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Dear Basketball (P.S. I love you): A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF KOBE BRYANT'S SPORT CAREER TERMINATION AND RETIREMENT FROM THE NBA

Slovenski naslov

ABSTRACT

The dual career theory and framework was applied to the "real-time" retirement announcement and self-awareness letter written by former American National Basketball Association (NBA) player Kobe Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers. Five major themes emerged from this study that are descriptive of Kobe's *Dear Basketball* self-awareness letter: a) *Love, Passion, and Bonded Forever*; b) *Giving and Teamwork*; c) *Feeling Alive*; d) *Time To Say Goodbye*; and e) *Savor The Moments*. Six major themes emerged from Kobe's narrative comments at his retirement press conference: a) *Internal Peaceful Decision*; b) *Retirement in My Heart*; c) *Tough Moments Create Beauty*; d) *Love and Respect For Fans and Players*; e) *Life After Basketball: Figured Out Next Step*; and f) *Powerful Message For All Athletes*. Recommendations for scholars and practitioners in the United States of America and Europe are provided based on the key findings and results of this research study.

Keywords: athlete transition, athletic identity, retirement, basketball

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IZVLEČEK

Teorijo in okvir dvojne kariere smo uporabili pri napovedi o 'real-time' upokojitvi in osebnem pismu, ki ga je napisal nekdanji košarkar ameriške nacionalne košarkarske zveze NBA Kobe Bryant, igralec ekipe Los Angeles Lakers. V raziskavi se je izoblikovalo pet glavnih tem, ki opisujejo Kobejevo osebno pismo, naslovljeno 'Draga košarka': a) *Ljubezen, strast in trajne vezi*; b) *Dajanje in timsko delo*; c) *Občutek biti živ*; d) *Čas za slovo* in e) *Uživati v trenutkih*. Iz Kobejevih izjav na tiskovni konferenci o upokojitvi se je izoblikovalo šest tem: a) *Odločitev iz notranjega miru*; b) *Upokojitev v mojem srcu*; c) *Težki trenutki ustvarijo lepoto*; d) *Ljubezen in spoštovanje do oboževalcev in igralcev*; e) *Življenje po košarki: naslednji korak* in f) *Močno sporočilo za vse športnike*. Na podlagi ključnih ugotovitev in rezultatov te raziskave so podana priporočila za strokovnjake in izvajalce v Združenih državah Amerike in Evropi.

Ključne besede: prehod športnika, športna identiteta, upokojitev, košarka

INTRODUCTION

What does one do when the ball stops bouncing? This is a timeless question since the inception of organized sport (Lapchick, 1991). Athletes from across the globe, regardless of the sport they play, must face the realities of transitioning from active participation in sport to a future life after sport. In a recent television commercial, Kobe Bryant shows an actor who is scheduled to portray Kobe in a movie how to accurately play the role of Kobe Bryant. Kobe describes the role of him as a young guy on a constant ascent, while the actor likens the role to that of a man locked in a battle versus “father time” on the verge of a steep decline. The commercial accurately depicts a mental battle that professional athletes are susceptible to in today’s world of fierce competition. Kobe Bryant’s story is one of inspiration and hope. Although the former National Basketball Association (NBA) player does not have a college degree, he has spent his time in the NBA preparing for a future career outside of sports. It has been reported Kobe made visits to top executives at social media companies such as *Twitter* and *Instagram*, and also routinely attended various university business lectures. Similarly, former professional athlete in the National Football League (NFL) Marcellus Wiley (currently employed by ESPN) was quoted as saying: “Part of the reason I selected Columbia University over many other schools that recruited me out of high school was that I was always preparing for my second career,” (C. K. Harrison, personal communication, October 7, 2008).

Thus, the current study aims to apply the conceptual framework of dual career theory to professional athletes using Kobe Bryant as a prime example. Kobe has not wasted any time since retiring; Bryant has founded Kobe Inc., a company aimed at promoting products and services related to the sports industry that are designed to stimulate change. His innovative business also includes a business unit by the name of Kobe Media, which will tell inspirational fiction and non-fiction stories. Kobe believes this business is his next calling and that his endeavors will be similar to his experiences in professional sport. The former NBA player was quoted as saying: “I can only imagine it’s basically the same stressful, miserable, joyful, blessed journey” (Rovell, 2014).

The central research questions this study examines are as follows: a) What are the major themes from Kobe’s retirement press conference in regard to his dual career and transition out of basketball?; b) What are the major themes in regard to Kobe’s self-awareness letter titled “*Dear Basketball*”?; and c) Which best practices, in regard to player development, were revealed from the qualitative data surrounding Kobe’s retirement press conference and self-awareness letter?

Literature Review

The literature review is organized into the following three subtopics: a) Athletic Retirement; b) Athletic Identity; and c) Dual Career Theory.

Athletic Retirement

Athletic retirement can be defined as a transition from a predominate role as an athlete in competitive sport (i.e. interscholastic, collegiate, semiprofessional, or professional), to a role elsewhere in society (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Retirement from high-level athletics differs from that of conventional retirement from another industry in that it reflects a transition from athlete to another functional role within society, as opposed to a withdrawal from the workforce as a whole (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997).

Scholars have studied athletic retirement and the ensuing experiences of former athletes in an effort to ascertain whether retirement from elite level sport competition results in a negative or a positive outcome for athletes (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004; Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014). Some scholars have reported signs of negative transitions, ultimately culminating in a former athlete's inevitable experience of trauma, distress, and/or adjustment crises (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). According to Warriner and Lavallee (2008), six of seven retired elite gymnasts that were interviewed conveyed experiences of emotional distress upon retiring from sport. Coakley (1983) summarized the findings of many scholars who have documented examples of trauma, identity issues, and the loss of financial status and social support in retiring athletes (see, for example, Ball, 1976; Harris & Eitzen, 1978; Hill & Lowe, 1974; McPherson, 1980; Rosenberg, 1980a, 1980b, 1981). Similarly, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) summarized several studies that have analyzed the negative effects of athletic retirement, which include depression and eating disorders (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Ogilvie & Howe, 1982), lowered self-confidence (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), and substance abuse and suicidal tendencies (Ogilvie, 1987; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). The research from Cecic–Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic (2004) and the ISSP position stand (2011) indicate that only 15% of elite athletes experience traumatic life events from their sport termination. However, not all elite athletes experience positive outcomes after sport (Hawkins and Colleagues, 2007). While Lewis and Harrold (2004) found indicators of positive outcomes after sport (see the next section), these same authors report that former NFL players experience serious hardships when it comes to financial, emotional, and psychosocial well-being.

Conversely, a few scholars (Allison & Meyer, 1988; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993) have suggested athletic retirement is a time marked with opportunities for former athletes to seek out alternative lifestyles unlike those previously dominated by competition and athletic demands. These studies have documented former athletes' feelings of relief (Allison & Meyer, 1988) and a sense of positive change (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Similarly, Lewis and Harrold (2004) found 70.3 percent of current NFL players interviewed regarded retirement as a positive opportunity to spend more time with family and friends. Additionally, over half the players viewed retirement as an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of their hard work without injury and to pursue other career interests (Lewis & Harrold, 2004).

Existing research provides numerous examples of both well-adjusted and less than ideal circumstances for former athletes. Within the athletic career transition studies there is a wide variety of findings. Therefore, many studies have focused on the personal and situational factors that contribute to the way in which an athlete perceives and adjusts to retirement including gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and social and emotional support networks (Coakley, 1983). The majority of athletes have the opportunity to experience a positive life event when transitioning out of elite competitive sport. As was mentioned earlier, the key is to get them to prepare for a second career and have an identity beyond physical participation and athleticism. Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) cite several scholars that list coping skills (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Meichenbaum, 1977), social support (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Sarason & Sarason, 1986; Smith 1985), and pre-retirement planning (Coakley, 1983; Hill & Lowe, 1974; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990) as significant influences on a former athlete's ability to successfully adjust to retirement. Another factor that plays a key role in an athlete's ability to cope with and adjust to the transition that accompanies sport retirement is the extent to which his or her notion of self, or identity, is grounded in being an athlete (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Pearson et al., 1990; Taylor et al., 1994; Lavallee, 2005).

Due to the nature of competitive sport, participation at the highest levels typically require a great deal of physical exertion. However, injuries or health related problems are just one of the causal factors for sport career termination which takes a physical toll on an athlete's body; this is why athletes are sometimes forced to retire at a young age despite remaining mentally capable. Lewis et al. (2004) found current players in the NFL expect to play professional football for an average of 12.5 years; however, the league reports the length of an average NFL career to be just 4.2 years. Because sport retirement occurs at a relatively young age as compared to retirement from more traditional industries, athletic retirees must find a way to successfully re-immerses themselves in society, whereas general retirees are often focused on pulling away from substantial roles within the community. This process of re-immersion into the workforce often requires adopting a role that does not fit into one's current scope of identity.

Athletic Identity

Identity is a self-concept based on "a variety of or combination of talents, personality, character traits, academic performance, occupation, religion, etc." (Beamon, 2012). Often, an athlete is fully immersed from an early age in attending scheduled practices and competitions and attaining challenging performance goals, which results in not having sufficient time to experiment with roles outside of athletics. Additionally, athletes often receive a high degree of social acknowledgment in reference to their athletic ability. As a result, it is not uncommon for much, or all, of an athlete's identity to be tied to his or her participation in athletics (Beamon, 2012; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). In a study examining retirement of elite gymnasts, Warriner and Lavallee (2008) found most of the participants conveyed in an interview that they were unsure of what they liked to do, what they were capable of doing, and what was important to them outside of gymnastics. This notion is more broadly labeled "identity foreclosure" and it occurs when one adopts a perception of self without allowing the time or resources for other potential roles to develop and contribute to one's identity (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Marcia 1966).

Park, Lavallee, and Tod (2013), cited 34 research studies from 1968-2010 that have documented strong athletic identity and athletic identity foreclosure as contributing negatively to an athlete's transition into retirement. Additionally, Cecic-Erpič et al. (2004) found strong athletic identity leads to more severe and more recurrent experiences of difficulty during athletic retirement. More specifically, several studies have found a connection between athletic identity foreclosure and the underdevelopment of career maturity, which causes difficulty in the retirement process (Adler & Adler 1991; Beamon & Bell, 2011; Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). Career maturity has been described as the development of thoughts and abilities necessary to make well-informed business decisions (Meeker, Stankovich, & Kays, 2000).

A strong athletic identity appears to be more prevalent among African American male athletes (Brown, Jackson, Brown, Sellers, Keiper, & Manuel, 2003; Harrison, Moore & Harrison, 2002). Using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993), Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, and Bimper (2011) assessed notions of athletic identity in African-American and White American male athletes. Harrison et al. (2011) found African American males were more likely than White males to identify solely as athletes. Similarly, Beamon (2012) found 15 of 20 African American male athletes interviewed reported athletics made up 60 percent or more of their identities, while 12 out of 20 participants reported 75 percent or more of their identities were due to their athletic performance. One participant stated, "Sports is basically me ... so I don't think I can do anything outside of sports" (Beamon, 2012, p. 201).

Dual Career Theory

Dual career theory has not been previously applied within the context of professional athletes' career transition. For the purposes of this research study, "dual career" refers to a lifestyle with an emphasis on both an athletic component and a non-athletic component such as work or school (Stambulova, Engstrom, Franck, Linner, & Lindahl, 2015), or a balanced combination of the obligations that define the two roles (Guidotti, Cortis, & Capranica, 2015), particularly related to student-athletes.

In a literature review on dual career realities of European student-athletes, Guidotti et al., (2015) cited several studies finding a focus on education and career planning led to positive transitions out of sport (Stambulova, Stephan, & Japhäg, 2007; Stambulov & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Debois, Ledon, Argiolas, & Rosnet, 2012; Park et al., 2013). Additionally, Lally (2007) found Canadian student-athletes, who actively engaged more fully in school and other facets outside of athletics prior to athletic retirement, did not suffer a major identity crisis upon retirement. In a systematic review, Park et al. (2013) cited three research studies that document the positive affect of a balanced life between athletics and non-athletics prior to retirement on an athlete's transition out of sport (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, 2004; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Similarly, Warriner and Lavallee (2008) cited all but one of the elite gymnasts in their study had experienced some form of an identity crisis upon retirement. The gymnast who was not exposed to an identity crisis discussed the heavy emphasis she placed on her education and grades throughout her gymnastics career; her academic focus served as another source of self-definition. In a qualitative study of ten African American former Division I football players, Irons (1999) concluded all ten participants felt earning a college degree eased the identity crisis experience upon retirement. Cecic-Erpič et al. (2004) found more educated athletes experienced less occupation related turmoil upon retirement due to a higher level of professional knowledge and more frequent career opportunities (Gorbett, 1985; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996; Williams-Ryce, 1996).

While it appears that a balanced schedule, which prioritizes both academics and athletics, is beneficial, many researchers have cited the challenges involved in obtaining a true dual career lifestyle. In a study of elite Danish footballers, Christensen and Sørensen (2009) cited time constraints as one of the biggest stressors for elite athletes. Some athletes chose to drop out of school and focus on football while others struggled through receiving low grades. Debois, Ledon, and Wylleman (2015) studied retired international sport competitors and found several participants believed the skills necessary to compete in an elite sport transfer well to the skills necessary to perform in a post-sport career; consider the following quote from a participant in the study: "The energy and commitment I put into sport, I use them now advantageously in my business. The values of sport can be translated to business life, like teamwork, respect for each other, modesty, the professional challenges I set myself." A statement such as this might explain why some elite athletes place more emphasis on their sport and less on their education, or even choose to drop out. Similarly, Stambulova et al. (2015) found athletes participating in sports with a possibility of turning into a professional career were more likely to prioritize their sport over their education. Some athletes viewed sport as more beneficial to their life goals than education, especially when they have the time only to receive minimal marks in school.

Guidotti et al. (2015) also reviewed several empirical studies that analyzed the outcome of a dual career model. Some of these studies cited positive academic results and general contentment

(Jonker, Elferink-Gemser, & Visscher, 2009; Breslauer, Bujan, & Horvat, 2012; Romar, 2012; Stambulova et al., 2014; Wartenberg, Borchert, & Brand, 2014; Stambulova, & Ryba, 2014), while other studies cited a detriment to sport performance and difficulty making career related decisions (Emrich, Fröhlich, Klein, & Pitsch, 2009; Romar, 2012; Van Rens, Elling, & Reijgersberg, 2015). One likely explanation in the variety of findings is the availability of resources. Several participants in Christensen and Sørensen's (2009) study referred to their parents as providing reinforcement of their dual career lifestyle, even when the school system did a poor job of creating a balanced culture. This finding suggests that support systems may play a key role in aiding athletes in maintaining a balanced life, which may aid in a smoother transition into retirement. Guidotti et al. (2015) documented several studies that cited life skills programs and social support as imperative to assisting athletes with career transitions (Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman, & Reints, 2010; Wylleman, De Knop, & Reints, 2011).

METHODS

The participant in this study was Kobe Bryant; at the time of the study, Kobe was a professional basketball player in the United States. He was born on August 23, 1978. He entered the NBA immediately following high school and he won five NBA championships. In 2015, Kobe set an NBA record for the most seasons with the same team and announced he would retire after the season. Kobe played 20 seasons in the NBA for the Los Angeles Lakers. Kobe speaks several different languages (English, Spanish, Italian) and lived in various places growing up. Part of his upbringing he lived in Italy; he also grew up in Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

Instrument: The *Dear Basketball* Letter

Kobe was asked during his press conference interview about the process of writing his *Dear Basketball* letter. The following question was posed to him: *That poem you wrote was very heartfelt, what was the process like in writing that?* He answered with the following narrative quote: "Honestly, it was quick. Once I went through the process of figuring out what I wanted to say and who I was saying it to, it became extremely easy for once I decided I wanted to speak to the game itself, which sounds really weird, but I've never actually spoken to the game. It's always been to the fans or teammates or things of that nature—but I've never actually told the game how I felt. And once I decided to write it from that perspective, and the words came in a matter of minutes." He explained how it was easy to tell the game of basketball how he felt. One of the instruments used in this study was Kobe's *Dear Basketball* letter. The entire text of the *Dear Basketball* letter is presented in Appendix 1.

Instrument: Press Conference Interview

A video of a live press conference was utilized as an instrument in this study. Kobe Bryant's retirement press conference interview took place on November 29, 2015 and was nationally televised on ESPN. Media members asked Kobe a wide range of questions during the press conference interview. These interview questions are presented in Appendix 2.

PROCEDURE

The current study utilized a qualitative research design and more specifically an interpretive and naturalistic approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) claimed qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach: “This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Qualitative researchers examine “spoken and written records of human experience, including transcribed talk, films, novels, and photographs” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 647). Interviews provide researchers with account of the significant issues being examined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), “Interview data often gives life to historical events” (p. 171).

The researchers in the current study analyzed Kobe Bryant’s *Dear Basketball* letter he wrote to the game of basketball and Kobe’s retirement press conference interview. In this study, researchers examined Kobe’s self-awareness letter titled “*Dear Basketball*” as a narrative account, which is a written record that functions as a result from a natural setting when Kobe made a decision to write the game of basketball a letter. Also, Kobe’s Press Conference interview is an additional narrative account that is used as a primary data source in this study. Kobe Bryant’s retirement is a historical event in the world of sport. Kobe’s press conference interview marks the announcement from him that he would retire; this announcement and his last game are historical events.

Initially, the researchers retrieved the *Dear Basketball* letter written by Kobe Bryant was acquired from *The Players’ Tribune*; the letter was published on November 29, 2015 (Bryant, K., 2015). Next, the researchers retrieved the YouTube video of Kobe’s retirement press conference interview by locating the exact web link (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb2E52YLPVo>); the interview was officially titled by YouTube as follows: *Kobe Bryant Full Press Conference - Retirement Announcement, November 29, 2015, NBA 2015-16 Season*.

Then, the researchers transcribed both the *Dear Basketball* letter and the press conference interview word for word and saved the transcripts in two separate Word documents, one for the letter and the other for the interview; this was done to make it user friendly for the investigative team members to analyze the two data sets. The next subsection outlines the data analysis process utilized by the investigative team.

Data Analysis

An investigative team was formed, which consisted of four individuals trained in qualitative research methodology, three of which were the primary researchers. This investigative team was utilized throughout the data analysis process. All of the members of the investigative team examined both data sets (both transcripts).

The same exact data analysis process in the same exact order was utilized with each of the data sets (transcripts: *Dear Basketball* letter and press conference interview); this was done to ensure consistency. The following steps were done twice due to there being two different data sets in this study. Following transcription, each investigator read each of the separate transcripts (letter and press conference interview) line-by-line in order to get a sense of Kobe’s comments. This process is referred to as line-by-line coding (Glaser, 1978). Next the process of “open coding” was utilized in which investigators identified potential themes by pulling together real examples from the text (Agar, 1996; Bernard, 1994). This process is also often referred to as identifying raw-data themes. The raw-data themes are quotes that capture a concept provided by the participant (interviewee)

(Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The third reading of the comments by the investigators involved a memoing technique, which is utilized to record relationships among codes and/or raw data themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). There are three types of memos that could be employed. Code notes is the type the team used. Code notes were formed by the investigators “to summarize his or her ideas about what is going on in the text” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 783).

After code notes were recorded, the investigative team met to discuss the two different data sets (letter and press conference interview). The primary purpose of this meeting was to interpret and identify major themes in each of the data sets. The meeting was twofold in that the team members first discussed the Dear Basketball letter and then discussed Kobe’s press conference interview. The same exact process for the meeting in the same exact order was utilized with each of the data sets (transcripts: Dear Basketball letter and press conference interview); this was done to ensure consistency.

The following steps were done twice due to there being two different data sets in this study. Investigative team members met and during this meeting investigators shared and discussed their code notes with the group. There were few incidences of inconsistent categorizations among investigators, which were resolved by engaging in discussion with all investigative team members. Final decisions were made that would accurately reflect the comments and saturate the themes. Primary researchers identified major themes for each of the data sets, specific comments, and support for each theme was located in each of the transcripts (data sets) (Patton, 2001).

Two sets of major themes emerged from the data; therefore, there were a set of major themes from the *Dear Basketball* letter and another set of major themes from the press conference interview. Once the major themes were established for both the transcript of the *Dear Basketball* letter and the press conference interview transcript data analysis was terminated.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

This study is specifically focused on Kobe Bryant, one of the most renowned NBA players of all time. Current researchers analyzed Kobe’s narrative accounts from his *Dear Basketball* letter and his press conference interview. In regard to the *Dear Basketball* letter, the data set was somewhat small; therefore, the narrative quotes were one to two sentences long. Five major themes emerged, which are descriptive of Kobe’s narrative comments from his *Dear Basketball* letter: a) *Love, Passion, and Bonded Forever*; b) *Giving and Teamwork*; c) *Feeling Alive*; d) *Time To Say Goodbye*; and e) *Savor The Moments*. In regard to the press conference interview, the data set was larger; therefore, the length of narrative quotes ranged from a couple of sentences to a short paragraph. Each of the comments (narrative quotes) included several key concepts, which coincide with the study’s major themes. Very few of the comments exclusively coincided with only one major theme. Six major themes emerged from the press conference, which are descriptive of Kobe’s narrative comments: a) *Internal Peaceful Decision*; b) *Retirement in My Heart*; c) *Tough Moments Create Beauty*; d) *Love and Respect For Fans and Players*; e) *Life After Basketball: Figured Out Next Step*; and f) *Powerful Message For All Athletes*. In the following section, narrative quotes are offered to support each of the major themes. The titles of some of the major themes are directly from the participants’ words, which is a technique termed “in vivo coding” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Due to space limitations, we will only present the top theme of Kobe’s letter and press conference based on the qualitative data (see Tables 1 & 2 for a summary of all the themes).

Dear Basketball Letter Themes

Five major themes emerged, which are descriptive of Kobe's *Dear Basketball* letter: a) *Love, Passion, and Bonded Forever*; b) *Giving and Teamwork*; c) *Feeling Alive*; d) *Time To Say Goodbye*; and e) *Savor The Moments*.

Love, passion, and bonded forever.

The major theme *Love, Passion, and Bonded Forever* represents Kobe's perceptions in regard to his love and passion for the game of basketball. He expressed a sense of connection to the game of basketball. He explained how he will be bonded to the game his entire life. Consider the following excerpts from the letter:

As a six-year-old boy deeply in love with you. I never saw the end of the tunnel.

I only saw myself running out of one.

I fell in love with you.

A love so deep I gave you my all — From my mind and body to my spirit and soul.

You gave a six-year-old boy his Laker dream and I'll always love you for it.

Love you always.

Kobe's letter was innovative, a game changer, and it demonstrated his vulnerability in part. Professional athletes are often socialized to be guarded due to all the public attention they receive, especially when it comes to the media and showing weakness of any type. The question remains can professional (and even college) athletes develop a love and passion for other areas of their life parallel or even greater than their sport? Should they be expected to seek a love and passion as deep as their sport and athletic expertise when their playing days are over? Kobe's letter exposes both the joy and tensions of the sport career termination process and gives the reader of this letter a snapshot of his psychosocial identity as a basketball player and a human being.

Press Conference Themes

Six major themes emerged, which are descriptive of Kobe's narrative comments from his press conference: a) *Internal Peaceful Decision*; b) *Retirement in My Heart*; c) *Tough Moments Create Beauty*; d) *Love and Respect For Fans and Players*; e) *Life After Basketball: Figured Out Next Step*; and f) *Powerful Message For All Athletes*.

Internal peaceful decision.

The major theme *Internal Peaceful Decision* represents Kobe's perceptions in regard to his decision to retire. He expressed a sense of peace with his decision. He explained how he had to look inside to arrive at the decision. Consider the following comments from Kobe's press conference:

A decision like this, you can't allow, you can't make that decision based on you know outside circumstances.

It has to be an internal decision and finally I just had to, to accept the fact that I this – I don't want to do this anymore, you know, its – and I'm OK with that

You have to look inside. I mean. If I had a burning desire to continue to play, I would.

You know, I wouldn't be second-guessing. I wouldn't be on the fence. I feel very solid in my decision.

But ultimately, it was a decision that I had to make. What do I feel? Do I want to play again or don't I? It's a very simple question, but it's a hard question to look in the mirror and ask yourself. The reality is: No, I don't. So why labor it? You know?

It probably helps me to be a lot more comfortable and more at peace with my decision. I'm not held slave to my passion.

I honestly feel really at peace with it.

I honestly feel at peace with it and excited for what's to come honestly.

Kobe's inner peace is a place that all athletes must reconcile with in terms of the inevitable termination of their sports career. The press conference dynamic and interaction between Kobe and the media was relaxed and non-confrontational. His inner peace projected his sport career termination plan in the most positive way, something that scholars and practitioners are seeking when attempting to understand, intervene, and empower athletes as they transition.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current research study, which examines Kobe Bryant's love for basketball and the inevitable end of his NBA career, provides some key contributions to existing literature. The next few sentences demonstrate our contributions woven in parenthetically. Specifically, Stambulova & Ryba (2014) state "as the first step in implementation of the cultural praxis of athletes' careers paradigm, we would like to encourage career researchers' and practitioners' reflexivity by means of positioning their research and applied projects in terms of the following aspects" (p.12). The five aspects of the research approach they call for are that a) the project be meaningfully positioned in a relevant sociocultural and historically context (Kobe's contemporary retirement); b) the project should be situated within a scientific discipline or in the interdisciplinary space to match the research problem (Kobe's retirement from an theoretical perspectives crosses sport psychology, sport sociology, and sport management contexts; c) the project should be theoretically and methodologically positioned (Kobe's retirement is positioned in the current paper with sport career termination theories and the qualitative methods derive from the "real-time" content of his cultural perspective); d) the project should be linked to relevant practice to ensure that empirical data and theory are informed by practice (Kobe's retirement in the current paper is appropriately blended across theory and practice); and e) the researchers should position themselves in the project and reflect on how their backgrounds and experiences influence development of the project (the researchers of the current paper are a diverse mix of scholars and practitioners in the area of athlete development and sport career termination and transition). The literature has also called for more research on interpersonal factors related to career transition issues with athletes (Guidotti et al., 2015), and coupled with the five aspects above—the current study has contributed to these two calls by other scholars.

Kobe was finally at peace with his decision to retire and expressed a strong connection to his social environment being his fans and fellow teammates/opponents. He created his own global business (Kobe Inc. and Kobe Media) to take him to his next career track and plans to continue helping athletes with their second careers. Much like a study by Corrado, Tessitore, Capranica,

Rauter, and Doupona-Topic (2012) indicated Italian and Slovenia student-athletes showed a similar motivation for academic-related tasks and motivation for elite sport, indicating that these athletes are determined to perform both in the classroom and on the field.

Central Research Questions Addressed

The methodology in this study is unique and makes the findings new to the sport science literature. No other researchers to date have analyzed an athlete's press conference and published the findings. The first central research question in this study addressed the major themes surrounding Kobe's retirement press conference. These findings indicate a high level of sentiment and passion.

In regard to the second central research question surrounding Kobe's *Dear Basketball* letter, the findings revealed unique themes that have not been previously been documented in the sport science literature. First, the very act of an athlete publicly writing a letter to his or her sport has not occurred in the world of sport for a lengthy period. The current interpretation of these unique findings is relevant here. The *Time to Say Goodbye* theme reveals that Kobe knew when he was ready to transition out of basketball. He felt good about the timing, which could be indicative of his readiness to tackle a new career. This shows his career maturity and his lack of identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012). The *Love, Passion, and Bonded Forever* theme indicated what a huge influence the sport of basketball was on Kobe's life. Kobe reported that he will always be thankful for the role basketball played in his life, which indicates his strong athletic identity. Beamon (2012) claimed an overly strong athletic identity and identity foreclosure can perpetuate the socialization of African American males to a sports centric identity. There is no question basketball was a huge part of Kobe's (African American male) life for a very long time and he had a strong athletic identity; however, he was prepared to retire and he did not experience identity foreclosure. This is very evident in Kobe's press conference themes, such as the theme *Life After Basketball: Figured Out Next Step*. These findings coincide with a couple existing studies on career transition.

Parallel Previous Empirical Research Studies

Harrison and Lawrence's (2003) study examined African American student athletes' perceptions of an African American male making the transition out of football. Harrison and Lawrence (2003) found the following themes: *Inspirational Imagery Validation*, *Academic and Athletic Success*, *Classroom Accomplishments*, *Family Devotion*, and *Life After Sports*. The current theme of *Life After Basketball: Figured Out Next Step* coincides with the *Life After Sports* theme from Harrison and Lawrence's (2003) study. Additional themes found by Harrison and Lawrence (2003) such as *Inspirational Imagery Validation* and *Family Devotion* coincide with current themes of *Love, Passion, and Bonded Forever* and *Giving and Teamwork*. Harrison and Lawrence (2004) also studied student-athletes' perceptions of a student athlete who successfully made the transition out of collegiate sport. Harrison and Lawrence (2004) found the following themes: *Career Path Well Planned*, *Balancing Academics and Athletics*, and *Positive Role Model*. Kobe has a desire to serve as a role model and to help his fellow athletes by sharing his *Powerful Messages for All Athletes* with them. The *Career Path Well Planned* theme directly coincides with current findings in which Kobe reported that he took 15 years to figure out his next career. Both of these studies (Harrison & Lawrence, 2003, 2004) support the current findings as Kobe experienced a positive transition out of sport and planned in advance for his next career.

Previous Empirical Studies with Findings Counter to Current Study

Not all transitions from athletic retirement are as positive as Kobe has experienced, as research has confirmed (Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Hawkins, Milan-Williams, & Carter, 2007). Further, the American popular press has also covered the unfortunate dual career realities of some former professional athletes, which include Allen Iverson, Antwan Walker, and Darko Milicic. Nonetheless, the current study is unique in that previous scholarship in this area of dual career with athletes has not focused on “real time” retirement content when athletes willingly and proactively terminate their careers in sport. Kobe’s public display in regard to his retirement allows for more scholarly investigation of what it means to exit sport and the layered nuances that athletes face with the transformation of their athletic identity.

Future Research

Future research should focus on professional women sports in both the United States and international regions. Researchers can analyze the dual career realities of female players getting ready to retire in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), the Turkish Women’s Basketball League, the Israeli Female Basketball Premier League, and the Women’s Japan Basketball League. Future researchers should utilize the same dual career framework with athletes at all levels of competition. Applying the dual career phenomenon to retiring athletes on all levels (youth to professional ranks) is an appropriate scholarly approach to examining the following dimensions of the dual career framework: “micro (i.e., individual athletes), meso (i.e., interpersonal relationships), macro (i.e., sport and education environments) and global (i.e., organizational and government policies) dimensions” (Guidotti et al., p. 16). Scholars should set forth a specific framework for practitioners working with athletes in all sports when these athletes retire. The next section offers some key recommendations from one of the authors of the current paper that has over 20 years of player development experience at the collegiate and professional sport level (specifically in the NBA also).

Recommendations

We have not made it systematically transparent for athletes to make the retirement transition successfully and seamlessly. For example, Michael Strahan a former defensive end in the NFL has been involved in the following TV shows that he says are his “second act:” His current and past stints at *Fox NFL Sunday*, syndicated morning talk show *Live! with Kelly and Michael*, and ABC morning television show *Good Morning America*. Michael Strahan, the author of the book titled, “*Wake Up Happy: The Dream Big, Win Big Guide to Transforming Your Life*” has successfully made the transition. We need snapshots of what former athletes did to be successful in this dual career reality.

Thus, we not only need to point to role models, but we also need to pinpoint their exact actions that made them successful. The specific experiences of former athletes like Strahan and Kobe who successfully retired need to be explored and well documented in order to share this data with current athletes who are approaching retirement. If an athlete makes it to an elite-level, they especially must set-aside their own time and resources, during their down time, to give themselves the proper time to find what will be rewarding for them during the next phases of their life. If they fail to use this time properly, they must factor in additional time after their athletic career to reestablish themselves in new career fields.

A major theme from the press conference is *Powerful Message For All Athletes* as this theme indicated that Kobe wanted to help his fellow teammates, opponents, and other athletes. The messages should be seriously considered when formulating best practices for practitioners directly working with athletes on the career transition process. The third central research question in this study surrounds best practices for player development. Kobe stated, "It's not as easy as basketball, because I was born to play basketball and had to really work to figure out what comes next. That's really hard, man — really, really hard. But that's what we as athletes have to figure out." Kobe is trying to convey to athletes that they need to work hard to decide what they are going to do when they retire from their sport. He is giving athletes a heads up that it is going to be a huge challenge and harder than anything they had to face in their sport. Kobe is also revealing that these athletes need assistance, consider his quote: "I continue to try to work with them to help them figure it out. It's not going to be the last season of doing that. I'll always be around for them and other players around the league." These findings support the player development programs that have been expanding in the global world of sport.

The success of player development programs is driven by how well the team environment supports the program from the top on down, how much the athlete engages in them, and how well the people who work within the programs are trained. Often these programs are not as well funded as the performance side of sport. Support of the off-the-court and post sport life should be on par with the performance side athletes at the college and pro levels. Team administration personnel, coaches, and general managers need to increase their interest in the personal side of the player before, during, and after sport as this will help player development programs flourish. Athletes themselves must engage in and believe that programs set up for them do provide real benefits now and in the future regardless of the stage they are at in their career. The people who are hired to work in player development must desire to really want to be in the off-the-court side of player development and not use it as a pass-through to other positions. If just these areas are addressed the impact player development programs could have on teams would be even more impactful.

Existing literature (Beamon, 2012; Cecic-Erpič et al., 2004) contradicts the current findings because much of it claims having a strong athletic identity makes retirement difficult. However, even though Kobe had a strong athletic identity he was able to feel comfortable and prepared to retire. This gives other athletes hope. It also offers practitioners a specific approach they can take when working with their athletes. Even though Cecic-Erpič et al. (2004) revealed that strong athletic identity leads to more difficulty during athletic retirement, there is hope for athletes with a strong athletic identity to not only successfully make the transition out of sport, but to also transition with little difficulty. Due to traditional approaches and the immense amount of literature (see the research studies cited in the literature review), it seems more challenging to assist athletes with strong athletic identities. This may not be the case if athletes are constantly preparing and taking their time to plan their next careers. Kobe in his press conference claimed, "To be honest with you, it really took me a long time to find out what it is that I wanted to do (after basketball)—15 years to be exact. I think that's a struggle for a lot of us athletes: to figure out what comes next."

In the final analysis, Kobe Bryant's dual career reality is off to a tremendous start and new beginning. As previously stated, athletes can learn a great deal from his career transition. Kobe has been involved in commercials promoting the NBA Finals integrated with the summer movie *Ghostbusters* (released July 2016) where he states during the advertising spot: "And they said

retirement would be boring.” Kobe was fittingly a spokesperson for the COPA fútbol (soccer) tournament where he holds the soccer ball in his hand much like him gripping a basketball during his 20 year NBA career. Kobe as seen at the start of the NBA Finals commercial is sitting at his executive desk of Kobe Inc. with a large painting of a Black Mamba snake on his office wall. Kobe was nicknamed the *Black Mamba* because of his aggressive style of play and killer instinct on the court. If Kobe transfers this mentality to the business and entrepreneurial global landscape—he will chart a blueprint for dual career realities that all athletes can aspire to emulate.

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Table 1: Kobe Bryant's *Dear Basketball* Letter Themes

Major Themes	Example Quotes
Love, Passion, and Bonded Forever	I fell in love with you.
Giving and Teamwork	A love so deep I gave you my all, from my mind and body to my spirit and soul.
Feeling Alive	When someone makes you feel as alive as you've made me feel.
Time To Say Goodbye	I'm ready to let you go.
Savor The Moments	So we both can savor every moment we have left together.

Table 2: Kobe Bryant's Press Conference Interview Themes

Major Themes	Example Quotes
<i>Internal Peaceful Decision</i>	<i>A decision like this – you can't allow – you cant make that decision based on you know outside circumstances. It has to be an internal decision.</i>
<i>Retirement in My Heart</i>	<i>It was just the right thing to do.</i>
<i>Tough Moments Create Beauty</i>	<i>There's beauty in that. It's going through the cycle. It's a natural progression of growth and maturation.</i>
<i>Love and Respect For Fans and Players</i>	<i>The coolest thing is the messages that I've received from other players.</i>
<i>Life After Basketball: Figured Out Next Step</i>	<i>To be honest with you, it really took me a long time to find out what it is that I wanted to do (after basketball).</i>
<i>Powerful Message For All Athletes</i>	<i>I think that's a struggle for a lot of us athletes: to figure out what comes next.</i>

Appendix 1***Dear Basketball Letter by Kobe Bryant***

Dear Basketball,

From the moment
I started rolling my dad's tube socks
And shooting imaginary
Game-winning shots
In the Great Western Forum
I knew one thing was real:
I fell in love with you.

A love so deep I gave you my all —
From my mind & body
To my spirit & soul.

As a six-year-old boy
Deeply in love with you
I never saw the end of the tunnel.
I only saw myself
Running out of one.

And so I ran.
I ran up and down every court
After every loose ball for you.
You asked for my hustle
I gave you my heart
Because it came with so much more.

I played through the sweat and hurt
Not because challenge called me
But because YOU called me.
I did everything for YOU
Because that's what you do

When someone makes you feel as
Alive as you've made me feel.

You gave a six-year-old boy his Laker dream
And I'll always love you for it.
But I can't love you obsessively for much longer.
This season is all I have left to give.
My heart can take the pounding
My mind can handle the grind
But my body knows it's time to say goodbye.

And that's OK.
I'm ready to let you go.
I want you to know now
So we both can savor every moment we have left together.

The good and the bad.
We have given each other
All that we have.

And we both know, no matter what I do next
I'll always be that kid
With the rolled up socks
Garbage can in the corner
:05 seconds on the clock
Ball in my hands.
5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

Love you always,
Kobe

Appendix 2

Interview Questions at Kobe Bryant's Retirement Press Conference

Can you talk about when exactly did you make up your mind to officially retire, and how draining has this whole process been on you today knowing the announcement was made earlier?

Were you emotionally drained tonight?

Kobe, with all you have accomplished, what is the hardest part about retirement?

You've said you don't want a farewell tour, now that you have announced it are you willing to accept it, especially starting back healthy?

...

Did you come into this season thinking it could be it and you wanted to see if you can talk yourself out of it?

What made you know this is it?

What told you this is it?

Kobe, would you consider retiring now as opposed to going through the rest of the season?

What did your family and in particular your wife and two daughters, what did they say to you when daddy told them "this is it?"

That poem you wrote was very heartfelt, what was the process like in writing that?

When you had talked about saying goodbye, was there any sadness in that thought?

You talked how you wanted to get through this year, and you're trying hard not to quit where you are ... When you finally realized you weren't able to control the situation anymore, what was that like?

Te sientes aliviado? Ay un sentimiento de alivio?

Describe por favor el momento donde tomas esta decisión del ambientaciones cuando te dio que ya es momento de renunciar.

Porque ahora Kobe? Porque renunciar ahora?

Te sientes triste?

When fans come to the game they received an envelope and in the envelope you wrote them a note, why is that important to you?

...

Did you talk to any former players and coaches about this process?

Is it exciting or scary or maybe a little bit of both to imagine life after basketball?

Where do you see yourself a year from now?

Is it possible the cool and calm Kobe Bryant could be broken down in tears during this farewell tour?

So when you hear from those players, and you look around the league, what do you think your impact was on the NBA?

How much have your outside passions comforted you with this decision to retire?

...

Do you know what comes next?

Would you like the last scene of your story to be a member of the U.S. National Team and win gold in Brazil?

Being a storyteller, given your 20 years, what is the best part of your story over your career having won five championships?

You won your rings with Phil, did you talk to him and what did he say?

You only have a couple more months left and I'm sorry if you have already been asked this question, what are the lessons that you want your teammates to learn?

Now that you have made this decision, does your plan for the rest of the season change as far as minutes a game?

Do you have a favorite Kobe Bryant moment in your career?

How great if you look back on these 19-20 seasons, how great of life has this been and how would you like to be remembered as a Laker?

What success do you want to obtain the rest of the season?

What is your outlook as far as the rest of this season and helping these young teammates get better?

Have you talked to Michael Jordan about your announcement? If so what did you guys talk about?

When did you make this decision to make these letters for the fans?

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How have you handled your body sort of failing you as of late?

What is it like being the older guy in the locker room and playing with some of these guys who are 17, 18, and 19 years old in the NBA?