

As a research assistant for the R.W. Turner Lab, I am responsible for contributing to various aspects of data collection and analysis for a study titled “Accelerated Cognitive Aging and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury among Former College and Professional Football Players: Psychosocial and Neurocognitive Risk and Protective Factors,” also known as the Athlete Brain Health and Aging study. Our essential question is: “What are the long-term neurocognitive and psychosocial implications of Mild Traumatic Brain Injury?” This study investigates differences in cognitive functioning of former collegiate and professional football athletes compared to males without a history of contact sports, with or without a history of concussions.

Focus group data collected by the Brain Health and Aging study revealed that many former NFL athletes struggle with finances after their playing career is over, specifically, spending their earnings too fast. Financial stress or even bankruptcy occurs as soon as two years post-retirement for many athletes (Torre, 2009). Even if they perceive concepts of healthcare as unconditionally good, altruistic, and helpful, their playing careers may have reinforced the mindset that being vulnerable is a sign of weakness (Maier, 2006). Therefore, former NFL athletes may be more likely to seek medical help for only sports-related injuries and concussions.

During the past nine months, I have coded qualitative data from our focus groups on former NFL players, former D-1 non-contact athletes, and former D-1 college football athletes. I also completed and received feedback on master narratives under the direction of Dr. Ronald Shope, which covered behavioral, social, and psychological themes. My preliminary findings revealed that all groups found the transition process challenging. For example, former NFL athletes often struggled financially or knew of others who did. Additionally, athletes faced the task of creating a new identity following their careers. It was extremely difficult to recreate the emotional environment of a team sport, from playing in large stadiums filled with fans to enjoying camaraderie from coaches and teammates. While some players turned to new activities, others turned to substance abuse to replace the structure they lost as players. Lastly, participants pointed out that while playing a sport could cause trauma, specifically from concussions and other injuries, it had also often served as an outlet for anger and other emotions. Communicating with friends, family, or mental health professionals was cited as the best resource to help with transitioning. Overall, the participants felt unprepared for life after their sport, especially if their athletic careers were cut short due to injury.

My project will focus on life after an athlete’s playing career. My current data suggests that former NFL athletes may have a harder time transitioning than non-professional athletes. I want to explore this finding further and describe how former high-level athletes transition into non-athletic life. I seek to answer the question: what specific factors influence the degree of difficulty of their transition? Furthermore, what psychological and emotional barriers inform their behavior? The systems for my involvement in this study are already in place. For example, our lab has received IRB approval for additional interviews related to the Athlete Brain Health and Aging study, and they will incorporate interview questions for my project. Therefore, I have approval from our IRB to conduct interviews for this project which I can audio and video record. Ideally, I plan to have a cohort of approximately six participants that would be stratified by sport level, with half from each group (former NFL and former college football).

All study activities will occur virtually via Zoom. Participants will be recruited using the existing NFL study database and will undergo the consent process before the start of the interview. I will develop my interview protocol with Dr. Leslie Davidson and Dr. Shope under the direction of Dr. Turner to analyze the following themes: identity, communication patterns, and health. The in-depth interviews will ask former athletes about their social networks,

wellbeing, and routines, as well as contain demographic questions that address household composition and living situation. These questions will emphasize how participants describe their physical and emotional health as they transitioned out of high-level sports. Overall, I estimate the interviews lasting approximately ninety minutes. I am confident that my experience administering health surveys and cognitive assessments has prepared me to successfully conduct these qualitative interviews.

Each interview will provide an individual story, and I will be responsible for transcription, coding, and conducting a cross-case analysis to compare the athlete's transition experiences within and between cohorts. Participants will be interviewed over the summer after I reach out and schedule them around their availability. Then, coding and data analysis will be conducted during the summer into the fall alongside the preparation of a manuscript. I endeavor to complete and submit my manuscript for publication by the end of fall, supplying material for my poster presentation at Research Days.

I expect to challenge the general public's notion that a professional athletic career guarantees an easy life. I hope that this study contributes to improving the well-being of former athletes. Furthermore, I hope to define the relevance of these dimensions for former NFL players and contribute to the evaluation of strategies to improve their help-seeking behaviors. If factors that threaten a former professional athlete's well-being after their athletic career can be identified, my findings can indicate how we can better support them. For example, my research may have a significant impact on policy to address attitudinal, behavioral, and social vulnerabilities in former professional athletes. I greatly value these experiences because I endeavor to improve my overall research skill set. If given this opportunity, I would look forward to presenting at Research Days next year and intend to present at relevant conferences with my advisors.

References:

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