

*'I have a small window of time left that I'm going to do it':* Transitions, risk and life-planning in the careers of mobile athletes

## **Abstract**

Transitions are a significant part of peoples' lives and perhaps consequently there is an abundance of sports research which focuses on career transitions. The focus within this research has primarily centred on the amateur to professional transition and the end of the professional journey, often referred to as 'retirement'. Whilst other transitions have been presented such as migration across borders, these are often episodic and taken in isolation. The present research focuses on transitions to consider risk and life-planning in the lives of spatially mobile athletes through the lens of Giddens' structuration model. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 male professional basketball players. These interviews delved into the lives of the interviewees with themes related to transitions emerging. These emergent themes unfold the concept of transition set against the idea of life as a series of overlapping experiences which represent the making of a life lived. In so doing, it humanises athletes within this research area by focusing on interlinking experiences. The experiences discussed highlight circular migration, maintaining careers, and preparing for post-playing careers as key transitional experiences overlapping with family life. The paper concludes by making practical and theoretical suggestions for how the knowledge generated informs how future research and policy should understand and approach how athletes interpret transitions and risks throughout their lives, impacting on a wide range of potential research areas including transitions and concussion.

## **Keywords**

**Career Transitions, Risk, Giddens, Mobilities, Life-Planning**

## **Introduction**

Research into athletic lives is well developed, focusing often on the being of athletic life (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). Transitions reside at the heart of these. Development and mastery, the stages between seasons, turning professional, and the movement between competitions are the most visible aspects of an athlete's career narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2009). Being an athlete is said to be at the centre of these lives due to the long-term commitments anchoring athletic identity (Ryba, Ronkainen & Selänne, 2015). This anchor is consequently founded through associations created during experiences of transition from amateur to professional and elite performance in sport (Hague & Law, 2022; Platts & Smith, 2018), with elite athletic careers a way of mobilising and making sense of a life course (Hickey and Roderick, 2023).

For athletes in the twenty-first century, spatial mobility is an integral aspect of developing and maintaining such athletic identities (Agergaard & Ronglan, 2015). In this context, mobility is the action of moving from place-to-place for professional development and work, the ease or difficulty with which individuals can achieve these outcomes, and how these ongoing processes affect experiences and the self (Engh & Agergaard, 2015). Athletes take advantage of opportunities across countries and continents often removed from their places of birth (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014). Spatial mobility is achieved through continuous negotiation between athletes seeking movement and social and political forces (Engh and Agergaard, 2015). Mobility is, accordingly, a personal endeavour shaped not solely by structural, historical, and economic constraints, but by political and familial experiences of transitions across boundaries (Carter 2011). Within the context of athletic careers and mobility, this paper considers the transitional experiences of professional basketball players as they negotiate their lives.

Within career transition research there is a tendency to focus on the end of careers and on those already retired from their performing lives due to the potential for crisis. This focus has included de-selection from association football academies (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Wilkinson, 2021), US college athletics (Menke & Germany, 2019), Olympic athletics (Cosh, McNeill & Tully, 2021; Oulevey et al, 2021; Hong & Fraser, 2023) and professional football (Roderick, 2014; Knights et al, 2019; Stamp, Potrac & Nelson, 2021). At the time of the interviews, all athletes had contracts as professional basketball players. Such is the nature of basketball contracts the majority of these were on single season deals with only two of the athletes having a multi-season deal. These athletes' observations on their lives consequently provide the perspective of athletes experiencing transitions, with the transition away from a playing career in the future. This paper contributes to the literature on transitions through this expansion and helps to provide insights into preparations, risk, and interlinking pursuits.

The aims of this paper are subsequently twofold. Firstly, the paper aims to elucidate the transitional experiences of athletes as they manage transitions throughout their lives. Instead of focusing on one element of their biography such as fatherhood or retirement. This allows the shedding of light on transitions as a continual feature of lives lived both on and off the court. Secondly, the aim is to relate these experiences to theory through the lens of risk to inform practice in the management, support and education of athletes' maintenance and dissolution of their athletic careers within their lives. These introductory points are built upon through several sections. Firstly, the literature on transitions is explored. Secondly, Giddens' (1984; 1990; 1991) observations around life-planning, risk and ontological security are presented against the backdrop of his wider structuration theory. The paper then moves to discuss the methodological approach taken, before analysing and critiquing the transitional experiences of the athletes in focus.

## **Transitions**

The focus of career transition research is often on crises or losses driven by involuntary career termination (Cosh, McNeill & Tully, 2021; Hong & Fraser, 2023). This focus follows the interest in retirement and identity challenges outside of sport (For example, Waling & Fildes, 2017). Within these crises, the experiences of retiring from athletic performance and competition can differ between individuals. The reason for retirement is, consequently, a potential force shaping a transition involving crises or not (Jewett, Kerr & Tamminen, 2020). Some athletes fulfil their ambitions as athletes and reach the end of a successful career, whilst others are forced from the sport through de-selection or injury (Jepsen, 2023).

While retirement transitions have long been a predominant focus, there is also a rich literature on transitions within athletes' lives which includes migration pathways. For example, Giffin et al (2023) focus on the integration of refugees into the Canadian sports system. This links to the present research as the interviewed athletes for this research are spatially mobile, participating in transitional journeys (Eriksson, 2017). Spatial mobility, particularly in the milieu of the burgeoning global middle-class, is assumed to enhance employability, cultural capital, and social and economic prospects. Here transitions, rather than a transition, are posited. That is, transitions are not presented as normative and linear pathways 'through' with a definitive endpoint. Rather, transitions are continuous and overlapping processes of transformation and challenge to identity, opportunity, and relationships, enacted through the mundane practices of making a life and imagining a future (Robertson, Harris and Baldassar, 2018). The focus on transitions links us to the wider aim to consider the participants as part of the reflexive project of the self through their awareness of and adaptations to risk (Giddens, 1991).

This move reflects the research context as well as current shifts within the research literature. Hague and Law (2022), for example, have focused on the culture shock experienced by English academy football players gaining professional contracts. Similarly, Hickey and Roderick (2023) have moved in this direction by focusing on Goffman's cooling-out metaphor to propose how English Premier League players experience post-career transitions through support from clubs. As Hickey and Roderick (2017) indicate, the focus of transition research on psychological modes of empirical analysis often overlooks the social self in favour of athletic identities. The primacy of athletic selves occludes the humanity of athletes' lives and the negotiation of risk involved in the maintenance of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). Processes of transition need not be a case of finding difficulty, or strife, but must be understood locally within the athlete's life against the backdrop of their socially understood demographics, stages of life and support networks (Coakley, 1983).

The participants' positioning as 'athletes' and 'migrant athletes' unifies them under a banner used by researchers and states alike (Faulkner, Kohe & Molnar, 2019; Faulkner 2020). This positioning obscures lives beyond competing and processing by immigration authorities. Kalir (2013, p. 315) compares the state approach to a 'speed camera' glimpsing migrants only as they pass across borders and figure within our frames of reference. Hickey & Roderick (2017, p.270) describe a similar process in sports career research as athletes are presented as 'solely a sports person at the expense of other social roles, evoking an all-consuming commitment to sustaining a professional status.' Such positioning speaks to the neo-liberalisation of sport, with athletes commodified within a heavily saturated labour market where their entrance to and exit from becomes the focus of interest (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Hickey & Roderick, 2023). The example of Giffin et al (2023) delves into the lives of those experiencing forced migration, however, the theorising focuses on successful integration into sporting systems, which speaks to understanding the effectiveness of the system. Similarly,

Kavoura and Ryba (2020) centre on dual careers and the impacts of such policies on aspiration to show the efficacy of support systems. The present research seeks to humanise individuals by viewing them as simultaneously athletes, mobile individuals, and national citizens,<sup>1</sup> as well as the social roles elucidated by interviewees to enable lives to be understood outside reference to or justification of a sporting system.

Social roles shape experiences, desires and aims as the short, medium, and long-term elements of their lives are navigated. Whilst efforts have been made to shed light on these areas (See Kiuppis & Stambulova, 2020), these elements have often been omitted from the career transitions literature prompted by the abovementioned psychological theorising (Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Hague & Law, 2022). Theorising in this area omits the overlaps and gaps between identities, whilst essentialising individuals to narrow frames of reference. Efforts have been made to include social theory to bridge the gap through Foucault (Jones & Denison, 2017), Bauman (Stamp, Potrac & Nelson, 2021), Elias (Hague & Law, 2022) & Goffman (Hickey & Roderick, 2023); this paper continues this trend. In summary, this paper contributes to research by extending the transitions literature to include professional basketball, and by linking to the precarious nature of the individual's transitions such as circular migration, seasonality and familial development we can discuss comprehensions of risk within overlapping transitions. To meet the paper's aims and develop a broader overview of transitional experiences and identity for spatially mobile athletes, the present research sets itself within the field of structuration and the work of Giddens (1984; 1990; 1991). Specifically, his perspectives on risk, ontological security, and life-planning.

### **Risk, Ontological Security and Life-Planning**

Risk in sport is often considered from the perspective of the potential damage an activity causes to an individual. For example, Soligard et al (2016) suggest poor governance through the expanding international calendar has impacted injury risk for high-performance athletes. Chen, Buggy and Kelly (2019) take a similar approach as they focus on the link between injury, risk and occupational health and safety. Recently such discussions of health and safety risks in sport have emerged through increasing awareness of concussion in contact sports (See McNamee et al, 2023). Risk discussed from this perspective focuses on hazards and the impact of competition on physical health. Though the impact of corporeal risk in premature retirements through career-defining or ending injuries features in the career transition narrative (Wilkinson, 2021; Hickey & Roderick, 2023), athletes' assessment of behaviours and comprehension of risk in the impact on the self is often overlooked providing opportunities for analysis of transitions.

Giddens (1984; 1991) suggests to experience life, we scrutinise and contemplate our actions in ways which allow interpretation. To help us explain how individuals comprehend our lives, Giddens (1984; 1990; 1991) proposed structuration theory to reconcile agency and structure through the concepts of action and structure. Action and structure provide the means to understand how individuals produce, reproduce, or seek change in the social structures present in their daily lives (King, 2010). In connection with this awareness of action, the reality of our day-to-day interactions shared with those around us provides meaning to our lives. For athletes developing and maintaining a professional career these processes might involve identifying as a professional athlete whilst negotiating the processes at its core such as changing clubs, coaches or agents or moving overseas for work (Roderick, 2014; Hague & Law, 2022; Elliott, 2023).

When these challenges are managed stability is offered through the normalcy of daily life through ontological security (Giddens, 1984; 1990; 1991). Ontological security is at the

centre of individual social action (Giddens, 1991). Giddens (1990, p. 92) defines ontological security as ‘the confidence...human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity within the surrounding social and material environments of action’. To maintain and preserve ontological security, individuals seek ways to assert control over their lives (Giddens, 1990; 1991). Ontological security is, however, under consistent threat due to social conditions and consequential moments. Building on Kierkegaard’s presentation of anxiety as existential dread (Krickel-Choi, 2022), Giddens suggests events which challenge and prevent the continuity of everyday routine may result in anxiety, leading to the potential for personal crises and loss of ontological security (Giddens 1990, 1991). Therefore, narratives of identity develop through the navigation of risk to avoid existential crises (Giddens, 1991).

Giddens (1999) suggests awareness of risk is bound up with our aspirations to control the future and the ability to do so. Reflexively organised life-planning is at the core of the biographical arc of these aspirations (Giddens, 1990). Giddens (1991, p. 36) utilises “practical consciousness” as the conscious and unconscious processing of risk and anxieties associated with life-planning. Giddens contends practical consciousness presents the everyday knowledge and skills individuals use to navigate and make sense of their social world. When awareness of or experiences of insecurity arise, answers are sought to waylay the fears of practical consciousness and restore emotional stability. Consequently, through athletes’ narratives, this research probes the understanding of risk within transitions as displayed through the articulation of lives both on and off the basketball court through life-planning and challenges to ontological security.

## **Methodology**

The analysis of athletic identities and transition draws on the experiences of 18 male professional basketball players<sup>2</sup>, formed around a methodological underpinning of *naturalistic inquiry* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The 18 participants were all professionally employed by clubs in the British Basketball League (BBL) at the time of the interview. The athletes' experiences of competing at both amateur and professional levels were drawn from reflections across four continents, spanning a total of 19 countries. Participants were male with ages ranging between the ages of 21 and 31, with experiences of overseas professional work ranging from one to eight seasons. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants to help gauge reflections on the experiences of mobility, with reflections on preparation and experiences of transition one aspect of a broader narrative of negotiation and impact.

Due to the demands and constraints of the professional context in which these athletes were employed, one interview was conducted with each of the athletes. One hour was allocated by clubs who acted as a gatekeeper to the players via a known contact. Informed consent was sought from individual athletes before the interview. Athletes were met as a playing group initially, then individually to discuss interviews before setting a time, which also acted as a moment to develop rapport within the time constraints. The actual length of interviews ranged from 35 to 90 minutes, with the majority around an hour in length. Interviews were selected as a revealing instrument of inquiry (Guest, 2006). Due to these capabilities, this method has been deployed throughout sport migration (See Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Engh & Agergaard, 2015; Van der Meij & Darby, 2017) and career transition research (Brown et al., 2019; Hickey & Roderick, 2023; Jones & Denison, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews provide researchers with insights into the social world through the interviewee via discussions about experiences (Amis, 2005). Building on these observations, semi-structured interviews were adopted for the wider research project into athletes' migratory experiences, providing a focus on the narrative of migration. The flexibility

to inquire and respond positions semi-structured interviews as an important aspect of interpretive sport research (Smith & Caddick, 2012). By delving into the interactional production of the interview, we can declare identities springing forth from the respondents reporting of their experiences and their reporting of the ‘how?’, ‘what?’ and ‘why?’ questions which probe beyond structured approaches to interviewing (Silverman, 2017). This approach shaped the development of the interview schedule which focused on the athletes’ biographies working from their early development in sport to their present, and, finally, their plans, which enabled themes related to transitions to emerge.

The reflections on, as well as adaptations of, the interview schedules were part of an iterative process of collection and analysis of these experiences, which is symptomatic of the relationship between the inquirer and the inquired at the heart of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Beuving & de Vries, 2015). Building on this iterative process, the data was processed auditorily, transcribed and analysed as text by unitising the data into codes and, subsequently, themes. Codes were developed after auditory processing and transcription to help construct the data into thematic units of analysis (Saldana, 2016). Themes concerned with career transitions emerged from codes related to the athletes’ deployment, contractual considerations, professional development, and familial expectations. For example, codes such as ‘brother’, ‘sister’ and ‘mother’ are clustered under the theme ‘family’. It is from these themes theoretical observations were developed to provide ‘explanatory propositions’ which speak to the general (Giddens 1984, xviii). The personal is linked to the wider social issue and theory through this approach (Wright Mills, 2000). This case study, therefore, elucidates exemplars which assist in the social scientific goals of producing context-dependent knowledge to inform expert practice within a given field (Flyvberg, 2006).

Pseudonyms are used for all references to athletes throughout this study (See Table 1) due to the publicly available profile of the participants. With all participants having readily

available profiles, clubs and countries visited are also omitted and referred to by description rather than name. This process aligns with Kaiser’s (2009) suggestion to recognise the audience and potential for respondents to receive public questioning surrounding research findings. This situation is particularly problematic in professional sporting cultures due to the anxieties around public profiles exposing professional athlete interviewees (Hague & Law, 2022).

Name	Years Pro	Professional Experience
Kevin	3	Played across three countries. Has NBA G League experience. Studying for a Masters' Degree. North American.
Darius	3	Played across three countries. North American.
Landry	4	The third country played in. Developing a sports and conditioning business in hometown alongside studying for qualifications. North American.
Taj	1	First year since completing college. First experiences of professional life. Completing education alongside playing. North American.
Greg	8	Played across four countries. Now resides in country on a year-to-year contract. North American.
Tyler	4	Played across three countries. Developing a business in hometown. North American.
Kyle	1	First year since completing college. First experiences of professional life. North American.
Tyreke	4	Played across three countries. Pursuing education alongside playing. North American.
Blake	2	Played across two countries. Pursuing education alongside playing. North American.
Alexey	3	Played across four countries. Pursuing education alongside playing. European.
Nikola	4	Played across three countries. European.
Brandon	5	Played across three countries. Pursuing public speaking alongside playing.
Marcin	1	First year since completing college. First experiences of professional life. European.

Isaiah	4	Competed in two different countries. North American.
Nicolas	7	Competed in five different countries. European.
Steve	1	First year since completing college. First experiences of professional life. North American.
Kemba	5	Played across five countries. North American.
Victor	4	Played across three countries. Completing internship alongside playing. European.

Table 1: Pseudonyms of players and the number of years pro at interview

### **Life-planning in the past, present, and future**

The following sections flow from the idea that self and self-identity are reflexively developed in the construction of a biography (Giddens, 1991). Subsequently, the structure follows the biography of the athletes moving from becoming an athlete, to being one and then to considering retirement which are all set against the context of their lives. The biography of being an athlete and negotiating transitions throughout the athletic career begins at an early stage in their lives. For athletes based in Europe, there is an opportunity to turn professional early. This process runs alongside other opportunities involving educational institutions in North America and the associated scholarships. For players raised in North America, the routes to a professional career involve high school, the Amateur Athletic Union, private summer camps and, lastly, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) college structures. Life-planning within these routes requires management of time, with the reflexive construction of self-identity as dependent on preparing for the future as interpreting the past to make decisions on who to be within the available choices (Giddens, 1991).

The choice for prospective routes is evidenced by the 19% of players participating in the NBA who are not from an NCAA background (NCAA Research, 2020). While a clear 81%

of NBA opening day rosters comprise NCAA athletes, there are still further opportunities beyond this sphere which enable a steady progression. This situation indicates the individuality of such experiences showing there is not a way into these professional careers, but several ways through individual experiences, opportunities, and locality. These routes were exemplified by the choice presented to Alexey:

*“I was fortunate that I was able to choose to do the American or European way. So, I was fifteen playing for the youth national team and they kept pushing me to go pro. [Coaches] were telling me that with the American way, you don’t know if you’re going to get lost. There are so many colleges and so many good players in America!”*

Pressures such as these are an emerging feature of the careers of young athletes, with agents and professional organisations trying to shape athletes’ futures (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Here we see the concomitant running of the end of youth and childhood alongside the requirement for adult decisions through recognition (Blatterer, 2007; Hague & Law, 2022). This recognition is drawn from status provided via being a talented young athlete alongside requirements for the decisions related to college, associated scholarships, and academic performance. During his mid-teens, Alexey was presented with such questions about decisions to continue as a basketball player:

*“I’d moved around to a couple of [professional] club teams in [home country] to get exposure. One of the coaches was friends with [reputable college coach in the United States] so I got to meet [coach] and meet his son...then I ended up going to school with his son in America.”*

Through exploring the development of the athletic self through Alexey’s biography, the project of disentangling the socially defined personas from players’ awareness of personal agency and

identity begins (Giddens, 1984). As athletic experiences occur, athletes' understanding of themselves develops and being involved in sport becomes an element of practical consciousness, which is embraced as a cocoon of known frameworks driven by the admiration of their success as an athlete (Giddens, 1990; 1991). This cocoon provides opportunities through scholarships and a career whilst sheltering the individual from the difficult unknowns such as navigating a new college or school system and distance from family and friends. As Darius communicated '*Everybody in my family plays basketball and everybody knows I play...it's just what we do.*' The ability to be a basketball player becomes security within the risks of transitioning between youth and adulthood, promoting interest in the pursuit of a professional career.

#### *Precarious Circulation*

As players transition to professional life their careers are shaped by seasonal contracts. For all but two players who had progressed to a multi-year contract, single-season contracts exist as the landscape of available opportunities. These contracts run from late August or early September through to the end of the season.<sup>3</sup> Navigation of the sport's contractual landscape ties athletes to patterns of movement which see them spend a portion of the year working in another country before returning to families or participating in off-season activities to secure future moves or post-career stability. As Greg offered: '*Most of the basketball [contracts] in Europe tend to work season-to-season. You rarely see multi-year deals.*' Greg was one of two players interviewed who remained in a country for an extended period having been offered a multi-season contract. Consequently, mobility and transitions are at the forefront of their careers driven by the single-season contractual landscape. Continuing Greg suggests:

*'it's just that eight-month contract and then you have to move out of the team house, and you don't have any place to stay. Then your flight is booked the day after you're knocked out of the play-offs or whatever. It's just more professional. Soon as the season's over - whoosh! - they send you back home right away.'*

The experiences highlighted by Greg are reminiscent of Parreñas' (2010) research into entertainers operating as guest workers between the Philippines and Japan. Parreñas (2010) observed an attitude where settling is not considered, and movement is always on the horizon. Like Parreñas' entertainment workers, Kyle's understanding of his mobility was portrayed as such: *"After this season is done and I'm done with college here then I go back [home] for the whole summer."* Athletes engaged in professional careers with seasonal contracts, consequently, participate in a precarious form of employment. Transitions continue to be encountered in the gaps between and across seasons. These are encountered with the prospect of potentially returning to a club or moving on to find new clubs. The instability and change woven into the organisational landscape these athletes traverse become part of the athletes' practical consciousness. The malleability, mediation, and knowledge of the rules of such experiences are part of living with risk (Giddens, 1991). Risks can centre on the early termination of their contracts, and not gaining new contracts to continue their careers. Transitions are encountered through career paths as these contracts end or are terminated, and players consider the next steps. This malleability means athletes experience challenges to the security of being an athlete from the outset of their careers, which has profound impacts on how we should view athletes' resilience and development as individuals navigating the sports industry.

With the multitude of options open to players, agents, and clubs, the nature of basketball players' mobilities consists of periods ranging from weeks to a season spent in countries working before leaving and participating in activities during the off-season. In some cases,

players are signed as injury or suspension cover meaning the period of mobility can be as short as a few weeks. Through contracts, players are provided with opt-out clauses, providing opportunities to leave situations they deem unbeneficial. These opt-out clauses are also afforded to clubs so they can ascertain whether the situation is beneficial for them.<sup>4</sup> These facets of contractual arrangements highlight knowledge of potential risks for both parties. For players, it provides the potential for continued development and decision-making about their future transitions. Risk as the preoccupation with the future and what happens next (Giddens, 1999) becomes fundamental to the players' practical consciousness. Reflexive life-planning is linked to this process to help support the structure of self-identity (Giddens, 1991). Consequently, the reflexivity needed to maintain athletic identities and take advantage of opportunities requires adaptation and learning to understand the minutiae of the industry being traversed.

This series of challenges tests not only their sense of being a professional athlete but their ability to access the local area as foreign nationals often possess limited language skills:

*“[My first season] ...I remember getting to the airport with all my bags and then going to the hotel and sitting on the bed then I turned the television on and it was all [local language] on each channel...I remember thinking ‘I’m in [host country]. What have I done?’” (Taj)*

The ability to cope with these occurrences often relies on the experience of living and working in challenging circumstances, led by the continuous reflexivity driving life planning. Homesickness, loneliness, language barriers and dislocation from familiar environments are often cited as reasons why migration is a challenging experience (Weedon, 2012). It might be suggested athletes can experience culture shock and dislocation as what might seem a natural expression of identity in one context becomes difficult in another (Thorpe, 2014; Van der Meij & Darby, 2017). For athletes experiencing difficulties with language barriers, day-to-day

existence outside of their life on the court can be frustrating as they struggle to successfully navigate often mundane day-to-day activities (Olwig & Valentin, 2014):

*“I think playing overseas you’ve got to be more mentally strong than basketball strong. Anybody can come over here and play basketball, but it’s the day-to-day grind living outside, living in apartments, travelling to the grocery store and stuff like that. It was rough because you get adjusted to things and you get down for a second, but you’ve just got to keep pushing for yourself” (Taj).*

Despite the risks of dislocation, the need to be mobile remains a significant aspect of an athlete’s ontological security. The life course for these athletes continues as a series of transitions and passages posing questions, opportunities, and risks. Education, relationship status, fatherhood, moving clubs, and signing with a new agent are all potential examples of transitions which involve risk in their lives. Such mediations are managing risk within the possibilities involved in the creation of their lives (Giddens, 1991).

#### *Continuing the career*

The need to make and re-make careers to avoid being left at home is the process of mediation for a young athlete like Kyle. Home could appear to provide a secure and consistent environment in which to return and avoid issues related to living and working as a mobile athlete. Managing life, however, involves risk which means confronting possibilities for the future and a break from past habits (Giddens, 1991). Leaving the circular migratory lifestyle required to be a professional basketball player provides challenges. As Darius offered, staying at home for a season to be with his young daughter also provided a crisis of the self:

*'I was broke and I needed money; I tried to get jobs at Wendy's.<sup>5</sup> I'm a college graduate and I couldn't get a job at Wendy's. I couldn't get a job at the gas station. I just couldn't get a job. I was searching and I was looking, filling out applications.'*

Risks and anxieties are inherent with such experiences as balancing the past, present, and future requires participation across multiple spaces. The form of spatial mobility participated in is a lifestyle choice and provides sources of meaning and personal identities (Thorpe, 2012; Eriksson, 2017). Whilst players can keep up to date with lives across borders (See Faulkner, Molnar & Kohe, 2019), balancing being a father for the first time alongside a consistent sense of self leads to tension. This tension is situated between being an athlete who is often overseas for work and is presented with limited opportunities for other work and being a present father. Being a professional athlete is, consequently, enmeshed with the broader organisation and management of family life in late modernity (Massey & Whitehead, 2022).

This realisation draws focus to the notion of mobility and their careers as a process involving personal and familial concerns (Carter, 2011). The complexity of life-planning unfolds through Darius' experiences, the process of being a basketball player evolves beyond orientation in the world of professional basketball by moving across borders and returning. Highlighting this process whilst discussing his strategy moving towards summer, Kemba suggested *'at the end of the season I'll go back, and we'll [Kemba and his wife] strategize and see what's best for me going forward; that's my summer!'*. Kemba's concerns are mediated through his relationship with his wife, whose emotional support from home shapes his life by connection to a stable base through not only his ambitions but also theirs as spouses (Roderick, 2012).

This mediation brings life-planning to the fore in the management of the past and present to an anticipated future for the individual. The navigation of internally referential social

systems the individual surrounds themselves with is part of the project of the self (Giddens, 1991). Kemba is *'just doing whatever I need to do to provide for me and her.'*, however, like Darius, Kemba had experienced a period away from playing professionally, creating frustration and anxieties as he reconciled his present with his ontological security: *"I worked for a transportation company. It gets frustrating working out, working out and you don't know when your next job's coming. So, I was working for this transportation company and trying to get basketball workouts in when I can or when I could."* In reflexively managing the self, Kemba is exposed to the reconstructed nature of relationships in modernity alongside the effect of globalised opportunities. In so doing, his voluntary attachment to marriage competes with being a basketball player as a long-standing aspect of his being. These experiences continue to probe the question of how and where to live within the negotiated process of being (Giddens, 1984).

Reflexive expertise to sustain the self involves continual improvement and effectiveness. When an inability to garner future contracts challenges athletic identities, expectations they have for themselves and those placed on them can leave expectations unfulfilled. Management of the self depends on the development of routines, the seeking of recognition, or the endorsement of a particular biographical narrative. It creates a safe and predictable world around the self as the "tacit character" (Giddens, 1991: p.36) of practical consciousness is accessed and existential anxieties are countered by a sense of reality as the day-to-day proceeds. Scrutinising and contemplating actions in a way which allows conscious interpretation through global opportunities, the transitions undertaken, and the social systems rely on learned routine and trust to fulfil the self and to make the predictable happen (Giddens, 1990).

Predictability is driven by making and remaking careers in the transitions between seasons to mitigate the risk of challenges to ontological security caused by missing out on a contract or career termination. Though the intended actions of the athletes do not presuppose

success, successes are accounted for and justified (Giddens, 1984). For the players here, their professional careers are driven forward by a series of decisions starting with the college or college and professional route and moving into the need to negotiate the professional career as their social systems and trust in these developments. Marcin's experience of his deliberations offers an understanding of these experiences:

*“This summer I stayed...with my teammate...Him and his family are great people. They kind of helped me going through those times and working out whether I was going back [to college] or not. We just worked out a lot and went to his high school to work out a lot. I met this guy...He used to play overseas...he kind of heard what I was going through and said to let him know if I needed anything and he could get me something because he knew some people. He found me my agent and my agent found me my job here.”*

The negotiation of the self through sustained association with one another is present with Marcin deliberating a return to college or Europe to pursue a professional career. The reliance on his established social systems and expert knowledge through a player helps to maintain the self. There is trust and understanding in the network which has been developed over time through mutual experience. Trust is both reflexive and unconscious requiring intention and belief in the burgeoning and established social relationships (Giddens, 1984; 1991). Marcin's experiences show the peripatetic nature of mobilities in which these athletes participate and the risk at their heart.

#### *Preparing to finish*

Awareness of such risks is among the motivations for looking to the future and a transition away from professional competition. Players are often aware of the short-term and time-limited

nature of their athletic careers, with risk a factor which has seeped into their lives (Giddens, 1991). Consequently, there is an acute awareness of the precarity of their athletic work, and whilst athletes who break the process of circular mobility to pursue work during the summer months utilise networks to further their athletic mobility – as in the case of Marcin – some also include activities with a post-career focus. As Tyreke suggests:

*“Basketball is short-term for me. I love it, and I’ve loved it since I was eight, nine and ten years old playing for my dad, but I think I have a small window of time left that I’m going to do it. My goal is to transition out into the business world and get my MBA. I’m working on that over the summers taking my [Graduate Management Admission Test] ...and I’ll transition out of basketball in the next few years into more of a normal person who stays in one spot.”*

The focus on ‘transition’ from Tyreke whilst using the phrase ‘normal’ suggests there is an implicit recognition the behaviours mobile athletes engage in are risky. Their lives have paradoxical drivers from an ontological security which takes pride in being a basketball player but is repeatedly challenged through the processes of distance (from family), dislocation and precarity. Subsequently, for the athletes here, the security attained through proven patterns of out and return is recognised as brittle, and a process that, at some point, will break (Giddens, 1991).

The scene set before the athletes here means that the benefits of procuring skills and qualifications can help players seeking successful transitions away from their athletic careers (Hong & Fraser 2023; Jepsen, 2023). Whilst Tyreke participated in educational activities during the summer because of the short-term views held towards his professional opportunities, for others these educational opportunities are taken to prepare if the impermanence of their professional career results in prompt career termination:

*‘After the end of this season, I will be going home and taking the test for [strength and conditioning qualification], working with [basketball coaching business] throughout the summer, improving my game as much as possible and staying ready and, hopefully, I’m going to be ending up somewhere next season.’ (Landry)*

De-selection or not being offered a contract is a route ending athletes’ playing careers (Hickey & Roderick, 2013). Landry’s awareness highlights the impermanent nature of the situation with which he and others are faced. Namely, the possibility of not being able to get a contract for next season and being abruptly faced with the possibility of remaining at home. The continued security of controlled transitions avoids the crisis of unemployment and ontological insecurity as shown in the narratives of Darius and Kemba earlier.

Individuals are likely to reskill themselves when consequential moments occur (Giddens, 1991). For athletes, there will be a point when their services are no longer required as players whether that is in the short or long term is part of the managed risk (Roderick, 2014). The risks highlighted earlier show consequential moments woven into the lifespan of these careers. Therefore, athletes such as Blake choose to enhance their skills whilst continuing to play professional basketball:

*“Even if I don’t [manage to continue with my career] then I still had a good ride then I’m getting my master’s in Education here so it’s like I’ve got my master’s and done it all with basketball...there’s a master’s in coaching...but it’s kind of limiting. Say something happens and I want to forget coaching at least education is a little more broad. If you know basketball, and you have a qualification in education then you don’t need a class to tell you how to do it.” (Blake).*

Such reskilling is life-planning as a reaction to the abstract and complex systems surrounding the individual (Giddens, 1991). Developing further skills besides their degree qualifications,

which for basketball players can often be in subjects which do not assist with their employability after their basketball career has reached its conclusion (Hoffer & Pincin, 2016). Such behaviour is an approach to risk and life-planning as a form of colonisation of the future (Giddens, 1990; 1991), the risk being insecurity with little to no ability to control our futures due to unpreparedness (Giddens, 1999).

In seeking this control, players' preparations for post-career can also see them seek other roles within the sports industry. The athletes seeking such roles move within the global commodity or global value chains (Klein, 2012; Darby, 2013) to continue their status within the sports industry by embracing their cocoon of known frameworks (Giddens, 1991):

*'I have good contacts now. I'm helping start a sports agency with a couple of partners of mine. We have a couple of basketball clients now. Basically, doing the same thing my agent does. So, knowing people in different countries and know different players and agents has been a big help as far as getting that up and running... We've actually had a lot more success than most new agencies have, but while I'm playing I want to see if I can make that work. Then if that ends up being a big-time thing then maybe I can transition straight into that from playing.'*

In helping to establish an agency, Kevin is utilising his expert knowledge of maintaining a basketball career as a form of utilising his past to shape the future (Giddens, 1990). We have seen through these narratives that the flux and precarity of being a basketball player competes with the security offered by being a basketball player and navigating their selves across spaces as parents, husbands, and sons. These engagements indicate mitigating risk through life planning is a process of controlling the future (Giddens, 1991; 1999), which is a central feature of transitions across careers.

## **Contribution**

This paper began by highlighting key themes within the sports transition literature. At the core of these is a focus on the end and beginning of athletic careers due to their prominence as crisis points. It was suggested this represents a ‘speed camera’ approach (Kalir, 2013, p. 315) which notices athletes as they enter and exit the sports industry. This paper has built on these opening observations to meet two overarching aims. These aims have been to understand transitions across the careers of the interviewees and theorise risk to inform management, support and education around athletes’ maintenance and dissolution of their athletic careers in the broader context of their lives. The data gathered to meet these aims has utilised the concept of life-planning within structuration theory which has allowed the discussion of risk and anxiety in the context of lives (Giddens, 1984; 1990; 1991).

This paper shows transitions as part of the precarious nature of engaging in sports work. The beginnings and ends of a playing career need to be viewed as one moment of transition within a life lived. Management of risk as a form of colonising the future becomes essential as players look from month-to-month and season-to-season. A career in sport is also one element of making a life. As their lives expand relationships come to play a part and add to the life of players as they establish whether to be an athlete or whether to move on. Making a life is not a simple matter of freedom of choice. However, people are ‘reflexive’ they look at society and their experiences, see the potential options and proceed (Giddens, 1990). Whilst the security of being a professional athlete might be challenged, as in the case of Darius, there are also possibilities to continue the career alongside these developing obligations such as the case of Kemba. Kemba collectively makes decisions with his partner to ease transitional insecurity and manage parallel career choices.

The prospect of retirement means many prepare for the end to avoid worries about what to do next and maintain ontological security. In looking at these issues we need to recognise athletes in the whole, as parts of networks expanding outside of sport. This recognition is not to enhance the position of sporting institutions, their commodification of athletes and their commitments to corporate social responsibility, but to develop awareness of the resilience and lives of athletes through and beyond their playing careers. As people interested in sport both through research, as sports practitioners and as fans, we need to see the person at the centre of the athlete. The commodification of individuals as athletes often homogenises their existence through their neoliberal utility as a worker in sport (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Hickey & Roderick, 2023). As we have seen, being an athlete is only one part of the self within a short career when compared to the human lifespan. The end of the athletic career is one dilemma amongst many encountered through their lives, athletic careers and the management of risk and life-planning. Subsequently, understanding who individuals are within and beyond these careers is an essential aspect of supporting athletes through transition and the understanding of their humanity.

The players here are shown to comprehend risk for their futures, be that next season or the end of a career. Whilst these outcomes are not necessarily secure as they will wash up against the possibilities of intended and unintended outcomes, they need to be recognised as awareness of risk and how to prepare and avoid anxieties created by the maintenance of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). In so doing, athletes display several possibilities for future research related to athletic careers, transitions, and risk. The physical costs of competition, such as concussion are a key area of concern related to physical risks (McNamee et al, 2023). Interrogating the ability to comprehend risk in these areas is key to understanding how and where policy is effective (AlHasmi & Matthews, 2022). Are young athletes able to understand the risk of a which can lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and are

they willing to risk that against the perceptions of success from an unstable talent pathway?

This paper has shown that athletes can account for a career and lifestyle many would find untenable, however, their decisions are weighed against the anxieties of not being an athlete and maintaining a desired lifestyle, whilst managing family life. It is the overlap between risk and anxieties related to the self which requires further exploration to better understand why athletes continue, how they feel when they can't and the overlapping transitions which help form the broader context of their lives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In some cases, with dual citizenship status and cosmopolitan leanings (Faulkner, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For details and pseudonyms see Table 1

<sup>3</sup> The end point of a season is indeterminate in advance as it is dependent on a team's progression from the regular league season through to the play-off campaign. In some cases, these contracts can end prematurely when teams aiming for European competition fail and release marquee signings.

<sup>4</sup> Standardised contracts in the BBL, for example, contain clauses which allow clubs and players to opt-out within the first month. This is also the case with contracts in Europe with Euro League and Euro Cup teams providing opt-out clauses dependent on the team's progress through the competition.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy's is a North American chain of fast-food restaurants.

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