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# Entering Collegiate Women's Decision to Discontinue Participation in Sports: A Qualitative Study

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ENTERING COLLEGIATE WOMEN'S DECISION TO DISCONTINUE PARTICPATION IN  
SPORTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

ENTERING COLLEGIATE WOMEN'S DECISION TO DISCONTINUE PARTICPATION IN  
SPORTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

By

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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to gather information about why collegiate women discontinue participation in sports. Women at a Midwestern Division III institution participated in this study. Three groups of women were interviewed through focus groups: women no longer playing a sport, women currently playing collegiate athletics, and a mix of women currently playing a college sport and women no longer involved. The women were asked questions about sport involvement and answered collectively. Women provided responses that fell into 5 main categories: psychological, physical, educational, social, and attachment. Physical responses were those that dealt with health issues; some felt that the sport kept them in shape and healthy while others felt the sport just exhausted them. Social responses dealt with friends, lack of time, wanting to be involved elsewhere, and missing out on activities. Educational issues dealt with sport providing discipline and organization, preparing for life after college, needing to study/grades, and a lack of scholarships. Psychological responses of discontinued players had to do with the sport being too competitive in college and not fun anymore, while continuing athletes liked the status and reputation that surrounds being a collegiate athlete. The final category is relational; this encompasses a lot of issues, but it mainly involves the individual feeling less attached to the sport than she was in high school. The new team did not compare to her high school team. The atmosphere of collegiate athletics is also different; they did not have familiar teammates or even rivals. Additionally, the discontinued players did not have the same role they had on their high school team. Division III institutions may use this information to better understand the female athlete and to tailor their programs to suit her wants and needs.

This thesis is approved for  
Recommendation to the  
Honors Council

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Frame of Reference**

“No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (United States Department of Labor, 1972, para. 1). Title IX was very influential in increasing the participation of females in sport. In fact, since it was passed, female high school athletic participation has increased by 904% while female collegiate participation has increased by 456% (Women’s Sport Foundation, 2008). Females have historically had to struggle for the right to participate; males were allowed to graduate from college, play organized sport, and vote sooner than females. According to Sack and Staurowsky(1998), women were “excluded on the basis of perceived female physical and intellectual inferiority, women found it necessary to explain why they should even be allowed to attend college, let alone participate in sport” (p. 51). Title IX was not only about increasing the number of women participating in sports, but it was also passed to provide equal opportunities in other programs that were offered at federally funded educational institutions. Because of Title IX, women’s sports teams now have closer to equal access to facilities, practice times, uniforms, equipment, scholarships, and much more (A Title IX Primer, 2011, para. 5).

The government has done much to level the playing field when it comes to equality in sports, and on the surface it seems to have worked well. However, women now must face the social and cultural barriers. “Toy, play, and sport behaviors are *learned*. They are explicit outcomes of differential treatment and discriminatory socialization practices that begin when we give infant males balls, bats, and blue items and females dolls, stuffed toys, and pink items” (Cohen, 1993, p. 6). Society tells women that boys play sports and girls do not. “Venus

Williams was named the 'Female athlete of the year' and yet the picture accompanying the article showed her in a low cut, skin tight, revealing dress with racquet in hand. The underlying message seemed to be: you can play sports, but make sure you're feminine as you do it" (Fink, 2002, p. 20). The media contributes to the mixed messages that young girls receive about athletics. By the time women reach college age, many have stopped playing sports completely. "The female share of undergraduate enrollment in 2004-05 was 55.8% while the female share of athletes was only 41.7%" (Cheslock, 2007, p. 5). While more women are enrolled in college than men, these numbers do not translate to athletics. Furthermore, the amount of growth seen in women's sports participation appears to be leveling off. According to Cheslock and the Women's Sport Foundation (2007), female sport participation grew by 26,000 athletes between 1995 and 2005, but only 15% of this growth came during the last 4 year of the sample period.

Since Title IX was passed in 1972, female participation in sports has increased dramatically; collegiate level participation increased by 456% and high school participation increased by 904% (Title IX, 2011). Females are just as interested as males when it comes to playing sports; they just need the chance to express this interest. There are 2.9 million girls playing high school level sports and thousands of others competing in Olympic sports not offered by colleges and universities; therefore, colleges and universities still have a long way to go before women will stop being interested in what schools have to offer (Title IX, 2011).

Colleges spend lots of money in intercollegiate athletics. Athletics help students get involved at the University or College in which they are enrolled and they keep alumni active as well (Mull, Bayless, and Jamieson, 2005, p. 89). A Division I school may focus more effort on generating revenue than on participation. As long as men and women are given equal

opportunity to participate in sport, a Division I school will stay focused on improving the quality and size of their program.

In contrast, the focus of a Division III school is primarily participation when it comes to athletics and is more concerned with the student athlete's experience than on increasing the attendance at football games (NCAA, 2007). Division III schools want as many students as possible to experience athletics at their school. If a student played at a competitive level in high school, they should be able to make the team at a Division III school. The success of their program is measured not by ticket sales and the number of people who attend football games, but it is determined by the success of their teams. These schools truly strive to embrace the "amateur ideal" on which the NCAA was originally founded (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 11).

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study was conducted to determine what factors may cause women to discontinue involvement in sports, particularly in Division III institutions. According to the NCAA, Division III schools want as many students involved in athletics as possible (NCAA, 2007). Despite this goal, Division III (as well as Division I and II) are starting to see a tapering off of participants in women's athletics despite the fact that there are more women enrolled in college than ever before (Cheslock, 2007). It is more and more common to see girls choose other areas of campus life in which to get involved (Cheslock, 2007). Many of these girls have the skill and experience to play a sport at the Division III level, but they choose not to do so. It is important to determine why women lose interest in pursuing athletic endeavors, especially in college. Instead of trying to increase the participation of females in athletics, it may be better to look at the reasons that women choose to discontinue involvement in sports. Colleges and Universities may then be better able to understand the collegiate female athlete and her needs and desires.

## **Operational Definitions**

NCAA Division III – Division III institutions must offer five sports for men and five sports for women and two team sports. Each gender must have sports with playing seasons in the fall and in the spring. There are a minimum number of contests in which they must participate and a minimum number of participants. There are no scholarships given to students for athletic ability, and the athletic department is funded and staffed just like every other department on the university's campus. These athletic departments place an emphasis on the athletes and not the spectators; the directors prioritize student-athlete's experience in the program above contest attendance. Division III schools maximize the number and variety of athletic opportunities offered to increase participation (National Collegiate Association, 2007).

Sports- For the purpose of this research, the term sport refers to any activity in which a participant could continue competitive play at a typical Division III college. Examples include, but are not limited to: softball, basketball, volleyball, track, golf, tennis, cross country, etc.

Athlete – Women currently involved in collegiate level or elite sports programs. They attend practice regularly and play in games in at least one sport.

Non-athlete- For the purpose of this study, this term referred to women who were not currently involved in collegiate level sports. The participants had to be college-age women attending a Division III school. They must have played on some sort of high school varsity level sport or on an equally competitive club or elite team. The participants were no longer playing their sport at a competitive level (they could have participated in intramurals or on teams just for fun). The participants must have had more than four years of experience playing their sport. The

participants could have played one year of collegiate level athletics but chose to discontinue their participation in that level of sport.

### **Basic Assumptions**

Participants did not discontinue their participation in sport due to a personal disagreement or issue with the coach. They also did not quit solely because of an injury or physical problem; a participant may have gotten hurt, but she chose not to return for reasons other than her injury.

All subjects enjoyed the sport that they played and were not made to play by a parent.

Pregnancy was also not a reason for a woman to discontinue her involvement in sports.

### **Delimitations**

This study was conducted at a Midwestern Division III college. The subjects were all college aged women who had played or were currently playing sports at a competitive level. All women who possess some level of previous competitive sport experience have the ability to play sports at a Division III school, and the focus was on the women who decided not to pursue their athletic career after their freshman year of college. Current athletes were also interviewed to provide comparison to responses from women who chose to discontinue participation; current athletes provided information about why some women chose to continue. However, reasons that women discontinue participation in athletics remained the center of the research. Focus groups were held the first week students return from winter break. Focus group discussion revolved around why participants discontinued or continued playing the sport in which they had been or were currently involved. Only one Division III school was used in the study limiting external validity. The school may have had a unique environment that discouraged females from continuing their participation in sport – an environment not common to similar Division III

schools. This Midwestern College has 1150 students from 26 states and 70 countries (College's Website). For the school's small size, they have a diverse range of students. This qualitative study included less than 30 women; however, each athlete had their own story to tell and very few stories were completely alike.

### **Significance of study**

This study is significant because its findings helped determine the reasons that women stop playing sports. With the results of this research, Division III institutions will be able to can better understand the needs of the female athlete. Division III schools will then be able to use the information to keep women involved in sports throughout their college careers. "The ultimate goal of challenging social norms surrounding femininity is to empower women to make their own choices about how to look and act to define their own version of an ideal female body" (Krane 2001 p. 123). This is not only about keeping female athletes engaged in their sports, but it is also a matter of preparing women for the future and the corporate world. Women gain self-confidence and leadership skills when playing sports; in addition, they are better able to handle the responsibility and stress of upper level positions.

Sport is where boys have traditionally learned about teamwork, goal-setting, the pursuit of excellence in performance and other achievement-oriented behaviors – critical skills necessary for success in the work place... It is no accident that 80% of the female executive at Fortune 500 companies identified themselves as former 'tomboys' – having played sports (Benefits, 2012, para. 2).

If it is truly beneficial for women to be involved in sports, institutions must work to ensure that women have a positive experience with their program. It does no good to offer an activity in which no one wants to be a part. Division III schools may take the data in this study and apply it to their women's athletic programs. Doing so will make athletic programs more

tailored to the needs of the female athlete; in addition, coaches will be better able to understand what their players are facing as Division III college athletes.



## CHAPTER TWO

Despite institutions' best efforts, many collegiate women are choosing to discontinue participation in sports. Women who played sports in high school and who had every opportunity to play in college often do not capitalize on this opportunity.

### **History of Women in Sports**

Women have had a unique journey to achieve the freedom to participate in athletics that they have today. Women have had to battle societal stereotypes when it comes to working, voting, and going to school. Before the 1890s, there was almost nothing available in the way of organized team sports for women; even after basketball was introduced as a sport acceptable for women to play, the rules were changed and the game controlled to make it an "educationally healthful exercise" (Cohen, 1993, p. 29). "In general, historical literature has ignored the 'woman' except in the role of mother and housewife... in such a role it was never deemed that anyone would have any left-over or 'leisure' time" (Howell, 1982, p. 35).

However, not all civilizations and cultures have limited women's participation in sport. "The citizens of ancient Sparta were more enlightened than modern societies; they encouraged women to engage in exercise. They believed that strong, healthy women would produce strong, healthy babies. This philosophy died with the Spartan civilization and was later replaced with the Victorian idea of woman hood [sic] in which women were considered to be physically and intellectually frail" (Cohen, 1993, p. 119). Spartan women were encouraged to play and fight just like Spartan men because their society knew and desired what benefits this kind of behavior would bring. After the Spartans, however, women were again placed in the simple, fragile mold seemingly unable to carry out tasks not related to child rearing or housekeeping.

Certain sports in the middle of the nineteenth century were deemed appropriate for women. They included sports such as croquet, archery, and skating (Cohen, 1993 p 28). Most activities in which women participated were determined appropriate based on the culture of the time and the class to which each particular woman belonged. For example, upper class women could participate in activities such as cards, horseback riding, dancing, and board games. Women of the lower class or living on the frontier could be involved in more active things (Howell, 1982, p. 91). Women on the plains were able to do more physically strenuous activities because that is what they did every day. These women had to aid their husbands in the field and with the animals; therefore, the culture in which they lived recognized them as being able to handle more strenuous recreational activities. In contrast, women of the upper class participated in activities that showed off their feminine beauty and grace (Howell, 1982 p 91). These women did not have to work hard, so it would not have been culturally acceptable for them to play hard.

In addition to fighting cultural battles about playing, women were also fighting against acceptable dress of the day. “When the craze for women’s athletics began about a century ago, their sportswear was comical, painfully uncomfortable, and even dangerous. But women were determined to participate in sports, from swimming to mountain climbing, from hunting to golf” (Lebing, 1987, para. 1). Men were able to do everything from swim in the nude to play any sport they desired. Women, however, had to protect their modesty in every way from swimming in outfits that covered them from head to toe (and made drowning much easier) to hiking in dresses that reached the ground because a woman’s ankles were much too sensual to be seen in public (Lebing, 1987, para. 8).

## History of Women's Collegiate Sports

Women had to fight to be allowed in college before they could even begin to strive for the chance to experience athletics. However, once women were allowed into college, administrators had to decide what to do with the women who wanted to play too (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 51).

Many arguments have been made as to why women should not play certain sports: “female bodies are weaker than males and could not handle to strain; women's bodies are more prone to injury; women should not be allowed to play contact sports because it is too dangerous for them; physical activity for women is only beneficial when it develops a healthier physical body; and many more” (Costa and Guthrie, 1994, p. 64). Women have sought to overcome such arguments in their battle to be allowed to play.

The 1800s were a great period of growth in women's education and sport; not only were women gaining admittance to colleges and universities, but they were also pushing the limits when it came to physical education (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 51). Senda Berenson developed a game of basketball suitable for women in the 1890s. “...women tired easily, were unable to deal emotionally or physically with the rigors of competitive team sport, and needed to have guidelines in terms of womanly court behavior to protect against trauma to the reproductive organs” (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 57). These rules included anything from only two dribbles to no running to no talking depending on the school (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p 57). With this new opportunity came new challenges, however. Basketball gave women's athletics a sport that needed to be monitored on a national level. If schools with women's sport teams wanted to play each other, they would have to abide by the same rules; the only way to insure this was to have a national governing body specifically for women's athletics

(Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 58). This first governing body was called the American Physical Education Association and they “placed the health and well-being of female students above all other concerns” (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 59). The governing body of women’s sports was distinctly separate from men’s sports; they were able to control things and do them exactly how they wanted.

Unlike men’s college sport programs, which predominantly allowed for the recruitment and subsidization of male athletes for the purposes of providing mass commercial entertainment, women’s physical education programs offered no separation between athletes and the remainder of the student body; women preferred instead to conceptualize athletics as something to which all students should have access. (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 62)

The end of the 1800s marked monumental changes in the world of women’s athletics. Women were finally allowed to do more than physical activity designed to keep them healthy; they were now allowed to participate in more strenuous sports (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 55). Despite all of the hardships that had to be faced, women such as Babe Didrikson, Billie Jean King, and Althea Gibson did all that they could to move women’s athletics forward (Cohen, 1993, p. 27).

### **Why Sports are Important for Women**

“If you grew up female in America, you heard this: sports are unfeminine. And this: Girls who play sports are tom boys or lesbians” (Nelson, 1994, p. 1). American culture does not tell young girls that sports should be important to them. Great progress has been made since the passage of Title IX, but fighting gender stereotypes and social norms is a greater battle than equalizing opportunities for women to participate. “Toy, play, and sport behaviors are learned. They are explicit outcomes of differential treatment and discriminatory socialization practices that begin when we give infant males balls, bats, and blue items and females dolls, stuffed toys, and pink items” (Cohen, 1993, p. 6). Abolishing these socialization practices would be the

ultimate way to equalize women and men in sports and in the rest of life. “The ultimate goal of challenging social norms surrounding femininity is to empower women to make their own choices about how to look and act and to define their own versions of an ideal female body” (Krane, 2001, p. 123). As Krane points out, when women define what it is to be feminine, they are empowering themselves. Not only do they empower themselves, but they also have much to gain socially in the way of improved academic performance and higher self-esteem (Cooky, 2009, p. 260). In fact organizations such as the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange enable Afghani girls to play sports despite the intense gender rules set by the Taliban regime (Cooky, 2009, p. 260).

### **Title IX**

“Today approximately 2 million young women participate in interscholastic sports, compared with the 300,000 before the passage of Title IX. More than one-third of all intercollegiate athletes are female, compared with 15% prior to Title IX” (Cohen, 1993, p. 3). Cohen (1993) does not argue the legislation’s effectiveness; rather, she questions society’s reaction to it. She says that the culture as a whole has not shifted in its underlying beliefs about women and sports and that this is a problem (p.3).

The battle often centers around resources, or lack of them. Boys’ teams traditionally have had newer uniforms, better equipment, preferred practice and game times, and more luxurious travel accommodations... This system was, and sometimes still is, unwisely rationalized by stating that girls aren’t particularly interested in competitive athletics. A decade ago, studies would show this argument to be true. What those studies did not show was that not enough opportunities were being offered to the girls to participate. If the administrators had thought to provide girls with the opportunity to play soccer, lacrosse, volleyball, golf, or track and field, participation numbers might have reflected a greater interest (Salter, 1996, p. 11).

Historically, it has been said that girls just aren’t as interested in sports as boys are; however, as Salter points out, they were never given a chance to become interested. Salter (1996) also

mentions that women are not asking to participate with men or against men; they are just fighting for an equal chance to play their own games (p. 8). When female athletes do get the chance to participate in athletic activities, they like to know that they are wanted there too. Not many women are going to continue playing if they feel that no one wants them to be doing what they are doing (Salter, 1996, p. 42). To get an accurate picture of just how many women want to participate in sports, society must change its views some. No one wants to live or work in an atmosphere of resentment, so why should women be asked to play in one?

Title IX was put into place in 1972 (A Title IX Primer, 2011, para. 1). Anderson, Cheslock, and Ehrenberg (2006) did a study on gender equality in intercollegiate athletics to determine Title IX compliance. They found that “in 2001/02 women comprised 55% of all students, but only 42% of the varsity athletes” (p. 226). They used a proportionality gap to determine the level of compliance at institutions in the NCAA. This gap was measured by taking the percentage of undergraduates who are women and subtracting the percentage of athletes who are women; they found that as many as 68-83% of schools are in noncompliance as of 2001/02 (Anderson, Cheslock, Ehrenberg, 2006, p. 231 and 246). Furthermore, most of the gender inequality occurs at smaller NCAA division schools (Anderson, Cheslock, Ehrenberg, 2006, p. 245). While Title IX was passed more than 30 years ago, schools are still having trouble complying with the legislation.

### **Male vs. Female in Sports**

Men and women are different, but does that difference determine their interest and ability level in sports? Historically, biological sex has been used to determine athletic ability. “Unlike women, who had seemingly limited and unrecoverable reserve, men were thought to have the capacity to regenerate energy through an active life (Sack and Staurowsky, 1998, p. 60). Not

only were men thought to be physically more suited for athletics, but the characteristics that helped establish their masculinity happen to fit hand in hand with being an athlete.

“Characteristics of hegemonic femininity include being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate, and gentle. On the other hand, strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence, and independence are characteristics of hegemonic masculinity” (Krane, 2001, p. 117). If these are the characteristics that society has determined that men and women possess, it is no wonder why men are considered athletes while women are overlooked. Boys are not necessarily more aggressive than girls, but they are encouraged to exhibit aggressive behavior more frequently than girls. It is less an issue of biological differences and more one of social consequences (Costa and Guthrie, 1994, p. 12).

Title IX was written to fight for the right of women to participate with equal opportunity in sports. The desire to play and be physically active exists in the female population. “Public health reports in the United States today estimate that 45% of women aged 20 to 40 participate in regular physical activity. This translates to approximately 8 million to 10 million young women...” (Costa and Guthrie, 1994 p. 185). The desire to participate exists; women just need to be given the chance to express it.

## **Media**

The media brings a specific identity to modern women’s sports. It can be argued that the fact the women’s sports are even covered by the media is an accomplishment in itself. However, the way that the media presents female athletes may be hindering the growth of women’s athletics.

Athletics is the journalism genre with the fewest women writers. It is rare for even females to write about women’s athletics – minus the coverage done on sexual harassment in the

sporting world (Nelson, 1994, p. 227). Women's athletics is also covered in a much different manner than men's athletics. "Venus Williams was named female athlete of the year and yet the picture accompanying the article showed her in a low cut, skin tight, revealing dress with racquet in hand. The underlying message seemed to be: you can play sports, but make sure you're feminine as you do it" (Fink, 2002, p. 20). Not only do the media highlight the physical appearance of the athletes, but they also focus on the private lives of the women on the field. Even *Sports Illustrated for Women* highlights stories about the women and their lives off the field and as mothers and wives. They even point out the clothes that they wear instead of looking at their athletic accomplishments (Fink, 2002, p. 21). The media also stresses the relational status of women by discussing the private lives of heterosexual athletes with husbands or boyfriends (Krane, 2001, p. 119). Focusing on the men in these women's lives takes away from what they do on the field.

The media also trivializes and diminishes women athletes by showing them as merely sex objects. "*Sports Illustrated* fully exploits the 'tits and ass' motif of soft pornography to produce its annual swim suit issue, where women models, not women athletes, make the sport scene" (Cohen, 1993, p. 18). Nelson (1993) goes as far as to say that the more female athletes receive fame and recognition, the more they are made to resemble prostitutes (p. 214). Nelson (1993) also adds that the media highlights a woman's sexuality concealing her strength because strength is not a quality that culture deems appropriate for women to possess (p. 216).

The media can also bring up gender in athletics at the wrong time. "Jockey Julie Krone won the Belmont Stakes in June 1993. Though Krone had already won more than 2700 races, this was the first time a woman had won a Triple Crown event. Reporters asked her afterwards: 'How does it feel, as a woman, to win?' She responded, 'I don't think the question should be



genderized"... Krone wanted to talk about how it felt to win, period" (Nelson, 1993, p. 198).

The media has a strong hand in helping define what it looks like to be a female athlete.

### **Difficulties Women Face in Sports**

Women are always nervous about being aggressive. Parents don't even realize this. And it's not done on purpose. But girls are taught to be passive from the pink blanket to when she falls down, to how they are held, how they are talked to, how they are told they are pretty. If a boy falls down, the father says, 'Get up, you're okay.' If a girl falls down, they say, 'Oh, are you all right?' She's being told to be passive. If a woman is aggressive people say she's a bitch, they don't like it. But women and men need to be appropriately aggressive. And we're not. (Billie Jean King as cited in Salter, 1996, p. 17)

As Billie Jean King stated, women are treated differently from men starting at birth. The way children are treated teaches them how to act in the future. This can create opportunities and hurdles in the sporting world for both genders.

Men and women are different. These differences are neither good nor bad -they just make the genders different. It is the same way in sport. Men and women tend to play differently too. "A quiet riding style can easily be translated by supporters of male dominance to a passive and reluctant riding style. A free-flowing game of ice hockey can easily be re-described as less intense and less serious than 'normal' ice hockey" (Burke, 2004, p. 179). Burke (2004) also says that these differences in the style of play occur because men and women are different not because one is better than the other at playing certain sports (p. 179).

Nelson discusses how men often use these differences to discredit the importance of female participation in athletics. For example, many people use the phrase "women don't really want to play sports" to discredit spending money in female athletics (Nelson, 1993, p. 126) Opponents of Title IX have used lines like this to discredit the need for this legislation. Nothing could refute these comments more than a study done in Los Angeles by Cheryl Cooky. She studied a sports program called Girls Play Los Angeles (GPLA). She looked at girls' basketball

programs in two schools in the Los Angeles area. Each school had drastically different levels of success and participation in the program. Cooky looked at the reasons behind the success or failure of the program. The Fairview school had convenient practice times, good marketing, and additional social experiences for the girls who played. The Centerview School lacked all of these things and administration was quoted as saying that girls just weren't interested in playing basketball. However, according to Cooky's research, had they had all of the means to get girls interested and involved in the program, they would have seen much better success. It turned out that the agency, not lack of interest from participants, was the key factor in the success of the program (Cooky, 2009, p. 280). "Simply put, if you build it, they might not want to come. It is not enough to expand structures of opportunities and allocate resources. The findings illustrate the importance of the agency in the implementation of sport programs" (Cooky, 2009, p. 280).

Homophobia may be another constraint to women's participation in sports. "The myth used to be that athleticism would masculinize women; that female athletes were ugly to men; that female athletes were incapable of attracting men; that we were a 'bunch of dykes'" (Nelson, 1993, p. 198). Many women do all that they can to appear as feminine as possible if they play sports. They do this to avoid all of the prejudice and discrimination that are associated with being homosexual (Krane, 2001, p. 120).

Not only do women face difficulties playing sports, but they also face hardships in gaining leadership positions in the sport industry. "In the ten years from 1982 to 1992, there was an increase of 812 jobs for coaches of women's teams. Only 180 of those, or 22 percent, were filled by women. Overall, approximately 48 percent of women's NCAA teams are coached by women. In 1972, 90 percent of all NCAA women's teams were coached by women... Women have a better chance of becoming a president of their college or university than the athletic

director” (Salter, 1996, p. 6). Women have a hard time gaining leadership positions in which they can encourage young girls to play sports.

The female sport industry, particularly on the collegiate level, is unique in the way that it came into being and in the way that it currently functions (Sack and Staurowsky, 1993, p. 64). Females think, act, and play differently than males (Costa and Guthrie, 1994, p. 10), so it is important to understand the factors that go into a collegiate woman’s decision to discontinue her participation in sports.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Introduction**

This study is designed to gain insight into why collegiate women discontinue their participation in sports. Qualitative research methods were used to obtain a full understanding into the reasoning behind such a decision. Athletes and non-athletes were both used to compare the differences between someone who continues and someone who discontinues participation in sports. The athletes almost acted as a control group in this situation.

The following sections discuss how the study was conducted, the participants involved in the study, and how the participants were treated over the course of the study. Data collection methods are also included.

### **Participants**

There were two types of participants in this study – athletes and non-athletes. The criteria for choosing non-athlete participants for this study included several factors: (a) the participants had to be college-age women attending a Division III school (Division III athletics focus on the participation of the athlete and not ticket sales or money generation; therefore, these institutions are perfect for this study – the schools want as many women to play as possible); (b) they must have played some sort of high school varsity level sport or on an equally competitive club or elite team; (c) the participants could no longer be playing their sport at a competitive level (they could be participating in intramurals or on teams just for fun); (d) the participants must have had more than four years of experience playing their sport; (e) the participants may have played one year of collegiate level athletics but chose to discontinue their participation in that level of sport. The criteria for choosing the athlete participants for this study include the following: (a) the

participants were currently playing on a collegiate athletic team; (b) the participants had prior experience in playing their sport (i.e. they did not begin playing the sport in college).

The participants were all women who attend the same Midwestern Division III College. The total population included all women who have ever played or were currently playing sports at this College. The sample frame included all women who were contacted about participating in the study. They were asked to participate via email or through personal connections with staff at the school. The women's soccer coach was influential in contacting athletes to participate. She has a relationship with all of the athletes and other coaches at the school and was able to recommend good candidates. She still has contact with several players who discontinued their participation in their sport after only one year of college experience; she was also able to contact psychology professors who shared this opportunity for class credit with their students. The sample was all women who responded positively to being asked to participate. This was a convenience sample and all women who expressed interest in participating and who were able to attend research sessions were included. The first 21 to 25 women who expressed interest and met the eligibility requirements were included in focus groups.

This was a study using human subjects and was qualitative in nature. The research and methods used were reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Arkansas. The research and methods were also reviewed by the participating college's Ethics in Research Committee.

To assure confidentiality of all participants, the researcher has reported all data without using specific names of individuals or the groups to which they specifically belonged. Background information was gathered to record what sports the girls played and the level to

which they identified with that sport; however, that information was not associated with specific participants in reported interviews.

This study focused on information gathered in three small focus groups. Each group included approximately seven participants. Focus groups of this size are considered small groups and are characterized by order and control. Each person was given a chance to speak in turn; however, the energy level could have been higher had the groups been larger in size. The size of the focus groups was chosen so that participants were not trying to compete to speak their mind, but they may have not gotten as excited when they did get the chance to speak (Templeton, 1994, p. 27).

## **Procedures**

Participants were assigned to one of three small focus groups. One group was composed of all non-athletes and another of all current athletes; the third group was a mix of both athletes and non-athletes. Participants were assigned to groups based on their availability first. They were able to request the day and time that suited them best. If both days and times worked for a participant, they were randomly assigned to a group. Focus groups were all treated the same at the beginning of the session. All participants were given a questionnaire detailing what sport they currently play or played in the past, why they chose the sport that they did, and several other generic background questions. Such questions included: age, year in school, major, and number of years since last competitive/elite level sport experience.

The researcher began the session with several opening statements including a description of what was to occur during the session and the goal of the research. Participants were also asked to sign a consent form stating that they realized that they were being recorded and that they gave permission for their opinions to be used (see appendix A). Questions for the first two

groups centered on the participants' decision to continue playing or not. The questions for the third group were molded around some of the answers from the first two groups. The third group was still asked about their involvement in sports, but they were also given statements to discuss based on previous group discussions. Questions included:

Non-athletes:

1. Describe your sport experience.
2. What factors or reasons went into your decision to stop playing?
3. What is it about being involved in competitive athletics that you miss?
4. Describe what have you gained, if anything, from being involved in sports?
5. What is it about sports that is necessary or beneficial to collegiate women?
6. What is it about sports that is detrimental to collegiate women?
7. What is your view of female collegiate athletes?
8. Describe what you have gained from not playing in college?
9. Describe what you have lost from not playing in college?

Athletes:

1. Describe your sport experience.
2. Describe all that went into your decision to continue playing at the collegiate level?
3. Discuss what benefits you have received from continuing your participation in athletics.
4. Discuss what you have missed out on or lost due to being involved in athletics.
5. What, if anything, about playing in college is different from playing in high school (or before)?
6. What is it about sports that is necessary or beneficial to collegiate women?
7. What is it about sport that is detrimental to collegiate women?

8. Why do you think other women did not continue their sport?

### **Collection of Data**

The focus groups were all held over the course of one week – the first week of classes for the College in the spring 2012 semester. Participants were contacted via email about participating in this study and were assigned to groups based on availability. All responses were recorded so that nothing was omitted or overlooked. Participants were made as comfortable as possible during focus groups to facilitate full disclosure when answering questions. Participants were provided pizza and drinks during the sessions, and seating was configured to facilitate casual discussion (a circle was formed with a table in the center for food). Participants were told the basic concept of the research before entering the session, which aided in obtaining full responses from participants.

### **Analysis of Data**

Participants' responses to questions presented for group discussion were analyzed in this study. Constant comparison was used to identify the major themes and compare them from group to group. Data were collected in the focus groups and transcribed. The transcriptions were then reviewed and common themes were noted. The themes from one group were compared to those of the other groups to establish similarities and differences. The trends established after review of the data were used to develop a theory as to why women discontinue their participation in sports. Each interview was recorded and transcribed and the participants' responses were coded. Each response was labeled IXPX. The I refers to the interview and the P stands for participant; the X's are substituted with the appropriate number identifying the specific interview and participant.



## CHAPTER FOUR

The results of this study provided possible reasons as to why collegiate women discontinue participation in sports. Division III schools may be able to use this information to better understand the female collegiate athlete; additionally, schools may be better able to tailor athletic programs to suit the needs of such students. The following results present themes derived from focus groups conducted with athletes and non-athletes at a Midwestern Division III college. Participants were asked a series of questions revolving around their decision to continue or discontinue participation in athletics in college.

### **Profile of Subjects**

All subjects were collegiate women attending the same Midwestern College. Participants all had played sports at a competitive level in high school and all had started playing at least one sport before the age of 13. Subjects were interviewed in three separate groups: women no longer playing a sport, women currently playing collegiate athletics, and a mix of women currently playing a college sport and women no longer involved. Group 1 consisted of all non-athletes (this term refers to a woman who is not currently playing sports competitively at the collegiate level, not an individual who is not athletic). Four women attended out of a possible eight. All women had played since they were very young and continued until their freshman year of college. All subjects in this group played for at least part of one season at the collegiate level and then voluntarily decided to stop playing. A variety of sports was represented by the group (volleyball, softball, basketball, and track/cross country and soccer – one participant played multiple sports). Group 2 consisted of all current collegiate athletes. There were seven women in attendance and all invited participants were present at the session. A variety of sports was also represented in this group: two soccer players, two softball players, two basketball players, and

one volleyball player. Group three was a mix of athletes and non-athletes; five athletes and two non-athletes attended out of a possible ten. All of the invited athletes attended while three of the invited non-athletes did not make it. Volleyball, basketball, softball, and soccer were all represented; however, the two non-athletes had both been on the volleyball team. It was much easier to access athletes for this study because coaches were inviting qualifying women to participate. Focus groups were kept small to enable women to participate fully. Smaller groups were believed to encourage more discussion and participation. Some responses discussed in the following text do not seem to appear often; however, this was due to the fact that women did not want to repeat each other. A lot of responses were accompanied by head nods and other non-verbal signs of agreement.

### **Theme Development**

There were five main themes to emerge from the data: (1) social, (2) physical, (3) educational, (4) psychological, and (5) relational. Each major theme has several subcategories represented by Table 1.

#### ***Social***

Three major subcategories were observed as social themes: lack of time/wanting to do other things, friends, and missing out on activities. All women expressed having experienced enjoyment with sports at least at some point during their athletic careers. Much of this revolved around the social aspect that sport contributed to the female's life. Every group mentioned having no free time as a negative part of collegiate athletics.

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Women said that while playing a sport they go to class, practice, study, and sleep leaving very little time for unstructured activities. “It’s a lot more time consuming cause, you know, you lift, you practice, you have to go to games, you don’t get a break...” (I2P6). While this was not a positive part of sport, all of the athletes stated that they would not choose to spend their time any other way. Sports are their social outlet – it is where they find their friends and how they spend their time.

I think like during season your social life is your team. Like, if you go out or anything like that, you are usually with the girls on your team. Um, I’m not really an example of it, but I know a lot of people live with girls who like are their teammates. And so, even if you’re not going out like a huge group like as all 10 of you or however many, you are still with people from your team so it’s just like your always together so those girls become your social life (I3P2).

All of the non-athletes interviewed mentioned lack of time as a reason for discontinuing participation. Each of these participants also mentioned how they chose to fill the time that sports had taken with some other activity. They all mentioned that they were able to do so much more since they stopped playing sports: resident assistant in the dorms, campus clubs, math team, extra classes, etc. “It gave me more time, like a lot more time. There was a huge difference between like last year in season and then this year when I didn’t play a sport...” (I3P7). “The main reason I quit was to just put more time and effort into other things” (I3P6).

Friends were also a big factor into women’s decision. Some women talked about having close knit friend groups on the team:

Yeah, in my case like the friends I made on the team are not just like going to be just college friends or just basketball friends. They are my friends outside of season, and when we graduate, like, we will still keep in touch. And, if I hadn’t played a sport, I don’t know like where I would have made my first friends when I came to college or, like, how close those relationships would have been (I2P7).

However, others were not as attached to the team. “The team was a clique within itself and within the clique there were other cliques, and I didn’t really fit into any of them” (I1P4).

The final subcategory involved missing out on other activities. This is similar to having other interests, but it deals more with the negative aspect of actually missing other events.

Athletes and non-athletes both recognized the fact that athletes miss out on many opportunities on campus and at home.

You're kind of like in and out of the social scene, I think a lot, which is something I'm glad that I stopped playing. 'Cause I'm like more involved with my friends and stuff, and I think they can kind of get like tunnel vision. And they'll kind of like disappear, and so I think the volleyball team does this in the fall too and then the basketball team does it in the winter. And like I don't know it kind of just like focus on themselves a lot and just like the team and kind of forget about the rest of the world (I1P2).

The group of all athletes brought up the fact that they miss out on getting to go home and enjoy breaks like the rest of the student body. Some teams even spend holidays on campus practicing and preparing for games. Group three did not talk much about this issue; they focused more on having time for other activities.

The social aspect of sports is very important to female athletes. It was discussed by all three groups and in many cases was one of the major contributing factors in the non-athletes decision to discontinue playing their sport at the collegiate level.

### ***Physical***

A surprising number of women mentioned physical exhaustion as an issue in athletics. Five AM practices and conditioning and weightlifting are much more intense than in high school.

Something I think it might be too is physically demanding for some people like for in high school we didn't do any conditioning for softball and then we came here and we have 2 months of 5 am's with like running and it's rough and we started with 9 freshmen and we have 3 now just after fall season and that's before 5 am's and all that so I guess that could be part of it (I3P5).

Some of the women (both athletes and non-athletes) were struggling with injuries; however, this was not seen as a barrier to participate. The women said it made it harder, but it was not a fear of

getting hurt that kept any of them from playing. Some of the athletes felt that it may contribute to others' decision to stop playing, but they did not feel that the threat of further injury affected them. "I was going to say injuries, too. Like, I had a ton of people tell me not to play anymore just because I have been through so much like with my knees. And, like, I just loved it enough that I was like I don't really care if I get hurt anymore; it's not a big deal anymore, so I think injuries make up a lot" (I2P4). It seemed to be a big culture shock once they actually started playing at the Division III level. Most thought they were prepared and found that they were not. "I wasn't ready for the time commitment and um the pain in my body that it was causing me... I mean it's just so stressful mentally, physically, emotionally" (I1P4).

Despite issues with sport being exhausting many women liked that it helped them stay in shape and active. Non-athletes stated being active and in shape as one of the things that they missed most about sports, while athletes said that it was one of the things that they love about sport. "I, well, staying healthy and being active, you know. I always just feel better after I have worked out, or, I don't know, it just puts you in a better mood - it's a fun way to exercise" (I3P7). Non-athletes still felt it important to remain active after playing. Choosing to discontinue playing organized sports was not synonymous with discontinuing all athletic endeavors. One participant in Group 1 came straight to the focus group from a run. Additionally, one participant stated, "Well, as weird as this may sound I still consider myself an athlete whether I don't play or not" (I1P4). All of the other women strongly agreed with her statement.

Physical health is an issue in women's athletics. Women care about how they look, and sport is a great way for them to maintain a healthy lifestyle. However, for some women it can

become too much. These women miss the chance to be active every day during a set practice time, but they do not miss the pain associated with an athlete's strict schedule.

### *Educational*

All women in every focus group expressed at least some level of concern about academic interests. There was a distinct difference in athletes and non-athletes when discussing discipline. Only athletes mentioned that the sport helped keep them organized and helped them do better or well in school. "I love the sport, and just for me playing a sport just makes me more organized. And the more stuff I'm involved in, the more organized I am, and you have to be. And I think that is one of the reasons that I really enjoy it" (I2P6). Athletes also said that their coaches help them do better in school, and that being a member of a team motivated them to try harder to get better grades. Non-athletes were more likely to discuss that they had more time to study once they stopped playing. One woman even stated that she felt that some athletes were "super-human" because they could do it all (I1P2).

Non-athletes stated that after college goals, such as a career, were a factor in their decision to stop playing. Non-athletes were much more likely to mention this concept than were athletes. "I think the biggest thing about not playing was being able to get involved with other things that I felt would be more beneficial after graduations, like long term, so that I would be able to take on other leadership positions in different clubs or organizations or just having more free time to just focus on certain things" (I3P6). Many of these women also mentioned that there was no career playing sports for them after college, so they felt that it was more beneficial to work at something in which they would have a career.

Grades and studying were mentioned by all groups. Non-athletes expressed that they had more time for studying. "... [I] had more time to study and I think that's helped my grades"

(I1P1). Athletes discussed that college is harder than high school, but their coaches help make it possible. “I agree, and you also have to like in high school, I didn’t have to study to get good grades ‘cause it was high school and it wasn’t really hard. But now I also have to work in study time as well as practice and all my activities and sleep and all of those things and yeah it is harder to manage your time” (I2P4). “...the coaches are really invested in your school work so it is another resource to help you with classes and college life especially our coach I think she is really good at that” (I2P4). Each group had a similar schedule and some were able to make it work with academics while others were not.

Scholarships were another surprising topic discussed by participants. Division III schools do not give athletic scholarships; they can give scholarships based on need and merit, but it cannot be based on athletic talent. Women unanimously stated that lack of scholarships made their decision to discontinue participation in sports much easier because nothing was holding them to the sport. All they had was a love for the game and a chance to play; they are not being offered thousands of dollars to cover tuition and room and board.

I think because it’s D3, like probably the reason you are doing this, is the retention is really, really bad especially for girls. Because you’re not getting paid to play, so there’s really no huge incentive to stay cause it’s so easy to leave. Like you don’t lose money, you don’t lose scholarship, or anything, so I think that’s one reason (I1P2).

In conclusion, all of these women found school and academics to be important; however, each dealt with it in a different way. Some found it easier to stay busy to help motivate them to get assignments done while they have the chance. Others found it stressful to have to balance all of their activities with only 24 hours in a day.



## *Psychological*

Psychological issues were mentioned often during focus group discussions; these issues are complex and difficult to categorize. However, psychological issues were divided into three general subcategories: status/reputation, pressure/expectation, and playing time.

Women liked and missed the reputation they had as student athletes. They like being recognized for their effort and having people come watch the team play. “We have had a lot of success in the past couple of years, so people will come to your games and know who you are. And, like, professors, I don’t know, I get emails about our games from like professors and that is just something that I like about playing here at a smaller school” (I2P7). Athletes mentioned that they enjoyed the recognition they received from being a student athlete. The non-athletes referred to the fact that they missed the status and reputation associated with being an athlete, but it did not seem to matter as much to them. However, non-athletes avoided using the word quit when talking about their decision to stop playing. One participant even said, “...once I retired as I call it. I never say I quit I say I retired” (I1P2). Not all non-athletes felt this way, but all of them dealt with emotional issues after discontinuing. Having to admit to family and friends at home that they were no longer on the team was difficult for them as well. Previously they enjoyed telling family and friends that they played a sport, but when they had to say that they were no longer playing it was difficult. “People always ask me if I like regret quitting. People from home or if I go back to high school and just visit profs they say, ‘So you still playing volleyball?’ And I’m like no I’m actually not playing. And they are like well do you miss it? And I’m like well, yeah I miss playing the sport I really do... but I just have to back it up with saying that you know because I quit, the main reason I quit, was to just put more time and effort into other things” (I3P6). This response seems to indicate that females feel the need to justify their decision to

themselves and other people. They cannot simply stop playing because they did not like it – they need to have a reason. All of the non-athletes were quick to point out all of the activities with which they had replaced their sport.

Another psychological issue is the higher level of pressure and greater expectations associated with collegiate athletics. All participants played on competitive teams in high school, so they are used to taking a sport seriously and having to work hard at it. However, every group mentioned that college coaches expected so much more out of them.

Yeah I think there is a certain work ethic you need in high school and to come here you need to step it up. So if you don't already have that it's hard to make that adjustment and become like that person. 'Cause it's not usually what people expect. It's like culture shock when they realize how much more time it takes. It's not just practice; it's lifting and workouts and conditioning and preseason and spring. For basketball you have to play like 2 or 3 times a week, and so it's like all year round and it's just a lot (I1P2).

Women in the first group (all non-athletes) mentioned that the coach and team were all about winning and that was a negative thing for them. Participants in the other groups did not mention this nearly as much as those in group one. “The coach flat out told me they were all about winning which is not exactly my point of view so that wasn't going to work” (I1P1). “...and yeah again the D3, our coach was so, you know, she had blinders on, she just wanted to win and you can't really expect your players to just want to win when you're at a D3 school. You are a student first here I think” (I1P4). Non-athletes basically felt like their sport was becoming like a job to them. They were being evaluated strictly on their performance, and sports had never been like that for them before. This factor, paired with others, was enough to contribute to their decision to discontinue participation.

The final psychological topic is lack of playing time. Several of the non-athletes said that they were putting in hours of work into an activity that did not provide them with much in return. They went to practice, did offseason workouts, and sacrificed a lot, but they did not get to play as

much as other members on the team. “I don’t know, like, playing time I think is a big part in it sometimes. I think like obviously if you don’t get much playing time nobody’s going to enjoy sitting on the bench and like putting the work in practice and lifting and stuff like that if you’re not getting playing time, I guess” (I3P2). It is not just lack of playing time in general though.

For some women, it is the drastic role change that they encounter transitioning from high school to college.

And, like, your senior year in high school, like, you most likely got a lot of playing time and you were the leader. You’re the top dog and everyone looks to you. And you are the one who’s like motivating everyone during the summer to do stuff, and I think it is a hard transition. Since I’m a freshman, like, it is a hard transition from being top dog to like going to following and listening and trying to learn and like listen to the upper classmen. And like you know you’re the ones getting the waters during the half time. Ha, ha, I do that good. And um you’re like the you know different things like that is I think for some people the transition from being the go to player to the kind of not like behind the scenes player but your just your role is different and I think that is a big transition (I3P4).

Each player is unique and handles their individual situation differently. In this case, the participant felt that it was worth it to continue playing. In other cases, the athlete felt that it was not worth it to keep working so hard while getting little in return. In addition, when an athlete is not getting a lot of playing time, she sometimes starts to question her overall athletic abilities. “If you are not part or really contributing like physically, then it really becomes emotionally hard because you’re like am I not good enough and you start questioning yourself” (I3P6).

### ***Relational***

This was not originally a designated theme; however, the more the data was studied, the more apparent it became that this section could stand on its own. From the focus group responses, women seemed to struggle with two major issues as far as relationships are concerned: team atmosphere and team dynamic. These two terms sound similar, but they deal with significantly different issues. Team atmosphere refers to the overall feeling of playing on a

team that women get when involved in athletics. Each woman has a very structured idea of what playing on a team should look and feel like when entering college. She has played on many teams before coming to college and expects that this new team will fulfill her idea of what being on a team is like. Collegiate athletics is significantly different than what any of the women interviewed had experienced before; however, some women (the athletes) accepted these differences and chose to continue while other women (the non-athletes) did not accept these changes and chose to not continue. “I think there is a certain expectation when you go to a DIII school. Like I expected it to be like high school, um, you know, fun for me and fun for the team and it’s just a little bit too competitive I guess when I got here you know it didn’t feel like what high school did for me” (I1P4). Several of the women in the focus group felt the same way. They were looking for a collegiate sport experience that met expectations from high school, but they did not find that their first year in college. Additionally, their parents are not around to encourage the same behaviors, and women are making decisions on their own – sometimes for the first time in their lives. “...Once you move on especially to DIII school your parents aren’t with you and you don’t really have the pressure of sticking with the sport that you have been doing since your were 5 years old because you are in college living on your own and it’s not the same experience as when your parents bring their little chairs and sit by the soccer field and go crazy” (I1P3). Upon enrolling in college, women are faced with a chance to make their own decisions and figure out what they want for their lives.

“The most fun I ever had was in high school... sophomore, junior, even my senior year when I wasn’t playing those were the most fun that I had um with the sport. Then it just became not as much fun anymore when it got so competitive in college and stuff like that. I guess that just having so much fun when I was playing is what I miss” (I14). Some women also mentioned

that they did not like how the teams were coached. “Um I also think that the atmosphere cause I don’t think girls take well to yelling and screaming and being cussed at so yeah that’s not good” (I1P1). Furthermore, participants mentioned that even the competition is different in college. A lot of these women had been playing the same teams with the same players for year – some even since elementary school. When these women arrive at college, everything they have ever experienced with sport changes. “I think it is scary for some people too because um in high school your playing with the people you played with in like elementary school and middle school and there will be different people here and there but for the most part you know like about them and then you get to college and everything is new so not only are you dealing with new classes, new profs but also like new team and also like new strategies cause like players and everything is just different” (I3P4). Athletes mentioned that the atmosphere of being on the team was much different than in high school, but they did not find that to be a negative issue. “Now I feel like having been in it for a year and like knowing the teams a lot better and some of the girls we play and stuff now I feel like the rivalry and the attachment level has started to build back up to kind of how it was in high school” (I3P5). These women recognized the differences between high school and collegiate sports and were able to accept them and continue playing in the new atmosphere.

The team dynamic is also much different than what these women had in high school. Team dynamic refers to the interactions among the players on the team – the relationships that are formed or not formed during the athlete’s first season on the team. Some women jump right in and accept the new team for what it is while others stand back and compare it to what they had in high school. “...and I wasn’t as emotionally attached to it as I was in high school I think and I loved the girls on the team but I think the team was just different than what I had in high school

and so that was also difficult. And I think I was comparing a little bit to what I had in high school and that wasn't helping" (I3P6). Some women also struggle to build relationships with other members of the team. "I didn't mesh well with a lot of girls on the team, so I was kind of an outsider" (I1P3). If these relationships are not formed and an athlete feels like an outsider on her own team, she does not feel as attached to this new team. When the time comes for her to make a decision about whether to stay or go, she does not feel as much of a connection to the team. She does not feel like she is a necessary component to the team's make-up. Some women even felt pressure to perform from their teammates instead of the coach. "I feel like there's a lot of pressure not from everybody on the team but from the people who are very serious about the sport it's kind of I don't know I felt a lot of pressure from them to be really good and at a college like this you can't expect to be the best because you are a Division III, yeah I don't know I just wasn't ready for that kind of competitive level cause before I had just played for fun and so here it's not fun all the time" (I1P3). This pressure makes it even more difficult to form relationships while on the team. One participant discussed an incident in which she and another team member were at some upperclassmen's apartment; the upperclassmen began pressuring the younger girls to drink. "They, you know, made her start drinking, and they were just pressuring her to keep drinking because she didn't drink a lot. But just little things like that that made me realize that that's not really what I want to be a part of" (I1P4). This was not something that participants expressed to be common, but it was another example of how a team member failed to develop a relationship with the rest of the team. Several non-athletes also mentioned that they began to see themselves less as team members and more as cheerleaders or a support system. "I think you turn into when you're not playing you just turn into a cheerleader more and your just there for the team which is like fine which I loved that I would have done it again...but I mean I can cheer

from the sidelines I can just go to the games you know and do other things” (I3P7). Whatever the case, non-athletes failed to connect with their collegiate team and this eventually led to their decision to discontinue their participation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Summary of Procedures**

Women at a Midwestern Division III college were interviewed in focus groups about their sport experience. Factors that affected their decision to continue or discontinue their participation in sports were discussed. Focus groups were utilized to encourage discussion and openness about the issues. Three separate focus groups were held each consisting of a different make up of participants. The first two groups had all non-athletes and all athletes respectively. The third and final group consisted of a combination of some athletes and some non-athletes. More athletes participated than non-athletes; this was attributed to the fact that participants were contacted by current coaches at the college. Athletes even had practice moved to make time for them to come to their focus group session. The first group had four non-athletes; the second had seven athletes; and the third group had seven participants (two non-athletes and five athletes). A variety of sports and grade levels were represented as well.

The first two groups were asked similar sets of questions about their sport involvement. The third group was asked many of the same questions, but in addition, they were asked to discuss some of the responses from the previous two groups. All responses were recorded and transcribed using constant comparison to derive themes from the data.

### **Summary of findings**

Participants discussed many issues regarding sport experience. Responses were categorized into five main themes: (1) social, (2) physical, (3) psychological, (4) educational, and (5) relational. Social responses were those involving friends, lack of time, wanting to be involved elsewhere, and missing out on other activities. When discussing physical issues, women mentioned that sports helped them stay healthy and in shape, but they could also become



too bodily exhausting. Issues in the psychological category were status/reputation, pressure/expectation, and lack of playing time. Athletes seemed to gain status and a positive reputation because of their involvement with athletics. Non-athletes often mentioned the fact that the pressure and expectations at the collegiate level are much higher than in high school. Lastly, many non-athletes mentioned that lack of playing time impacted them negatively challenging how they thought of themselves as athletes. Sports impact on education was also discussed heavily in each focus group. Athletes stated that sports enabled them to stay better organized and do better in school while non-athletes expressed an inability to balance both studying and their sport. Non-athletes also conveyed the importance of life after college; women mentioned that since they would not be playing after graduation, they felt that they should focus more on their major and other activities that would more be of more tangible benefit to them in the future. Finally, participants responded about the relational aspects of the sport, specifically the team atmosphere and the team dynamic. Non-athletes expressed a lack of relational attachment to their collegiate sport while athletes seemed to identify with the changes accompanying their new team. Team atmosphere refers to the overall feeling of playing on a team that women get when involved in athletics. Team dynamic refers to the interactions among the players on the team – the relationships that are formed or not formed during the athlete's first season on the team. Team dynamic also goes beyond the athletes' interaction on the team. It includes the coach's attitude, how sport relationships impact an athlete's life outside of the sport, and how much an individual identifies with the team. Both of these concepts were not mentioned specifically by participants; however, their responses are consistent with these ideas. Furthermore, relational issues were not initially identified as a stand-alone theme; it developed after the data were reviewed more.

Several of the previously discussed themes overlap, but it was determined that each could also stand alone. For example, relational issues may also include an athlete's interactions with friends on the team which is a social issue; however, relational issues as a whole are able to stand alone as a theme and including much more than just friendships.

Relational issues were found to be the most common reason that women gave for discontinuing participation in sport. All other factors are important, but this theme encompasses a lot of what participants discussed. Women compare what they had in high school to what they have in college when playing a sport. Everything is new and different for entering collegiate women: the team, the coach, the rivalries, the atmosphere, everything. Some women accept this change while others do not. The women that do not begin to distance themselves from the sport and look elsewhere to fill the needs that sport had once provided. Women begin to stop identifying themselves as a necessary part of the team. They don't see themselves as important to the team nor do they see the team as important to their happiness and satisfaction in college. Women that chose to discontinue their participation in sport still often say that the sport and the women on the team are important to them, but they have found another activity or group of people that is more important.

When reviewing the literature for this study, nothing was found that indicated that relational issues would be a contributing factor to a woman's decision to discontinue her involvement in collegiate athletics. Many authors (Cohen, 1993; Fink, 2002; Salter, 1996; Nelson, 1994) discussed the role of society on a female's athletic participation. According to all of these authors, society is not telling women that it is important for them to be athletes; femininity and athleticism are not able to co-exist according to social norms. Women are told, from birth, that boys play sports and girls play with dolls (Cohen, 1993, p 6). However, not one

participant mentioned anything about wanting to appear more feminine to her friends in college. None of the women mentioned that they felt it was time to start growing up and acting more like an adult leaving their childish tom boy ways behind. When women mentioned their plans for life after college, they did touch on this issue. Women have almost no opportunity to continue playing a sport competitively after college. When participants mentioned that they stopped playing sports to focus more on school and what they would be doing after college, they were touching on the issue that society does not value women's athleticism.

The literature also discussed that female's often face the issue of homosexuality in sports. Nelson (1994) mentions that women who play sports are sometimes even assumed to be lesbians simply because they play a sport. It was thought that this issue may contribute to a woman's decision to stop playing sports (p.198). A woman may not want to be associated with homosexuality or thought to be a homosexual herself; however, not one of the participants even mentioned the word homosexuality in their responses. According to the data, this issue is not something that women even consider when choosing to discontinue their participation in athletics. Participants also did not mention a lack of opportunity or unfairness between men's and women's sports during any of the focus groups.

Stewart and Taylor (2000) found that injury, time conflicts, coaching issues, lack of fun, and not being good enough were all factors in young women's decision to discontinue sports (para. 15). Several of these issues were consistent with the data derived from this study. Women in college also mentioned that playing was not fun for them anymore, that the coach overemphasized winning, and that they had time conflicts. The lack of fun while playing a sport and coaching issues both can fall into relational issues. The literature is consistent with what

was found in this study, but there was not much literature on the issue found especially when looking at the college aged female athlete.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the findings and within the limitations of this study, women cited relational issues as the most common reason for discontinuing participation in sports. Women are looking for a certain amount of team unity and a certain team atmosphere when they come to college. The team is never the same as in high school; however, team atmosphere and team dynamic can still be stressed. Coaches are judged on their ability to win; this can create a team atmosphere centered on winning not developing relationships among players and between the athlete and the sport. "If the coach and players have different reasons for participating in sport, rarely will either experience the success for which they had hoped" (Stewart & Taylor, 2000, para. 7). Coaches need to be challenged to develop a certain amount of team unity and relationships when preparing their team for the season. Camping trips, ropes courses, challenge activities, and other outdoor activities are just a few of the ways to do this. Adding more to an athlete's schedule may not be the best way to handle the situation since women also cited lack of time as a factor; however, women desire a social environment from their sport team. The team is who athletes see the most and are around the most. If an athlete does not identify with this group primarily, it is doubtful that she will continue playing for all four years of college. A woman wants to feel needed and to need the team in her life. She needs to see the value of her role on the team and what the team does to fill a role in her life. If either is missing, the athlete is lacking a proper relationship with the sport which may lead to her decision to discontinue.

## Discussion and Implications

Colleges and Universities have much to take away from this study. The impacts of team building on athletic performance and success are widely discussed in the sport industry; however, the ways in which teams go about establishing cohesion and synergy are not often at the forefront of collegiate athletics. For example, Sport Center anchors talk about teamwork and team synergy quite often especially when discussing collegiate athletics (just watch coverage on the March Madness basketball tournament). The anchors, however, don't often talk about what they mean when referring to team chemistry. "Team building comes from clear vision of what the group is striving to achieve and is tied to commitment, teamwork, collaboration, and mutual accountability" (Yukelson, 1997, p.79). Coaches are the people to be directly entrusted with establishing a positive team atmosphere early in the season. Their ability to do this will ideally lead to fewer relational issues with women in sport. When interviewed about what he thought about effective team building interventions in sport, one coach said that, "he feels the team really comes together on the first road trip of the season, where individuals are forced to interact with one another for an extended period of time outside their familiar environment" (Yukelson, 1997, p. 81). According to this coach, athletes begin to best build team togetherness when forced to spend time together. They live together, eat together, travel together, and have fun together when on the road; but coaches may not want to wait until the season begins to start helping players find that team unity. Some female athletes don't make it to the beginning of the season especially if they are involved in a spring sport. They practice and train with the team in the off season, but fail to find meaningful relationships within the group. This implies that relying on road trips and time together may not be enough to create necessary relationships for female athletes. "Most coaches had a training camp retreat where the players were taken out of the

university environment to a place where they could focus solely on the sport and the team. Most coaches felt these times were very effective for team building” (Bloom, Stevens, and Wickwire, 2003, p 138). Getting athletes away from the day to day campus life enables them to concentrate on their sport and their team. In this way coaches are best able to help athletes create lasting relationships that will give athletes a reason to keep playing. Coaches have a great opportunity to give their players more than just a training camp experience. Nature may even provide the best team building atmosphere. Players have to spend time together interacting because there is no technology (cell phones, television, etc.) distracting them. Nature can even be seen as the ultimate team building atmosphere because there is nothing around but the team. With a good leader, a team’s time spent outdoors can be seen as a way to grow together as a group.

Challenge courses and high and low ropes courses also provide great team building opportunities because they push individuals and encourage them to rely on other people to successfully accomplish an activity. “... it’s not just winning games, but really making a student-athlete feel that what they do in practices, in competitions, in the classroom, and how they interact with each other on and off the field all directly relate to team building and team unity” (Yukelson, 1997, p 81). The NCAA already stresses that student experience is the important part of Division III athletics, not spectator attendance. The question is whether or not individual colleges or universities are holding to that standard. Fixing some discrepancies at the institutional level may encourage more participation in sport by women or help keep those already involved from discontinuing.

### **Recommendations for further study**

More women at more schools may be studied to see if the themes are consistent to all collegiate women or just to those at this particular school. This study was limited to one college

in one area of the country and to several small groups of women. The results from this data may be used to contrive an instrument to test why women discontinue participation in sports on a larger scale. The responses discussed in this research may be presented in a survey form and distributed to get a better idea of why it is that women stop playing sports. The data generated in this study could be used directly in the construction of such an instrument. Regional differences may also be looked at to see if schools in different parts of the country have themes specific to their area. Women at Division I and Division II schools may also be studied to see what contributes to their decision to discontinue participation in athletics at that level. The types of activities that women are choosing to replace sport can also be researched. If athletics do not provide the atmosphere that women are seeking, another activity or organization might be filling that role. Lastly, the reasons that men give for discontinuing participation in athletics would also be a logical area to study next. The results may then be compared and gender differences may be observed. There may not be an issue with women's sports; the structure of athletics as a whole may not be appealing to athletes despite their gender or ability level calling for a change from the NCAA.

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The Midwestern College's website was also used to research facts about the college's enrollment (website not provided due to a request from the institutions review board to remain anonymous).

APPENDICES

## Appendix A

## INFORMED CONSENT

You have chosen to participate in a research project exploring the reasons that collegiate women decide to discontinue their participation in sports. This is a qualitative study in which you will be asked to participate in discussions about your sport involvement.

Please take time and read everything before signing:

I am voluntarily choosing to participate in this research project. I understand the procedure and what will be asked of me. I am aware that the researcher will be using a voice recording device to record our session. I give her permission to record my responses and use them in her research. I also realize that my name will in no way be associated with my responses for this project.

As a participant in this session, I understand that I have the right to leave at any time. I am in no way required to finish the session, and I have the right to not respond to any question I do not want to answer. If I choose to leave in the middle of the session, I realize that I will be in no way penalized.

I give Emily Gilliam and the University of Arkansas permission to use my responses, and I understand that this research may be published.

This study is being conducted by a University of Arkansas honors student. If there are questions about the research, you may contact:

Emily Gilliam – [egilliam@uark.edu](mailto:egilliam@uark.edu)

Dr. Merry Moiseichik – [merry@uark.edu](mailto:merry@uark.edu)

If there are questions or concerns about the conduct or procedures of this project, please contact:

Ro Windwalker – [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

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Name (print)

Date

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Signature

Date



## Appendix C

January 13, 2012

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Emily Gilliam  
Merry Moiseichik

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 12-01-399

Protocol Title: *Entering Collegiate Women's Decision to Discontinue Participation in Sports: A Qualitative Study*

Review Type:  EXEMPT  EXPEDITED  FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 01/13/2012 Expiration Date: 01/12/2013

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Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

**This protocol has been approved for 25 participants.** If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)



Table 1: Major Themes

Social	Physical	Educational	Psychological	Relational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time constraints/ other interests</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Missing Out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhaustion</li> <li>• Health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discipline</li> <li>• Life after college</li> <li>• Grades/studying</li> <li>• Scholarships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Status/Reputation</li> <li>• Pressure/Expectation</li> <li>• Lack of Playing Time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team atmosphere</li> <li>• Team dynamic</li> </ul>