that, I’m not worried that I’ve missed two weeks of training because that’s just how it is, that’s ok.” Although some sacrifices had to be made, the combined athlete mother identity provided additional values to their life, such as balance and increased focus. At six-months Enid explained being an athlete can be “pretty boring” but becoming a mother has added value to her life. She continues to state that as an athlete “you go home, you recover, you eat, you sleep. So, it’s all about rest as well as the training. For me like, I get to go home, and I get to do those really lovely mum things.”

Within her final interview Enid further explained:

So, when I go to training it’s more focused, it’s about training, I can recover as soon as I get home. Making sure I’ve done everything I need to do at the track so when I do go home, I’m not thinking oh that session was rubbish, that was a waste of my time.

Within the previous lifestyle comments, there appeared to be a shift in emphasis from sport to allowing the integration of the new addition to their lives. This was shown to cause disruption for Margaret at two-months who was still mastering organization as “[having a baby] doesn’t fit, it didn’t fit, I am a structured person, and it didn’t fit at all.” By 15-months, Margaret shows a shift in this thought process:

I still feel like I’m learning how to compartmentalize my life, and my life and Sally’s life and Lincoln [boyfriend] has to fit into my plans because these are my decisions... You just need to be super organized, and organization is not my strong point.

Enid recognized the conflicting behaviors associated with both an athlete and mother lifestyle at two-months. Showing that one is ‘structured’, and the other is more unpredictable:

Everything in athletics is very controlled. Like what time you’re at training, what sessions you do, erm like recovery, all those kind of things. Everything is like very regimented. Whereas when you have a baby all that goes completely out the window pretty much. Like you’re on a totally different time frame.

Similarly, at the six-months and 16-months, Enid explained how she has modified her lifestyle to fit both her child and sporting life: “Structure has given me a lot more time to be able to do it properly. To like do Rowen properly and to do me properly. So obviously if he’s asleep I’ll meal prep for that week.” At 16-months, Enid reiterated the need for being organized, “Having a baby makes you more organized anyway, you have to be. Otherwise, you’ll end up just having nothing and then just a screaming baby... Definitely more organized as a mother.”

## **Discussion**

The aim of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of pregnancy and motherhood in elite athlete mothers by exploring how motherhood influences the

perceived personal and physical identity of an elite athlete, over a longitudinal period postpartum. As with previous findings, the athlete identity was shown here to be dominant for these elite athletes, where actions, behaviours, thoughts, and decisions were governed by sport (McGannon et al., 2019). However, over time other identities came into play, and there was a change in the dominance of the athlete identity. Throughout the interviews, it became evident that personal and athlete identity shifted, and space was made to accommodate the newfound mother identity. What is important to emphasize, however, is that both athletes had differing experiences throughout this study. For Enid, there was more of an acceptance of this shift into motherhood, however, for Margaret, her pregnancy was not expected, and this brought about a greater loss of the athlete identity. This loss was coupled with pronounced negative emotions and heightened yearnings to return to her former position. Accepting and adapting to this change rather than perceiving it as a barrier creates a positive identity transition (McGannon et al., 2019). This current study evidenced that during postpartum these elite athlete mothers reconnected with their athlete identity over time. However, rather than returning to their former athlete self, they expressed that they had become a new or different athlete because of the different experiences, challenges, and achievements that they have compared to their previous self, which is also congruent with previous research (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Martínez-Pascual & Palacios-Ceña, 2014). Key however, is how both athletes navigate the first few months of being a mother. For both athletes it became evident that within the first six-months, this period of change created feelings of uncertainty of physical identity, athlete identity and goal associated with this.

At this early stage of motherhood both athletes highlighted concerns with the change in their body and shift in physical identity. During pregnancy and early postpartum the two athletes were exposed to new bodily experiences which influenced their ability to be an athlete. These experiences came in the form of loss of control, reduced performance, and changes to how their body functions therefore, resulting in a shift in physical identity (Martínez-Pascual et al., 2016; Tekavc et al., 2020). As seen in previous work by Martínez-Pascual et al. (2016), elite athlete mothers may have contrasting views as some are acceptant of this physical transition and others view it

as a barrier to athlete identity and goals. However, throughout the initial stages of motherhood, as body control, athletic aesthetics and performance begin to increase, so too does the connection with the athlete identity, demonstrating a key connection between the physical and athlete identity. Within the current study, both participants report changes in their physical identity. Margaret was less prepared to become a mother, which seemed to have a larger impact on her physical identity as she lost some of her 'physical fitness' during pregnancy. However, both athletes later reported regaining their fitness and being able to return to their sport. This demonstrated that although both athletes had different experiences associated with their physical identity, both were able to regain their place within their sport.

With those who decide to remain in their sport, motivation increases throughout postpartum along with a fervent desire to return to elite level sport and to train hard (Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Tekavc et al., 2020). This can be observed in the two elite athlete mothers within this study. Attitudes and actions adjust, and goals and success are redefined to compensate for the new challenges because of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood (Pedersen, 2001). Within this study, it was evident that both athletes intended to return to their sport and being elite athletes. However, slight differences were observed between the two athletes, as Enid's goals remained the same, yet Margaret changed her goal of achieving an Olympic medal to just making the national team. Furthermore, where there was a shift of focus and commitment in athletic goals for Enid, once she had fulfilled the desire to become a mother a renewed focus and motivation towards her athletic goals took place, which is in line with the findings by Appleby and Fisher (2009). Appleby and Fisher (2009) reported that for elite runner mothers, after their initial adjustment to being new mums, these athletes began to view being mothers and athletes as less contradictory and more compatible. In fact, within our study Enid reported how she felt a heightened sense of achievement being an elite athlete and a mother, which was also evident in some of the participants in Spowart et al.'s (2008) study, who experienced feelings of empowerment.

The readiness of an athlete to transition into motherhood influences emotions, feelings, and acceptance of this new identity. Some may have a powerful desire to become a mother while

others express feelings of regret and uncertainty as they move away from the athlete identity and express fears of not being able to return (Tekavc et al., 2020). For the participants in this study, experiencing a new identity felt unusual to begin with as they navigated themselves within this role at their own pace. One adjusted quickly (Enid); the other struggled to associate with the language surrounding motherhood. Although our elite athlete mothers reduced their physical and athlete identity as they transitioned into their mother identity, they remained focused or regained focus on their sport during this time. This may demonstrate a decompartmentalizing of these two identities, forming a dual identity but also at times the ability to compartmentalize when the focus on one identity is desired or necessary. Where employment is required in Margaret's case, a third identity comes into play, thus demonstrating the ability to form multiple identities. What can also be seen in our findings is this 'triad' of identities, especially for Enid who explains on multiple occasions, how she separates herself, from her athlete and mother identity by describing herself as a mother, an athlete and "being me".

Rather than losing or reducing the athlete identity completely, a renegotiation takes place to allow multiple identities to coexist (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). It appears that rather than the sole transition into an 'athlete mother' there were experiences of the mother identity coexisting alongside the athlete identity. This study showed that when the elite athletes adopted the identity of a mother and maintained an identity in sport it evoked increased feelings of achievement, empowerment, uniqueness and feeling special due to the ability to overcome barriers and challenges associated with pregnancy, birth, and motherhood (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Spowart et al., 2008). It is also possible that the addition of the mother identity to the athlete brings about a sense of identity balance (Appleby & Fisher, 2009). The balance arises from the new meanings that the mother identity brings where if the athlete falls short there is intrinsic satisfaction in the fulfilment of being a mother (Pedersen, 2001). Within this study, both elite athlete mothers demonstrate an ability to compartmentalize and show positive and negative influences of each identity. This separation is a positive disassociation that can enhance the commitment to the other (Tekavc et al., 2020).

Clearly defined space for each identity or the merging of these where a child may attend

training, or a competition are often required (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Our elite athlete mothers express the desire to want their children to be part of something that is significant in their life but also require that time for themselves where they can focus on sport without distraction. Fulfilling the athlete identity has a positive impact on the mother as it allowed time out and space to refresh before returning to give the mothering role full attention (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon, 2018; Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Spowart et al., 2008; Tekavc et al., 2020). The athlete and mother identity have been shown previously to both conflict and complement each other, but here we show it is possible for them both to be present in equal measure, despite changes in priorities.

Priorities can change as the child's wellbeing and family replace sport as the most important thing in the athlete mother's life (McGannon et al., 2019; Tekavc et al., 2020). Some athlete mothers are acceptant and expectant of this change as Enid was while others, such as Margaret, require time to manage this change postpartum (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017). Sport is still considered to be of utmost importance, but it can only remain there by creating a balance between the two roles (McGannon et al., 2019), and this was evident within Margaret's transitional journey. Although our elite athlete mothers are in too early postpartum to highlight the full impact on their athletic performance, a positive transition brings about a new relaxed approach to sport which has been shown to enhance performance (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017; Tekavc et al., 2020). This occurs because sport is no longer their sole priority, allowing for multidimensional identities, goals, and focus (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). In addition, the values associated with sport and the freedom it bestows upon the athlete mother, supports them in becoming a positive role model for their child in terms of demonstrating independence, motivation, and health (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017; McGannon, 2018). This study contradicts previous work, which highlights guilt, the need for justification of actions, "good mother" pressures and selfishness as feelings commonly expressed by athlete mothers (Darroch & Hillsbury, 2017; Martínez-Pascual & Palacios-Ceña, 2014; Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Spowart et al., 2008). Our elite athlete mothers do not portray feelings of guilt or requirements to justify actions or uphold traditional

“good mother” ideals but do discuss necessary actions of selfishness as a requirement to be successful in their sport thus, making sacrifices worthwhile or providing for their family.

Sport and other life spheres such as being a mother have historically been considered incompatible and require separation, however it is evident now that there is an integration and/or a parallel presence, of these two spheres that allows for them both to coexist (Pedersen, 2001). Earlier research has shown the shortening of training sessions, changing times and locations as being effective interventions (Appleby & Fisher, 2009). Our findings both support and contradict the suggestions by Appleby & Fisher (2009) as only one of our elite athlete mothers was required to adapt their training whereas the other focused on what she perceived was necessary for her training, to allow for quality time with their child. The lifestyle of an elite athlete has sport as the central focal point whether they possess dual identities or not. The entry into our elite athlete mother's lifestyle evidenced an initial loss of control from what would normally be a very structured and stable lifestyle pre-pregnancy, as shown by McGannon et al. (2019). The lifestyle of an elite athlete mother requires constant compromise between the requirements of family and requirements of their sport (Tekavc et al., 2020). Juggling, balance, flexibility, and organization were necessary when renegotiating and gaining control of this new lifestyle for our elite athlete mothers and within earlier research (McGannon, 2018; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Sacrifices in terms of social life, training sessions and shared experiences with their child are made as elite athlete mothers give all they can to achieve their athletics goals and make the sacrifices and commitment worthwhile. These two identities bring about increased fun, enjoyment, focus and distraction and if a balanced lifestyle, and physical and mental flexibility is achieved then the athlete lifestyle can enhance the mother lifestyle and vice versa resulting is satisfaction of both identities (Darroch & Hillsbury, 2017; McGannon et al., 2019).

### **Limitations, Future Research, and Implications for Practice**

The present study has several limitations to consider. Given the study has only considered one discipline of sport (athletics), from western Caucasian females, future research may seek to further understand different athlete's perspectives from different sports and

cultures. However, regardless of this, it is hoped that by presenting thick descriptions, it is possible that naturalistic generalizability may occur (Stake, 1995), whereby some readers recognize similarities and differences with the results that are being presented within this study (Smith, 2018). In addition, due to the recent global pandemic Covid-19 the final two interviews had to take place via an interview video call which could introduce some variability and change of dynamics.

## **Conclusion**

This research set out to explore the longitudinal transition of two elite athlete's identities, as they became elite athlete mothers. It explored the impact of this transitional journey on their identity, physical identity, goals, priorities, and lifestyle. Across the course of the three interviews, each athlete highlighted crossovers between the athlete and the mother identity, however, also demonstrating how the athlete mother journey is nuanced. Antiquated views meant female elite athletes may have terminated their sporting careers in pursuit of family goals, however in modern day society we see successful amalgamations of the athlete and mother identity. Previous research had highlighted how athlete mothers can successfully negotiate an integration of both athlete and mother identities through actions such as bringing the child to training (Appleby & Fisher, 2009) which has also been noted within our findings along with the fluidity to adopt dual identity by keeping sport separate from family life to spend quality time in each role (Palmer & Leberman, 2009).

What is clear within our findings is that the initial month's postpartum is the most challenging for these athletes, where the biggest negotiations in identity occur. Physical bodily changes, feelings of uncertainty, and changes in priorities are all at play. Not only that but funding and sponsorship played a significant role in the varied experiences of these two athletes. It is hoped that our research provides readers with new perspectives from both a para-athlete and Olympic athlete who are not only balancing motherhood and sporting commitments but also employment due to the absence of funding or sponsorship. Here we can see that for these two elite athlete mothers, the early stages of motherhood may reduce the athlete identity



and challenges associated with physical identity may occur. However, over time an identity renegotiation takes place to allow each identity to coexist. Some experiences of identity conflict were observed within the data, where sacrifices had to be made, but also times when they were compatible, and one would enhance the other. Other identities came into play where they were able to step outside of the athlete and the mother spheres, such as a worker, a partner or simply having time to do other things they enjoyed, showing they juggled multiple identities during this transition. Although some shared experiences, feelings and emotions were evident, each elite athlete mother's transition was unique as they each had their own individual experiences.

## References

- Albareello, F., Crocetti, E., & Rubini, M. (2018). I and Us: A longitudinal study on the interplay of personal and social identity in adolescence. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 47(4), 689-703. doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0791-4
- Appleby, K., & Fisher, L. (2009). "Running in and out of motherhood": Elite distance runners' experiences of returning to competition after pregnancy. *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal*, 18(1), 3-17. doi.org/10.1123/WSPAJ.18.1.3
- Batey, J. (2014). Team Mums: Team sport experiences of athletic Mothers. *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal*, 22(1), 30-37. doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2014-0010
- Bonner, A., & Tolhurst, G. (2002). Insider-outsider perspectives of participant observation. *Nurse Researcher*, 9(4), 7. doi.org/10.7748/nr2002.07.9.4.7.c6194
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In A. C. Sparkes (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* (pp. 191 - 205). Routledge.
- Carr, D. (2021). Personal identity is social identity. *Phenomenology and the cognitive sciences*, 20(2), 341-351. doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09702-1
- Cosh, S., & Crabb, S. (2012). Motherhood within elite sport discourse: The case of Keli Lane. *Psychology of Women Section Review*, 14, 41-49.
- Cosh, S., Crabb, S., & Tully, P. (2015). A champion out of the pool? A discursive exploration of two Australian Olympic swimmers' transition from elite sport to retirement.

*Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 19, 33 - 41.

[doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.02.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.02.006)

Darroch, F., Giles, A., Hillsburg, H., & McGettigan-Dumas, R. (2019). Running from responsibility: athletic governing bodies, corporate sponsors, and the failure to support pregnant and postpartum elite female distance runners. *Sport in Society*, 12, 2141 – 2160. [doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2019.1567495](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2019.1567495)

Darroch, F., & Hillsburg, H. (2017). Keeping pace: Mother versus athlete identity among elite long distance runners. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 62, 61-68.  
[doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.03.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.03.005)

Drummond, J. (2021). Self-identity and personal identity. *Phenomenology and the cognitive sciences*, 20(2), 235-247. [doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09696-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09696-w)

Goodwin, A., Astbury, J., & McMeeken, J. (2000). Body image and psychological wellbeing in pregnancy. A comparison of exercisers and non-exercisers. *Australian and New Zealand Journal Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 40(4), 442-447.  
[doi.org/10.1111/j.1479-828X.2000.tb01178.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1479-828X.2000.tb01178.x)

Howarth, D. and Stavrakakis, Y. (2000). Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis. In Howarth, D. R., Norval, A. J. and Stavrakakis (Eds) *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change* (pp 1-23). Manchester University Press

Martinez-Pascual, B., Abuín-Porras, V., Pérez-de-Heredia-Torres, M., Martínez-Piedrola, R. M., Fernández-de-las-Peñas, C., & Palacios-Ceña, D. (2016). Experiencing the body during pregnancy: A qualitative research study among Spanish sportswomen. *Women & Health*, 56(3), 345-360. [doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2015.1088118](https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2015.1088118)

- Martinez Pascual, B., Alvares-Harris, S., Fernández-de-Las-Peñas, C., & Palacios-Ceña, D. (2014). Maternity in Spanish elite sportswomen: a qualitative study. *Women & Health*, 54(3), 262-279. doi.org/[10.1080/03630242.2014.883660](https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2014.883660)
- Martínez-Pascual, B., Alvarez-Harris, S., Fernández-de-Las-Peñas, C., & Palacios-Ceña, D. (2017). Pregnancy in Spanish elite sportswomen: A qualitative study. *Women & Health*, 57(6), 741-756. doi.org/[10.1080/03630242.2016.1202883](https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2016.1202883)
- Märtsin, M. (2018). Becoming an employed mother: Conceptualising adult identity development through semiotic cultural lens. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68, 11-18. doi.org/[10.1016/j.wsif.2018.02.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.02.001)
- McGannon, K. R. (2018). Juggling motherhood and sport: a qualitative study of the negotiation of competitive recreational athlete mother identities. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 36, 41-50. doi.org/[10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.01.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.01.008)
- McGannon, K. R., Curtin, K., Schinke, R. J., & Schweinbenz, A. N. (2012). (De)Constructing Paula Radcliffe: exploring media representations of elite running, pregnancy and motherhood through cultural sport psychology. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 13(6), 820-830. doi.org/[10.1016/j.psychsport.2012.06.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2012.06.005)
- McGannon, K. R., Gonsalves, C. A., Schinke, R. J., & Busanich, R. (2015). Negotiating motherhood and athletic identity: A qualitative analysis of Olympic athlete mother representations in media narratives. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 20, 51-60. doi.org/[10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.04.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.04.010)
- McGannon, K. R., McMahon, J., Schinke, R. J., & Gonsalves, C. A. (2017). Understanding athlete mother transition in cultural context: A media analysis of Kim Clijsters' tennis comeback and self-identity implications. *Sports, Exercise & Performance Psychology*, 6(1), 20-35. doi.org/[10.1037/spy0000079](https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000079)

- McGannon, K. R., Tatarnic, E., & McMahon, J. (2019). The Long and winding road: An autobiographic study of an elite athlete Mother's journey to winning gold. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 31(4), 385-404. [doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2018.1512535](https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2018.1512535)
- Moshman, D. (2013). Epistemic cognition and development. In P. Barrouillet & C. Gauffroy (Eds.), *The development of thinking and reasoning* (pp. 13 - 29). Psychology Press. [doi.org/10.4324/9780203068748](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203068748)
- Nash, M. (2011). "You don't train for a marathon sitting on the couch": Performances of pregnancy 'fitness' and 'good' motherhood in Melbourne, Australia. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 34(11), 50-65. [doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2010.10.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2010.10.004)
- Negrin, L. (2008). Appearance and identity. In L. Negrin, *Appearance and Identity Fashioning the Body in Postmodernity* (pp. 9 – 32). Palgrave Macmillan. [doi.org/10.1057/9780230617186\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230617186_2)
- Palmer, F. R., & Leberman, S. I. (2009). Elite athletes as mothers: Managing multiple identities. *Sport Management Review (Elsevier Science)*, 12(4), 241-255. [doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2009.03.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2009.03.001)
- Pedersen, I. (2001). Athletic Career: 'elite sports mothers' as a social phenomenon. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 36(3), 259-275. [doi.org/10.1177/101269001036003001](https://doi.org/10.1177/101269001036003001)
- Rasquinha, A. M., & Cardinal, B. J. (2017). Association of athletic identity by competitive sport level and cultural popularity. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 40(2), 191-204.
- Smith, B. (2018). Qualitative research: developing rigor. *Sport & Exercise Scientist* (56), 24-26. [doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357](https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357)
- Smith, B., & McGannon, K. (2018). Developing rigor in qualitative research: problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. *International Review of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 11(1), 101-122. [doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357](https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357)

- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2016). *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Sport and Exercise*. Routledge.
- Sparkes, A. C., & Smith, B. (2009). Judging the quality of qualitative inquiry: Criteriology and relativism in action. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 10(5), 491-498.  
[doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2009.02.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2009.02.006)
- Spowart, L., Burrows, L., & Shaw, S. (2010). 'I just eat, sleep and dream of surfing': when surfing meets motherhood. *Sport in Society: The Consumption and Representation of Lifestyle Sports*, 13(7-8), 1186-1203. [doi.org/10.1080/17430431003780179](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430431003780179)
- Spowart, L., Hughson, J., & Shaw, S. (2008). Snowboarding Mums carve out fresh tracks: Resisting traditional motherhood discourse? *Annals of Leisure Research*, 11(1/2), 187-205. [doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2008.9686792](https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2008.9686792)
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. London: SAGA Publications.
- Stets, J., & Burke, P. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224-238. [doi.org/10.2307/2695870](https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870)
- Stryker, S., & Burke, P. (2000). The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(4), 284-298. [doi.org/10.2307/2695840](https://doi.org/10.2307/2695840)
- Swann, C., Moran, A., & Piggott, D. (2015). Defining elite athletes: Issues in the study of expert performance in sport psychology. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 16, 3-15.
- Talbot, L., & MacLennan, K. (2016). Physiology of pregnancy. *Anesthesia and Intensive Care Medicine*, 17(7), 341-345. [doi.org/10.1016/j.mpaic.2016.04.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mpaic.2016.04.010)
- Tekavc, J., Wylleman, P., & CeciĆ Erpič, S. (2020). Becoming a mother-athlete: female athletes' transition to motherhood in Slovenia. *Sport in Society*, 23(4), 734-751.  
[doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2020.1720200](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2020.1720200)

Turner, P. K., & Norwood, K. (2013). Unbounded motherhood: embodying a good working mother identity. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 27(3), 396-425.  
[doi.org/10.1177/0893318913491461](https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318913491461)

Udall, A. M., Groot, J. I. M., Jong, S. B., & Shankar, A. (2020). How do I see myself? A systematic review of identities in pro-environmental behaviour research. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 19(2), 108-142. [doi.org/10.1002/cb.1798](https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1798)