

LEAVING THE GAME: STATUS AND IDENTITY IN THE ROLE EXIT OF  
PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYERS

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Football is one of America's favorite sporting pastimes, with its top professional organization, the National Football League (NFL), raking in some of the highest revenues of any sports league in the nation. There has been a lot of public discussion recently about issues facing NFL retirees. Most of this discussion has been centered around two main issues: financial well-being and physical health of retirees. In this dissertation, I shift the focus to the social-psychological process of role exit, the leaving of a role that is central to one's self-identity and re-creation of a new role that incorporates some aspects of the one being left behind. I link this micro-level process of role exit to macro-level structural inequalities in order to better understand how status and capital shape identity (and vice versa).

In this dissertation, I argue that even though all professional football players occupy a high status position for a short period of time, they both enter and exit this role with varying levels of capital and status. These structural inequalities account for much of the difference in retirees' experiences in life after sport. The important question, however, is *how* do larger inequalities shape individual experiences? I argue that players with higher stores of appropriate capital are able to disidentify with football before

actually disengaging with the sport, allowing them more preparation time and less psychological turmoil in creating a new identity. In other words, the *way* a player exits the football role is both shaped by and shapes their status and social position in life after sport.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Football is one of America's favorite sporting pastimes, with its top professional organization, the National Football League (NFL), raking in some of the highest revenues of any sports league in the nation. The annual championship game, known as the Super Bowl, has become part of our cultural landscape, drawing over 111 million viewers in 2014, more than any other television event in history (NFL.com 2014). There are over 1,500 players in the NFL today, all of them sacrificing their bodies for the brutal, hard-hitting game of football. While these careers can often be very lucrative, they are also very short. According to the NFL Players Association (NFLPA), the union representing NFL players, the average length of an NFL career is 3.5 years (NFLPA 2014). This means that even if players are making large sums of money, they don't make it for very long. Retirement for these players comes at a time when most of their peers are just getting settled into careers.

There has been a lot of public discussion recently about issues facing NFL retirees. Most of this discussion has been centered around two main issues: financial well-being and physical health. In 2009, Sports Illustrated published an article claiming that about 78% of NFL retirees declare bankruptcy or are in financial distress within just two years of retirement (Torre 2009). This article was the impetus for a larger conversation about the financial well being of professional athletic retirees. One of the main arguments from NFL retirees was that, especially for older players from the earlier years of the NFL, there was a lack of a suitable pension. In 2002, the NFLPA approved an increase in pension payments to those retirees who played in the league before 1977

after receiving numerous complaints about the abysmal monthly pensions (Freeman 2002).

Retirees, especially those who dedicated their lives and bodies to the NFL before the days of multi-million dollar bonuses and advertising endorsements, continued pushing for better benefits for years and saw real opportunity for change during the 2011 labor negotiations and lockout between the NFL and the NFL Players Association (NFLPA). However, they were denied a place at the bargaining table and consistently left out of the conversation. Retirees felt that they had been “pushed out of negotiations to streamline the mediation process despite a court order for their inclusion” (Associated Press 2012). In September 2011, after the labor dispute had been settled, a group of 28 NFL alums, including many Hall of Famers, sued the NFLPA arguing that it did not have the authority to negotiate on behalf of retired players after the decertification of the union in March 2011 (Wetzel 2011). The suit was dismissed in May 2012.

In addition to the economic issues facing retired NFL players, they must also deal with declining physical health and possible brain injuries from the concussions and other rough play on the field. As of March 2013, thirty-three deceased NFL retirees (of 34 examined) had been diagnosed post-mortem with a degenerative brain disease, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, that researchers believe is caused by severe and/or repeated head trauma. The disease impairs normal functioning of the brain, causing erratic behavior, impaired judgment, memory loss, depression, and may eventually lead to dementia (Yong 2013). Many of these men were under 55 years old. At least six of them took their own lives (Jaslow 2013; Schwartz 2007; Smith 2011; Zurko 2013). While this may be the extreme end of the physical wear and tear endured by players, there is a host

of other physical ailments associated with playing football, such as sleep apnea, joint replacements, arthritis, and high risk of cognitive impairment and disease, such as Alzheimer's, that retirees must deal with (Hart Jr. et al 2013; Jenkins and Maese 2013; Mayo Clinic 2009).

The health crisis facing NFL retirees reached a boiling point in June 2012 when a group of over 4,500 NFL retirees filed a class action lawsuit against the NFL, accusing the league of hiding from them the dangers of concussions. In July 2014, a judge granted preliminary approval to an uncapped settlement that would provide cash payments to any NFL retiree suffering from cognitive impairments. While this seems like a positive outcome for retirees, some fear that these resources will be difficult to access, will take too long to administer, and are frustrated with the NFL's refusal to acknowledge any wrongdoing in the way concussions were handled (Belson 2014; Pinter 2014; Townsend 2014).

It is clear from the numerous lawsuits and increased activism of NFL retirees that there are some serious issues facing this population. The prevailing popular discourse surrounding the troubles of ex-NFL players tends to be framed by the media in one of these two ways. The problem is either seen as an economic one, that poor pensions lead to impoverished retirees (or alternatively that players' irresponsible spending sets them up for failure in life after sport) or as a biological one, that football injuries lead to all kinds of physical and mental health problems. This framing highlights some very important factors in understanding the problems faced by NFL retirees. However, it does not capture the complete picture.

This dissertation will consider both the macro- and micro-level gaps in these arguments. First of all, neither the health nor wealth argument considers the various types of capital (economic and otherwise) that these men bring to their role as football players. *Capital*, according to Bourdieu (1986), is a set of resources born of “accumulated labor” that has the potential to produce profits or to reproduce or expand upon itself. One of the key traits of capital is that it has a “tendency to persist in its being” (241). In other words, capital begets capital. How do wider inequalities of capital shape players lives during and after sport? What role, for instance, might social class of origin play in retirees’ financial or physical well being after football?

Secondly, we have to consider the social psychological impact of retirement as part of what shapes their experiences in life after sport. Many NFL retirees have defined themselves as football players since they were young children. For these players, who have reached the highest echelons of their sport, their identity as athletes is not only self-defined, but also defined by others who see them not as complex human beings, but as athletes alone. Retirement brings an abrupt end to not only a career, but to a self. This is what Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) terms *role exit*, the process of leaving a role that is central to one’s self-identity and re-creating a new role that incorporates some aspects of the one being left behind. The inner turmoil of losing a major facet of identity, combined with differential levels of resources for creating new identities, is likely to have a huge impact on an individual’s mental health, life satisfaction, and ability to successfully move on once his football career is over.

## Research Questions

As detailed above, most popular media accounts of football retirement have focused on issues of wealth and health in the lives of professional football retirees. I seek to broaden this picture by focusing on the social psychological impact of retirement from football. Additionally, most of the sociological literature on athletic retirement has focused on life satisfaction *after* sport, while there has been little attention paid to the *process* of retirement. In order to fill both of these gaps, I seek to answer questions about what the process of retirement actually feels like for retirees and how that process is related to retirees' positions in broader social hierarchies of race, class and gender. My primary research questions are as follows:

- How do professional football players experience role exit? How is their experience similar to or different from other role exiters?
- How does a player's position in the social hierarchy (race, class, gender) affect his process of role exit? What role do various forms of capital play in this process?
- How, in turn, does the process of role exit affect retirees' lives after sport? How does this process shape the identities, status, and social position of football retirees?

In this dissertation, I argue that even though all professional football players occupy a high status position for a short period of time, they both enter and exit this role with varying levels of capital and status. These structural inequalities account for much of the difference in retirees' experiences in life after sport. The important question, however, is *how* do larger inequalities shape individual experiences? I argue that players with higher stores of appropriate capital are able to disidentify with football before

actually disengaging with the sport, allowing them more preparation time and less psychological turmoil in creating a new identity. In other words, the way a player exits the football role is both shaped by and shapes their status and social position in life after sport.

Understanding the various types of role exit is crucial for understanding not only why some retirees fare so much better than others in retirement, but also for understanding the ways in which larger social inequalities shape individual lives. This research, in employing both social psychological analysis and examining larger systems of oppression, bridges the micro and the macro, allowing us to see how interactional processes are influenced by structural power differentials.

## **Literature Review: Interactional Processes**

### *Identity Theory*

The roots of this dissertation lie in questions about the self and identity. How do professional football retirees see themselves? How does this sense of self change over time, particularly as they transition out of football? Further, what are the consequences of this identity change? In order to begin answering these questions, I draw upon Sheldon Stryker's identity theory (Curry and Weaner 1987; Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000). In this theory, the self is seen as a hierarchical set of identities. Each identity is tied to a role found in the larger social structure. Therefore, individuals will have as many identities as roles they occupy. These roles are linked to specific duties and expectations that must be internalized. Stryker argues that identities are differentiated and placed in the hierarchy on the basis of two important dimensions: salience and commitment. The basic

theory is that greater commitment to a role leads to greater salience of that role in the hierarchy. In turn, greater salience leads to greater influence on behavior and thus, more resistance to change (Howard and Hollander 1997: 95).

The role of professional football player is a very important one for these men. As I will discuss further below, this role brings with it high levels of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. In other words, there are many tangible and intangible benefits that go along with being a professional football player. It's not surprising, then, that this role would be central to many men's identity. Beyond just the perks of occupying the football role, however, we have to consider other reasons why so many men demonstrate a high level of commitment to the football role. The concept of commitment, according to Stryker (1980) is defined along two dimensions: interactional and affective commitment. Interactional commitment is a reflection of the number of ties associated with a particular role. Affective commitment, however, is based on the emotional significance of the relationships connected to a particular role (Hogg, Terry and White 1995; Owens 2003). The more strongly committed an individual is to their role, the higher it will fall in the identity salience hierarchy.

Identity salience is defined as the probability, or likelihood, that a particular identity will be invoked in a variety of different situations. Thus, those identities at the top of the salience hierarchy are likely to exert a greater influence on behavior than those at the bottom because they will be used in a variety of situations. Adler and Adler (1989) conceptualize this as a "master status", or the position most central to our lives that exerts influence on other roles and identities (308). The master status is a product of both self-identity (how one sees oneself) and social identity (how one is seen by others). This

intense dual inward and outward emphasis on a particular identity can lead in many cases to a condition of *identity foreclosure*, wherein individuals commit to a particular identity without fully exploring their own values, needs, talents, and interests (Marcia 1966). This premature identity commitment most likely stems from the influence of important socializing agents (parents, peers, community or religious groups) and the desire for their approval or to avoid conflict and crisis (Petitpas 1978). The unfortunate result of identity foreclosure is that while the master status becomes extremely well developed, other identities are neglected (Beamon 2012). This may be due to personal desire, but also because the time and energy devoted to the master status do not allow for much other identity development.

It is easy to see why the master status is so resistant to change, especially if this identity has been foreclosed on by self and others. However, as an individual's social context changes (as he goes through retirement from professional football, for example), the role linked to one's master status often becomes impossible to occupy. Individuals must exit this role, significantly altering the identity that comes along with it. This requires a substantial shift of the identity hierarchy housed within the self and often entails creating a new identity altogether to encompass past roles occupied. For those who have experienced identity foreclosure, the transition is particularly difficult as individuals often feel ill-prepared and anxious about moving on (Beamon 2012). It is this particular transition that I examine more closely in the dissertation.

## *Role Exit*

Role exit, as described by Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), is “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one’s ex-role” (1). From this definition, we can see that there are two important aspects of this process: the leaving of a role and the re-creating of a new one. This allows us to see how identities are not merely done away with when a role is exited, but rather recreated to fit with changing social circumstances. Fuchs Ebaugh argues that when we exit a role that matters to us, we retain vestiges of this role as part of our new self-concept, or a “hangover identity” (5). This “hangover identity” highlights the tensions between past and present, both within self-identity and from others’ view of us. When we exit a role, it does not cease to be a part of us. We are still viewed by others as having at one time been associated with that role, and we still understand ourselves in that context (Beamon 2012). This can be both positive and negative for identity development and transition. For those who previously experienced identity foreclosure, they are able to incorporate aspects of their previous identity into a new one, possibly making the transition less shocking. However, the constant presence of elements of the previous identity may also obstruct development of new opportunities. This theory of role exit is, thus, very useful for thinking about the entire process of identity transition.

Fuchs Ebaugh identifies two important processes associated with the larger experience of role exit: disengagement and disidentification. Disengagement is “the process of withdrawing from the normative expectations associated with a role” (3), wherein individuals cease practicing the socially expected behaviors that accompany a

role. Where disengagement is about external role commitment, disidentification is more internal. This process occurs when individuals “begin to shift their identities in a new direction, that is, they begin to think of themselves apart from the people they were in previous roles” (4). Fuchs Ebaugh argues, “disengagement leads to disidentification” (4). My data, however, complicates this relationship. I argue that some players began disidentifying with football *before* actually disengaging and that these players are able to make a smoother transition into an ex-role. In other words, these men have not foreclosed on the athlete identity. I will discuss this in much greater depth in the chapters that follow.

According to Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), there are a series of stages that one goes through in the process of role exit. The first stage of becoming an ex is experiencing *first doubts*. This stage is “essentially one of reinterpreting and redefining a situation that was previously taken for granted” (41). In this stage, actors begin to re-evaluate the costs and rewards of their current role. Some never move beyond this stage; others move through quickly on their way to becoming an ex. Once doubt creeps in, role exiters begin a process of *seeking alternatives*. At this stage, they start to imagine themselves occupying new roles. This stage of the role exit process is particularly difficult for those who have foreclosed identities. As Beamon (2012) describes in her study of collegiate athletes, “even though it was apparent that his sports career was over, he would not engage in identity or career exploration” (201). For those who have fully internalized an identity, seeking alternatives is near impossible, even when faced with imminent role exit. *Turning points* are the moments when actors actually exit the roles that have been central parts of their identities. These turning point moments are characterized by a sensation of

disorientation or anomie, what Fuchs Ebaugh calls “the vacuum”. Finally, once actors move beyond the vacuum of normlessness, they are able to start *creating an ex-role*, one that incorporates both their past and present identity and allows them to reshuffle their identity hierarchy and overall self-concept.

While Stryker’s identity theory (1980) and Fuchs Ebaugh’s theory of role exit (1988) are useful for examining the intricacies of identity creation and transition, they do not take into account any of the larger structural issues that shape individual lives and choices. Fuchs Ebaugh’s sample included many types of role exiters – divorcees, addicts, retirees, ex-nuns, transsexuals – but does not include any discussion of their social class, race, or gender. This omission tends to universalize the experience of role exit without considering how an actor’s position in hierarchies of oppression and domination might shape their identity commitment, salience, foreclosure, and role exit.

Few scholars have addressed these issues, particularly the role that social class plays in the role exit process. Anderson and Bondi (1998) focus on race and gender in their study of recovering drug addicts. They apply Fuchs Ebaugh’s theory of role exit to those exiting the drug-addict role, arguing that the role exit process for men and women closely parallels gendered socialization and expectations regarding the public versus private sphere. For instance, women were more concerned with the interpersonal consequences of drug addiction, while men focused more on external concerns, such as money and careers (171). Race was also an important factor in individual role exits, as Black respondents were more likely to be stigmatized by their past role as drug addicts. They also had to contend with institutional inequalities, such as housing segregation and racial profiling by police, in creating an ex-role (169). Recovering drug addicts’ varying

positions in the social hierarchy shaped what their process of role exit looked like, demonstrating that this process is not universal.

In looking specifically at role exit from elite sport, scholars have paid particular attention to the identity foreclosure experienced by athletes. This group is acutely susceptible to identity foreclosure for a number of reasons: they often get started in sports at a young age, before they have time for exploration of other interests or talents (Kelley and Carchia 2013; Sabo and Veliz 2008); the role brings high status along with material, social, and emotional rewards (Meggyesy 1970; Messner 1992; Sabo 1994); and, it takes extreme focus and dedication of time and energy to reach the elite level that many athletes strive for, taking time away from exploring other potential identities (Ogilvie and Taylor 1993). While these factors impact all elite athletes, they are especially influential for minority men in at the highest levels of revenue-generating sports (i.e. football and basketball) (Beamon 2012; Harrison et al 2011; Kennedy and Dimick 1987; Murphy, Petitpas, and Brewer 1996; Scales 1991). Black men, because of limited opportunities outside of the sport labor market and perceived innate athletic ability, are likely to identify themselves and be identified by others as athletes to the exclusion of other possible selves. This racial and gendered trend in identity foreclosure, especially amongst athletes, must be considered in any discussions of role exit or identity transformation. As I examine the role exits of professional football players, I maintain a sharp focus on the structural inequalities and expectations that shape both the creation and re-creation of identity.

## **Literature Review: Structural Inequalities**

In order to more fully understand the process of role exit, we must consider not only social-psychological shifts and changes, but also how larger social structures shape these individual experiences. Players bring with them to the role of “football player” different racial identities, varying levels of capital, and a set of expectations about how to “be a man” in U.S. society. Each of these factors locates them in a particular position in the social hierarchy, which, in turn, affects their identity and sense of self both during and after football. In the sections that follow, I examine the potential influence of race, class, and gender on the role exit process of professional football players.

### *Race: Stereotypes and Institutional Inequalities*

Though sport is often thought of as a realm of experience free from racial inequalities, it has been demonstrated by numerous scholars that this simply isn't true (Cunningham 2009; Davis 1999; Dufur and Feinberg 2009; Edwards 2000; Eitzen 1996; Kooistra, Mahoney and Bridges 1993; Leonard and King 2011; Lorenz and Murray 2014; Sailes 1993; Woodward 2004). For men of color, the repercussions of racial discrimination and prejudice begin early in life, continue to affect them during their time occupying the role of “football player”, and of course, shape their experiences transitioning out of football and into new identities. Racism permeates nearly every facet of individuals' lives, but I will narrow my focus here to two general themes: racial stereotypes about athleticism and intelligence, and institutional discrimination in employment.

## Racial Stereotypes

NFL retirees of color are disadvantaged from an early age by expectations and assumptions about their intelligence. The stereotype of Black people as intellectually inferior is deeply embedded in American culture, originating in the early colonial settlement of the U.S. as a means of legitimating the institution of slavery. According to numerous scholars, these attitudes persist today though are often espoused in more covert ways, often contrasting Blacks' lack of intelligence with their "innate" athletic abilities (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Ferber 2007; Hill Collins 2004; Leonard 2004; Plous and Williams 1995). In other words, Black people are seen as having brawn rather than brains. This construction of Blackness has important impact on how we understand Black men in our schools and in our sports.

One area of widespread impact is in educational achievement. Though considerable gains have been made in the last 50 years, Blacks and Latinos still lag behind Whites and Asians in scholastic endeavors. They are more likely to drop out, earn lower grades and test scores, and progress at a slower pace through all levels of schooling (Massey and Fischer 2005). This pattern holds true even with upper and middle class Blacks and Latinos (Cashin 2004; Ogbu 2002; Steele 1997). Along with the differences in achievement by race, scholars have also noted a pattern of lower achievement for athletes compared to non-athletes, especially those athletes in the "revenue sports" (i.e., men's basketball, hockey, and football) (Jameson, Diehl and Danso 2007; Upthegrove, Roscigno and Charles 1999). As noted in an earlier section, it is non-White men in these sports who are most vulnerable to athletic identity foreclosure, wherein they hone in on the athlete identity at the expense of all others, including an

academic one. Thus, athletes of color are doubly at risk for low educational attainment, a characteristic that will certainly haunt them once their football careers are over.

Stereotype threat theory, developed by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (1995), seeks to understand the predicament of these groups who must deal with “widely-known negative stereotypes” about their group. Members of such groups must constantly question whether their actions or appearances are conforming to negative stereotypes and if said stereotype is thus being confirmed in the eyes of others (797). They argue that:

...whenever African American students perform an explicitly scholastic or intellectual task, they face the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative societal stereotype—a suspicion—about their group’s intellectual ability and competence (797).

Because stereotypes about Black people’s lack of intelligence are so widespread in U.S. culture, Black people themselves are “keenly aware of prevailing negative valuations of their mental abilities” (Massey and Fischer 2005: 46). This is also true for athletes facing the “dumb jock” stereotype (Davis 1999; Sailes 1993). According to stereotype threat theory, the mere knowledge of these stereotypes can have damaging effects on the academic performance of Black students and athletes. Individuals need not believe the stereotype for it to have power over them (Steele 1997).

Stereotype threat affects Black students and athletes both internally and externally (Massey and Fischer 2005). Stereotypes can also be externalized “when minority members cognitively expect others to act on the basis of prejudicial notions when evaluating them” (49). Students who externalize negative stereotypes and maintain their academic identity are faced with the high-pressure situation of carrying a “performance burden” (49). These students, because they believe they are being judged on the basis of their race, must constantly worry that they will confirm the stereotype. This increases

anxiety about academic performance. The added anxiety about failure and pressure to over-perform actually increases the likelihood of poor performance. Steele and Aronson (1995) argue that low achievement on tests and in class comes from an “inefficiency of processing”. Students carrying a performance burden are likely to score lower on tests because they are “alternating their attention between trying to answer the items and trying to assess the self-significance of their frustration” (809).

Massey and Fischer (2005) argue that while internalization is not a necessary condition of being targeted by negative stereotypes, it often does occur to some extent. Students who continue to take in these negative stereotypes may eventually disidentify with the academic domain. According to Steele and Aronson (1995), continued stereotype threat “may pressure the person to define or redefine the self-concept such that school achievement is neither a basis of self-evaluation nor a personal identity” (797). While this may be a good strategy for relieving anxiety, it also has the consequence of lowering academic performance. As Steele (1997) says, “to sustain school success one must be identified with school achievement” (613). If a student’s self-concept is no longer tied up with academics, they lose motivation to succeed in this domain. This becomes a problem when athletes must exit their roles and create a new sense of self.

The stereotype of Black intellectual inferiority carries over from the educational arena to the football arena. Here the association of Blackness with athleticism (“brawn”) and Whiteness with intellectualism (“brains”) translates into players of different races being tracked into certain positions on the team. Black players are more likely to be pushed into less prestigious (and often higher risk) positions, “demanding more ‘innate’ athletic ability such as speed, quickness or brute strength” (e.g., running backs, receivers,

and cornerbacks) (Kooistra, Mahoney and Bridges 1993: 243; Bigler and Jeffries 2008; Messner 1992). White players, on the other hand, are more likely to be found in “central positions” where they are valued for their leadership and decision-making skills (e.g., quarterbacks, offensive centers) (Woodward 2004: 358). There are both physical and economic consequences of “racial stacking” that affect players’ careers and their lives after football.

In terms of physical consequences, many of the positions that are dominated by Black players inherently come with a higher risk of injury. Furthermore, because they are also lower status positions, players come to value physicality “as a means of gaining status among other males” (Messner 1992: 82). In other words, these men know they will not be valued for playing smart. Therefore, they must play strong, emphasizing tough, aggressive play in order to gain the respect of their teammates, coaches and fans. Focusing on their bodies as a site for gaining success often puts undue stress on the body, creating more chances for injury. In addition to higher risk of injury, Black players also suffer from economic disadvantages due to stacking. The positions that Black players tend to occupy have shorter career lengths that may lead to lower retirement benefits at the end of their careers. We can see the intersections of race, class, and gender here with Black men having fewer resources – both symbolically and economically – to perform masculinity and thus, having to resort to their bodies. Racial stereotypes create undue obstacles for Black players (and other players of color) as they strive to be seen as more than an athlete both on and off the field.

## Employment Discrimination

In addition to negative racial attitudes about people of color, retirees of color must also contend with institutionalized discrimination in the workplace. This includes both the sporting labor market and the world of employment outside of sport. The racial inequalities present in the labor force have been widely documented. Men of color are less likely than their white counterparts to be hired (especially in the service or retail industry) or promoted (Maume 1999; Moss and Tilly 1996; Reskin, McBrier and Kmec 1999). Due to widespread segregation in occupational sectors and individual job sites, men of color are also likely to earn less and have less power at work (Elliott and Smith 2004; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993). Some fraction of this inequality is due to overt racism, but these outcomes are often the result of more insidious institutionalized inequalities and attitudes. For instance, many people get jobs through their interpersonal networks. However, widespread residential, educational, and even occupational segregation limit our network connections, perpetuating this racial division (Reskin, McBrier and Kmec 1999).

Many of the same forces and patterns at work in the wider labor market are also visible in the world of sport. For many ex-players, staying in the game as a coach or analyst is a desired option, especially for those who have a foreclosed athlete identity. However, even in their own league, the NFL, there are only 5 head coaches of color (out of 32 teams) going into the 2014 season.<sup>1</sup> This number vastly underrepresents the influence of Black men on the game where as many as 70% of the players are Black. This racial disproportionality has persisted since the inception of the NFL (Sabo and Jensen 1994; Woodward 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Four of these men are Black and one is Latino.

Racial disparity in NFL coaching may be at least partially explained by the racial stacking that players experience during their playing careers. According to Woodward (2004), many of the coaches in both collegiate and professional football were former white quarterbacks. He argues that “White athletes might, in fact, be groomed at all levels of football to move into coaching and administrative positions in the sport after their career is over, whereas African Americans are not given this same orientation” (372-3). Thus, racial stacking affects not only the player’s athletic career, but also his opportunities for financial success and job satisfaction once that career is over. Further, when Black men do get hired as head coaches, they are evaluated much more harshly than their White counterparts (Davis 1999). For retirees of color who seek post-football employment outside of sport, their opportunities may be even more limited as they are not expected to be intelligent or good leaders.

These racial disparities in employment and education, combined with the prejudicial attitudes of those who see Black men as athletes exclusively, create some serious obstacles for non-White players leaving the NFL. These are experiences that shape identity commitment, salience and foreclosure, as well as affecting the process of role exit and the options (or lack thereof) that retirees of color have for creating new identities in the absence of a football career.

#### *Gender: Hegemonic Masculinity*

Much like the racialized expectations that shape the lives of NFL retirees, these men must also contend with gendered stereotypes and deeply ingrained gender socialization as they construct, exit, and recreate identities. Though men occupy a

privileged place in the patriarchal gender order, they, too, are constrained by this rigid dichotomy that presumes a natural and essential gender binary. The institutionalized cultural expectations of what it means to be a “real man” constitute what Connell (1995) terms “hegemonic masculinity.” This term describes a relatively stable gender expression that reflects the current ideal, at any given place or time, of how to be masculine. Hegemonic masculinity is an ideal type, rarely achievable in its purest form by any man. This set of gendered expectations retains its power because even though most men cannot achieve it, they continue to benefit from it in that it “bonds men symbolically, as a separate and superior group to women” (Messner 1992: 18). To be more masculine, is thus to be less feminine.

Domination, physicality, and exerting control over both self and others are essential values of hegemonic masculinity in current U.S. society. These values and norms are internalized by men as part of their identities and also manifested in behaviors, or “manhood acts,” that demonstrate group membership and are designed to elicit deference from others and maintain power and privilege over women and other men (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009: 289; Schwalbe 2005). Consciously or not, these manhood acts are a way for men to show that they have sufficiently absorbed the values of hegemonic masculinity and that they deserve their place in the gendered pecking order.

Sport is an ideal arena for the embodiment and performance of these manhood acts – a place to demonstrate dominance, control, power, fearlessness, and grit. Football, which has “emerged as America’s most popular ‘gladiator’ sport” (Welch 1997: 393) is especially suited to showcase these traits. Thus, men who better embody them are not only considered better players, but are also seen as better at being men. This creates

enormous pressure for men to conform to these norms, as both their athletic careers and masculine identity depend upon it.

According to Messner (1992), this identity is defined, for football players, through physicality. He argues that players learn to use their bodies as instruments, creating a disconnect between the emotional and physical self. One former player describes this disconnect by arguing that “football is one of the most dehumanizing experiences a person can face” (Meggyesy 1971: 8). While athletes may be very in tune with the capabilities and limitations of their body in terms of its use as a tool, they are taught to ignore, repress, or embrace sensations that do not serve this purpose (Klein 1993, Smith 2008). Athletes are not the only ones who see their bodies as instruments; coaches, management, and even fans are also likely to view them as tools, or commodities, to be put to use for capitalist gain (Trujillo 1995; Wacquant 2001).

Along with the instrumental use of one’s body, men are also encouraged to stifle feminized emotions, such as fear, compassion, and tenderness (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Magaraggia 2012; Schwalbe 1992). These emotions, along with the expression of pain, are treated as a liability and must be ignored or repressed. Sabo (1994) calls this “the pain principle” and argues that it is present in many men, not just athletes. The pain principle stifles bodily awareness and emotional expression, leading bodies to be seen not as part of the self, but as machines to be put to work. This “manly” treatment of the body can lead to life-altering injuries and chronic pain. Hegemonic masculinity is, thus, very tied up in bodily performance. When this performance is threatened by injury, pain, or disability, masculine identity is at stake. For this reason (as well as others), many athletes often play hurt. Messner (1992) argues that playing

through pain is motivated by both internal and external pressures. Many players view injuries as an inevitable part of the game. This normalization of pain, along with an alienation from the body as part of the larger self, motivates many players to return to the field after injury (Curry 1993). Internal motivation for playing hurt may also be as simple as players' competitive nature and their love of the game.

External pressures come in the form of teammates, coaches, and fans that contribute to masculine insecurity via name-calling ("pussy", "faker" or "lazy"). Some scholars conceptualize this external pressure as *accountability* (Schwalbe 2005). When injury threatens men's ability to dominate and perform their expected masculine identity, other men hold them accountable. Schwalbe argues that, "To show weakness or fear is to fall short, though such failure may be more than individual...Every male's sense of superiority, as well as his privileged position in a binary gender system, depends in part on other men signifying masculine selves" (2005: 77). In other words, men are often pushed by other men to play through pain in order to maintain their individual and group position in the gender hierarchy. However, players don't necessarily need this external pressure to hold themselves accountable to masculine standards. The knowledge that their manhood acts will be evaluated by others is often enough to alter behavior *before* receiving any sort of feedback. As Hollander (2013) argues, "our expectations about others' possible evaluations of us become incorporated into our sense of the 'rightness' of our behavior" (Hollander 2013: 8; Fenstermaker and West 2002; West and Zimmerman 1987). In other words, the line between external and internal pressures to play through pain is rather blurry.

Injury is, for most football players, inevitable. As Welch (1997) points out,

football is a sport where “violence is formally introduced into the design and strategy of the game” (393). Most injuries are not career ending; rather, they are gradually accumulated into an overall experience of pain. For many, this may culminate in the ending of a career; for most, it means a lifetime of health and pain issues. Thus, the paradox of football (and other contact sports) is that by enacting the norms of hegemonic masculinity, men wear down their bodies, making them unable to continue to enact these norms. The performance of hegemonic masculinity precludes men from continuing this performance, or as Connell argues, men’s “vulnerability comes from the very situation that allowed them to define masculinity” (1995: 55). The men who make it to the top of the masculine heap, those who most successfully embody hegemonic masculinity, the ones that dutifully ignore pain, repress emotion, and continue to physically dominate and control others on the playing field, are the ones who suffer most. They end up in bodies that are broken and weak, unable to continue to embody the physical standards of masculinity they once lived out on the field.

The consequences of this threatened masculinity, however, are not universal. Poor and working class men and men of color are more constricted in their performance of masculinity than their wealthier peers, beginning in boyhood and continuing through life (Crosset 1995; Eitzen 1996; Lareau 2003; McGillivray, Fearn and McIntosh 2005; Messner 1992; Sabo 1994; Sack and Theil 1979). For many of these men, sport has been constructed as one of few legitimate ways to attain masculine identity and status in the community (Beamon 2012; Messner 1992). For working class men, their “bodily capacities *are* their economic asset, are what they put on the labor market” (Connell 1995: 55). Lower class men and men of color are also tracked into more dangerous sports

because of lack of access to the more benign “country club sports” such as golf or tennis (Messner 1992). The over-commitment to sport as a means of both economic survival and masculine performance makes the loss of bodily ability even more devastating for marginalized men. Gender, and its intersections with race and class, is an important aspect of the larger social context that shapes men’s athletic identity construction and role exit.

### *Social Class: Bourdieu’s Forms of Capital*

In addition to being shaped by their position in the racial and gender hierarchy, athletes’ identities, and subsequent role exits, are also influenced in many ways by their social class of origin and by their fluctuating class position during and after their football careers. This class position is marked not only by income, or economic assets, but also by status, prestige, and power. Bourdieu’s theory of inequality captures the many layers of experience and resources that shape an individual’s class position, as well as larger hierarchical systems. He argues “*all* cultural symbols and practices... embody interests and function to enhance social distinctions” (Schwartz 1997: 6). In other words, everything we have, do, wear, and say works to position us somewhere in the class hierarchy. This theory is useful for understanding the nuance of class position, expanding on the more traditional measures of income, education, and occupation.

Bourdieu, in writing about the reproduction of social class and class inequalities, articulated an important distinction between economic capital, or material wealth, and other forms of less tangible assets, such as knowledge, credentials, and legitimacy

amongst one's peers. He argues that these intangible forms of capital can be just as important as economic wealth in creating and maintaining power structures (Bourdieu 1986). Along with economic capital, Bourdieu describes three additional forms of capital that individuals may draw upon to maintain or increase their position in the social hierarchy: cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Each of these forms are distinct, yet they are interrelated and sometimes interchangeable.

### Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is made up of symbolic resources that allow a person to function more effectively in valued social circles. It includes tastes, dispositions, ways of talking, knowledge of institutions, and educational credentials. Cultural capital is not viewed as an inherent trait or personal achievement, but rather something that is passed down through socialization experiences (Swartz 1998). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital exists in three states: embodied, objectified, and instrumental. Embodied cultural capital is made up of the dispositions and aesthetic preferences individuals internalize, their level of so-called "cultivation". It is the product of accumulated labor and cannot be obtained instantaneously, but must be developed at a personal cost of time, sacrifice, and possibly money (Bourdieu 1986). That said, it is often acquired unconsciously, passed down through family or educational background. An example of embodied cultural capital might be one's taste in music or film.

Whereas embodied cultural capital exists within its possessor, objectified cultural capital exists in material objects that require specialized knowledge to use or fully understand. Objectified cultural capital, or cultural goods, may be passed along or traded

for money without the same personal costs as embodied cultural capital, but both are necessary for making full use of cultural goods. Bourdieu gives the following example:

“A collection of paintings, for example, can be transmitted...But what is transmissible is legal ownership and not (or not necessarily) what constitutes the precondition for specific appropriation, namely the possession of the means of ‘consuming’ a painting...” (Bourdieu 1986)

In other words, the actual object is worth only as much as the owner can interpret it. One may have a collection of Picasso paintings, but without the embodied cultural capital to understand or appreciate them, they may be worthless to the one possessing them.

Institutionalized cultural capital is a way of standardizing cultural capital so that it can be exchanged for economic capital. This form of cultural capital most commonly refers to educational credentials. Having a diploma or certificate is an agreed upon measure of worth, similar to a five-dollar bill, for example. On the whole, cultural capital “is not as stable or as universal a currency as economic capital” (Swartz 1998: 80). This is especially true in pluralistic societies, where there is less devotion to so-called “high culture” and less agreement about what constitutes valuable cultural resources (Peterson and Kern 1999). So, how do we decide what cultural products or symbols are valuable? Bourdieu would argue that this value is largely determined by the social context, or *field*, in which the capital is operating (Swartz 1998). Picasso paintings, or the ability to interpret them academically, may be valued in intellectual or art fields, but this cultural product (and the knowledge required for understanding it) is less valuable in labor or sport fields. As mentioned above, there is not a universal cultural capital. Rather, it is any cultural resource that promotes mobility, prestige, or power within a specific field.

Many scholars agree that athletic participation, along with many other extracurricular activities, is an important form of cultural capital in the education and

employment fields, as “the knowledge, tastes, and dispositions formed in these class practices are (mis)recognized as ‘intelligence,’ ‘creativity,’ and ‘character’ in formalized institutions such as schools” (Stempel 2005: 413). As a form of “concerted cultivation”, sport is seen as a place for producing the cultural values of discipline, self-control and self-actualization that are valued by ruling class (Lamont 1992; Lareau 2003; Stempel 2005; Wilson 2002). Thus, while participation in (and consumption of) particular sports may vary by class, it is widely recognized that participating in sport in general provides some measure of cultural capital that will serve people well in academia and in the working world.

### Social Capital

Another important form of capital is social capital, the resources we are linked to via our networks or memberships in social groups (Bourdieu 1986). The amount of social capital an individual possesses is in direct relationship to both the size and status of his or her social networks. In other words, if members of a social network have large volumes of economic or cultural capital, this has a multiplier effect on the collective capital of other members (Bourdieu 1986; DeLuca 2013). For those with little economic or cultural capital, social capital has increased value because it is primarily through relationships that new opportunities are forged (Kerpelman and White 2006). Social capital is capable of being converted into economic or cultural capital through the commanding of resources from within a social network (Portes and Vickstrom 2011).

Maintaining social capital does not come without cost, however. According to Bourdieu, “the reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed

and reaffirmed” (250). This work takes time, energy, and, often, emotional labor (Hochschild 1979). Coleman (1988) describes the exchange of social capital in monetary terms. If Sue does a favor for Bill, she must trust that Bill will “pay her back” later on. Sue now has a metaphorical credit slip for what Bill “owes” her. If Bill chooses not to return the favor, Sue has lost the time, energy, and whatever other forms of capital she put in for him. This illustrates the emotional exchange that goes into developing networks, as those with higher degrees of trust will likely be more effective and beneficial to its members.

Social theorists have broken down Bourdieu’s concept of social capital into various types that describe different relationships and serve different purposes. *Bonding capital* tends to exist in more homogenous relationships (i.e. personal family networks). These relationships are close-knit and often have high degrees of trust. However, because of their closed nature, they can also be rather limiting (Gittell and Vidal 1998; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). Spaaij (2012) argues that while this form of social capital may appear limiting to outsiders, it serves as a place where those with marginalized identities are affirmed, empowered, and brought together. While bonding capital may not facilitate upward mobility in the sense of making connections, it does provide individuals with a sense of self-worth, confidence, and solidarity that can be beneficial for social mobility.

*Bridging capital*, on the other hand, exists in networks with more distant ties that have the ability to cross social divides. This type of capital serves the purpose of information gathering, generating reciprocity, and forming social cohesion, opening up more opportunities for social mobility (Granovetter 1973; Spaaij 2012). *Linking capital*, a particular form of bridging social capital, connects people directly to institutions and

services. This more formal social capital is shaped in large part by one's cultural capital, or "knowledge of the system" (Ager and Strang 2004; Spaaij 2012). Bridging and linking social capital give individuals access to practical resources outside of their personal networks.

Social capital is both generated and exchanged in sport. It is often necessary to have some initial "start-up" social capital to gain entry into sport and to move up the ranks of sport (DeLuca 2013). Sport participants must first learn about sport and develop an interest. Young athletes need a family network that can get them through the bureaucratic process of signing up for teams, provide transportation, and generate emotional support (i.e. bonding social capital). Personal social networks often shape choices about where to play, based on geography, coaching staff, or peers. The social capital derived from personal networks (family or kinship) is integral to beginning a sporting career (Rosso & McGrath 2012). Bridging and linking capital, generated through sport participation, can include access to and knowledge of highly skilled coaches, training centers or gyms, competitive leagues, job openings, and the facilitation of new networks. In sum, social capital is both a precursor and product of participation in sport.

### Symbolic Capital

In order for social or cultural capital to be converted to economic capital, it must be recognized as having some kind of value. Only if its possessor is seen as legitimate, prestigious, or authoritative will the traits in question be seen as having worth. This recognition is symbolic capital, "the metaphorical currency that confers prestige on an individual and is exchanged between agents vying for status and power" (Ferguson 2013:

97; Bourdieu 1998). Simply put, “symbolic capital would be nothing more than another way of designating what Max Weber called charisma” (Bourdieu 2013: 299).

Symbolic capital serves to mask the socially constructed nature of value, making esteemed traits seem natural rather than a result of unequal power relations (Bourdieu 2013; Doherty and Dickmann 2009). Symbolic capital, like other forms of capital, is dependent upon context, or what Bourdieu would call *fields*. For example, within the field of sport, physical dominance may be taken as a marker of prestige. This may confer the possessor of such prestige with influence over those within his or her field. Outside of this field, however, the symbolic capital bestowed upon athletes may be diminished. Bourdieu (2013) says, “Proof is that the same ‘physical’ or ‘moral’ feature – for instance, a fat or thin body, a light or dark skin, the consumption or rejection of alcohol – can be given opposite ... values in the same society at different epochs or in different societies” (297). In other words, the value of certain cultural markers is entirely dependent on the social context.

One specific form of symbolic capital that is especially relevant to professional football retirees is *celebrity capital*, “understood as accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations, or broadly as recognizability” (Driessens 2013: 556). According to Driessens, celebrity capital, because of its basis in the media, is more able to cut across social fields than symbolic capital, which is generally more field-specific. The media is a form of “meta-capital” that exerts influence in multiple social fields, giving celebrities (those made famous through media exposure) a wide range of locations where they can exercise their capital. Football players, by virtue of their positions on elite, and well-loved, sporting teams, possess high degrees of celebrity capital, especially

if they are recognized as affiliated with the NFL or a particular team. This celebrity capital can be traded in for economic capital in the form of product endorsements, social capital gained through interacting with other celebrities, and increased symbolic capital, giving players license to speak out for certain political or humanitarian causes, for example, or acting as role models for children.

### Gender Capital

*Gender capital*, a form of capital not discussed by Bourdieu, but rather theorized both in response to his neglect of gender and in the spirit of his model of forms of capital, acts as a hybrid of cultural and symbolic capital and hegemonic gender expectations (Bridges 2009). Bridges (2009) defines gender capital as “the value afforded contextually relevant presentations of gendered selves” (84). It mirrors embodied cultural capital in that it reflects the internalization of tastes, knowledge, and ways of being that can be used as resources for social mobility. In other words, individuals who successfully internalize and perform the hegemonic standards assigned to their gender can use these performances to move up the social ladder. For example, some research has shown that women who wear makeup are viewed as more competent, trustworthy, and likeable (Saint Louis 2011). While being a woman is not necessarily an asset in the labor market, performing “appropriate” femininity can be. Gender capital can thus be a stand-in for other forms of capital, especially for those who are marginalized from the White male norm (Huppatz 2012).

Gender capital works the same way for men, particularly those men with less access to other forms of capital. If they can perform appropriate “manhood acts”, they gain a measure of legitimacy or status within their field (Bridges 2009). In this way,

gender capital also functions similarly to symbolic capital, imbuing the actor with power and authority. Also like symbolic capital, gender capital is often hidden or seemingly natural. Because the gender binary, and all the expectations that come along with it, has been so naturalized, we often fail to see the way that we reward people for performing gender “correctly” (McCall 1992).

These essentialist assumptions come to light, however, when one cannot perform the expected gendered acts. Professional football players accrue gender capital through early sport socialization and the performance of manhood acts on the field. These performances both solidify their status within football and within the broader gender order. However, they also take a huge toll on the body, a key aspect of performing hegemonic masculinity. In short, the accrual of gender capital in sport will ultimately deplete this same form of capital. Unlike other forms of capital that tend to reproduce themselves or produce increased profits, the accumulation of gender capital may actually hinder the growth of capital accumulation. As players prepare to exit the football player role and create new identities, they are often faced with depleted stores of gender capital at the time when many of them need it most.

Professional football players bring with them to sport various levels of economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and gender capital. As they move through, and eventually out of, their careers as professional football players these stores of capital grow and shrink, flex and shift. Together, all of these resources define their position in the class status hierarchy and shape the way their athlete identities are created, exited, and re-formed. These identities are also shaped by the expectations of hegemonic masculinity and the stereotypes and institutional inequalities surrounding their racial identities. In short,

larger social structure is key to understanding the micro level processes of role exit and identity construction.

### **Significance and Contributions**

The significance of this project is both academic and practical. By bringing together the micro level processes of identity construction and role exit with macro level inequalities and hierarchies, this research makes contributions to a number of areas. While I draw quite heavily from Fuchs Ebaugh's (1988) theory of role exit, I also extend this theory by illustrating the ways in which the various stages of this process are shaped by an individual's class, race, and gender position, connecting this process explicitly with Bourdieu's theory of capital. While the process of role exit may be a near universal feature in our modern world, it does not look the same for all of us. Our differing levels of commitment to an identity or difficulties creating new identities are often a direct result of the material and symbolic resources we have available to us. Professional football retirees are a specific and unique example, but they also provide a good model for examining role exit from other high status, high visibility roles. Further, this population provides a good model for those who exit a role involuntarily, something Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) does not really discuss.

This research also extends Bridges (2009) concept of *gender capital*. While professional football retirees are a unique population in many ways, they also represent a more generalized gendered role that relies on the body for the accrual and maintenance of gender capital. In this dissertation, I examine how the accrual and eventual loss of gender

capital shapes retirees' creation of a masculine identity. How do men enact masculinity without the full use of the body? This question could be extended to look at other highly gendered occupations, including dangerous blue-collar jobs such as the military or coal mining for men, and sex work for women. It could be further extended to include all people with non-normative bodies, including people with disabilities and the elderly.

In addition to contributing to academic literature on identity construction, role exit, and gender capital, this research also has a more practical consequence in that it provides a deeply nuanced look at the lives of professional football retirees. In popular media, professional athletes are viewed in very two-dimensional ways, as either heroes or villains. This research does away with this dichotomy and positions these men as complicated human beings who are not simply passive victims or complete screw-ups. As the lawsuits regarding pensions and concussions continue to play out, many people view these athletes as spoiled or undeserving. I hope that this project will provide a more compassionate viewpoint, linking their stories to larger issues of inequality and injustice.

## **Road Map**

Following a chapter on the methodological ins and outs of my research process, I will trace chronologically the process of retirement from professional football. This will begin with a description of life during professional football, focused specifically on the capital possessed, accrued, and traded upon during a career in professional sports. In this chapter, I will employ Bourdieu's theory and forms of capital to explore both the perks and pressures of occupying a highly visible, high-status role. I also consider the role that previously held capital plays in shaping the football careers of these men. Understanding

the various forms of capital possessed by professional football players, both before and during their time occupying the football role, will be important for making sense of their experiences upon leaving that role.

In the chapter that follows, I will explore the transitional process of leaving professional football, focusing on the various phases of role exit, as outlined by Fuchs Ebaugh (1988). I argue here that professional football players fall into a typology of role exit types: the early exiters, the explorers, and the engrossed players. Early exiters were the players who disidentified with football before actually disengaging. These players had the highest levels of various forms of capital and were able to use those resources to prepare for new careers and identities. Engrossed players, on the other hand, were relatively low on the social hierarchy, had limited stores of capital, and were not able to prepare for life outside of sport. These distinctions had important implications for the identity and status changes that all players experienced upon leaving professional football.

The final substantive chapter picks up at the moment immediately following role exit, examining both the social and internal tensions experienced by retirees living in what Fuchs Ebaugh calls “the vacuum.” This moment in the role exit process is marked by confusion and disorientation as players become retirees and the expectations for both of those roles remains unclear. For many, especially for the engrossed players, the experience of creating an ex-role is accompanied by depression and feelings of loss. For others, more often the explorers and early exiters, becoming an ex is seen as a viable way to create and accrue new forms of capital. For all retirees, there is a challenge in

embodying the ex-role. All retirees must learn how to deal with pain and still maintain masculine identities in their lives after football.

I conclude by making connections between the micro-level process of role exit and the macro-level inequalities and expectations that shape individual lives. I bring together discussions of identity, capital, and hegemonic masculinity in order to make sense of the difficult transitions that professional football players go through on their way to becoming professional football retirees.

## CHAPTER II

### RESEARCH METHODS

In this project, I utilize qualitative research methods to explore the process of football players' transition out of sport and back into the "real world". Because I am interested in football retirees' self-identities, how they imagine others identifying them, and the way that this identification changes over time and through various role exits, it was important to gather data that describes these processes and understandings.

Much of the earlier research on this subject has been based on either case studies of single athletes (Buton 1970; Kramer 1969; McKenna and Thomas 2007) or larger-scale surveys (Curtis and Ennis 1988; Greendorfer and Blinde 1985; Lerch 1980). While these methods have generated some very useful data, they leave gaps that need to be filled. Survey research does not allow us to understand the richness and nuance of individual experiences. It also cannot explain the *process* of retirement the way that interviews can (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Case studies, unlike survey research, provide a lot of depth. However, this method is limited by its narrowness. While understanding the experience of one player could be very enlightening, it cannot help us to discover patterns about who is more or less likely to have a difficult time with transition and what factors seem to consistently affect these transitions.

In order to address both the depth and breadth of professional football retirees' experiences, I conducted 28 life history interviews. The life history method is useful for drawing connections between particular moments in individual's lives and the larger social and interpersonal context in which these moments occurred (Connell 2007; Plummer 2001). Further, this method provides a unique window into an individual's

sense of self, an important task for gathering data on identities and roles. Handel (2003) describes this type of data as “a reflexive activity of the person’s self”, a product of one’s inner dialogue that arises based on the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (13). The data produced through the telling of a life history is not necessarily “the cold hard facts”, but is rather a selected recall and interpretation of events by the teller. Thus, this method can help us to learn about both the events of someone’s life and how they feel about these events (Geiger 1986).

In each interview, I asked respondents to tell me their “football life history,” beginning with how they got started playing football and moving through high school, college, and the pros. I paid close attention to transitions, particularly the transition out of football and back into “civilian” life. By conducting semi-structured interviews with ex-players, I was able to not only get a very detailed picture of their football careers and experience with retirement, but I also discovered what things were most important to the players themselves. Leaving my interview questions open-ended and having a flexible interview schedule allowed interview subjects to determine the direction of the conversation, and thus the direction of the project itself.

I came to this project with a particular interest in the various difficulties retirees face upon exiting their roles as professional football players. According to the many stories relayed in popular media, these struggles range from financial to marital to physical and mental health problems. Asking retirees to tell their own stories, beginning with their first exposure to football and continuing up through their lives as retirees, allowed me to see where many of these struggles originated, and for some, where they were resolved. For instance, many men talked about marital discord during and after

football, but most of the men in my study maintained their relationships, working through the issues that may have split up other couples. Allowing for the open discussion of these issues shed light not only on the struggles of retirees, but also on the ways they negotiated these struggles.

In summary, using in-depth, semi-structured, life history interviews allowed me to explore in great depth the various transitions that professional football retirees went through during the course of their football careers, and gave retirees a chance to elaborate on the aspects of these transitions that were most important to them. This opened up possibilities for understanding that I had not considered upon embarking on the project. I used these methods to address my largely open-ended questions: What does role exit look like for professional football players? What is the role of capital or social class of origin, race, and gender in exiting football? How does the process of role exit shape retirees' lives after sport?

## **Research Plan**

For this study, I conducted 28 semi-structured, in-depth life history interviews. I used snowball and convenience sampling techniques to reach as many professional football retirees as possible and interviewed until I hit saturation, “the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the newly constructed theory” (Sammure and Given 2008). After conducting interviews, I used a grounded theory coding technique to analyze the data and report the results (Charmaz 2006). I will describe each step of the research process in greater detail below.

### *Data Collection: Recruitment*

Retired professional football players are an interesting and difficult population to track down. There are a number of online databases of retirees, but these data sets certainly do not come with any contact information and they are often contradictory or incomplete. Some retirees are well known as former professional football players, while other retirees actively work to hide or downplay their football pasts. Because of the somewhat disorganized nature of this population, I began my recruitment at a number of different entry points and used convenience sampling to draw in as diverse sample of retirees as possible.

The organizations that do exist for professional football retirees are alumni networks. I used the NFL Retired Player's Association and the NFL Alumni Association as starting places for contacting retirees. I began this process by emailing presidents, secretaries, and/or directors of the NFL's Retired Players Association and its regional alumni organizations. In my initial contact, I briefly introduced myself and my research, and asked these gatekeepers to send out a letter or email to their membership on my behalf. In the recruitment letter, I described the purpose of the research, and included an informed consent form, explaining that participation would be completely voluntary and without financial benefit. I included my phone number and email, and asked willing participants to contact me. I also suggested to gatekeepers that they could give me members contact information if they felt comfortable with that.

Of the sixteen gatekeepers from NFL alumni and retired players groups that I initially contacted, only four regional alumni directors responded. All of those gatekeepers agreed to send my recruitment letter out to their membership. I eventually

heard from and interviewed two retirees, both from the same regional organization.

Utilizing a snowball sampling technique, I asked both of these interviewees if they knew anyone else who might be interested in participating in my study. This generated one more interview.

Because of my particular interest in retirees who struggled in their lives post-football, I also emailed and called the directors of two non-profit groups that serve retired players in need. Both groups deal primarily with financial and healthcare assistance for retired players. As with the alumni and retired players associations, I asked them to send out letters to their clients on my behalf. Because of the sensitive nature of the assistance that these organizations provide, I did not even suggest that they give me retirees' contact information. In fact, I assured them that I would not know the names or identities of these individuals until they returned their informed consent forms to signal their participation. Both of these non-profit directors were pleasant, but rather dismissive. One agreed to pass my letter on to someone else in his organization that he thought could better handle my request. I never heard from them again. The other also directed me to someone else within the organization. I did end up speaking with her, but she was not optimistic about her clients' participation. I also never heard from anyone in this organization again.

Overall, the pursuit of interviewees through formal organizations was less than fruitful, leading to only three interviews in a single geographic region. One possible reason for the silence from both alumni networks and non-profit clients is that the onus was on retirees to make contact with me. In other words, they had to be very motivated to want to participate in a research project or to share their experiences with a stranger. Had I been able to contact these men directly, I think the response rate would have been

higher. In the case of the men being served by the two non-profit organizations, I think another barrier to participation is shame. Relying on others for financial assistance or help with healthcare doesn't feel good for anyone, but may be especially painful for those who were at one time at the height of masculinity, both physically and financially strong. For men who may have been contacted by the non-profit organization about my research, they may not have been very interested in talking to a stranger about their hardships. Further, they may not have had the time or resources to spend talking about their lives. Finally, I know that many non-profits are stretched quite thin in both resources and time. It's possible that neither organization passed my letter along simply because it was not a high priority for them and they may not have had the resources to do so.

After having poor luck with professional football organizations and non-profits, I turned my attention to university alumni networks. In order to maximize my geographical reach, I contacted university "letterman's clubs" or alumni groups in a variety of geographic areas, asking alumni group leaders if they had alumni who played in the NFL. After my experience with NFL alumni groups, I started by asking directly for alumni's contact information. I found sympathetic, or perhaps irresponsible, gatekeepers at three universities around the Northwest and Southwest. From these college alumni networks, I contacted and interviewed eight men in four different cities.

In addition to these more formal organizations, I also took advantage of personal network connections, mostly friends or family of friends. These contacts demonstrated the hidden-in-plain-sight nature of the professional football retiree population. As I told friends about my project, many of them would say things like, "Oh, my neighbor played professional football," or "I have a friend from high school who played in the NFL."

These casual conversations about my research led to eight interviews in four geographic regions: the Northwest, Southwest, Northeast, and Midwest. In addition to relying on personal networks, I also drummed up five interviews through cold-calling retirees whose contact information I could find on the internet. Most of these came through my searching for college alumni who also played in the NFL, but also through knowledge of retirees living in my geographic area.

Finally, in addition to convenience sampling, I also relied on snowball sampling, where my interviewees would refer me to others who might be interested in participating. This was another beneficial source of recruitment, generating five more interviews. While I had very little response when recruiting indirectly (through gatekeepers), I found that if I could actually get a retiree on the phone, they almost always agreed to participate in the interview. In fact, no one that I actually spoke to directly refused to be interviewed. However, a few retirees did agree and then never returned my phone calls or emails.

Late in my recruitment and interview process, as I was approaching data saturation, I contacted all the retirees I had previously interviewed and asked them for names and contact information of retirees who had had different experiences from their own. I was especially interested in those who had had a more difficult time adjusting to life after football. This was another place where I ran into a wall of silence. Most did not respond at all or else told me they weren't in touch with any other retirees. One interviewee wrote back and said he had someone in mind. A few days later, he wrote again saying this person was not doing well and was not interested in talking about it. This was the only direct rejection I got, lending weight to my assumption that perhaps those who were struggling in their lives after football were less willing to discuss it.

The recruitment process was, for me, the most difficult aspect of this project. It was a lot of self-promotion, followed by a lot of rejection, especially at the beginning when I was trying to work within formal organizations. Once I was able to talk to individual people, the process became a little easier. However, throughout recruitment, there was always discomfort around calling people out of the blue and asking them to donate their time and emotional energy with nothing in return, other than the chance to share their story.

#### *Data Collection: Interviews*

The period of recruitment was almost simultaneous with the interview period. I began recruiting interviewees in March of 2010 and my first interview was in August of 2010. Both recruitment and interviews continued through January of 2012. Once initial contact had been made, I scheduled, whenever possible, a time for a face-to-face interview with the retiree. When an in-person interview was not possible, I conducted interviews over the telephone. I began each interview by introducing myself, describing the project briefly, and then going over the informed consent form. I explained to participants that their identities would remain confidential, that there may be some psychological risks to participating, that participation was completely voluntary, and that they could stop the interview or take a break at any time, as well as refuse to answer any question. After gaining respondent's signed consent, I had them each fill out a brief demographic survey with questions about their age, race, educational background, marital and family status, employment status, and football history (years played, positions

played, teams played for).<sup>2</sup> After completing the survey, I asked interviewees if I could audio record our discussion. Everyone agreed to this.

My respondents were quite diverse on many levels. In terms of demographics, they ranged in age from 34 to 72 years old, with the average age around 53 years old. The majority (18) were White, but I also interviewed eight Black retirees, and two Pacific Islanders. Twenty-two of the 28 men graduated from college; 5 have advanced degrees.<sup>3</sup> They also varied in terms of their football careers. The average career length of my respondents was 7 years, with careers ranging from 2 to 17 years. Twenty of the men played on the offensive side of the ball, including 11 offensive linemen, 6 running backs and receivers, and 2 quarterbacks. Eight played defense: 2 defensive lineman, 2 defensive backs, and 4 linebackers. Interviewees lived in nine states within four geographic regions (Northwest, Southwest, Midwest and Northeast). The majority of interviewees (16) lived in the Northwest, followed by nine from the Southwest, two from the Midwest and one from the Northeast.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 4 hours, with the average interview taking about 1.5 to 2 hours. Twenty-three of the interviews were conducted in person at a place of the respondent's choosing. The remaining five interviews were conducted over the phone. I met respondents at a variety of places, including their homes, their places of work, and local restaurants or coffee shops. Scholars seem to agree that face-to-face interviews provide the best means of creating a relaxing, comfortable environment

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<sup>2</sup> Only one respondent did not complete the demographic survey. He jumped right into conversation after signing the informed consent form and I didn't want to stop the flow. I emailed him the survey the next day, but even after a few follow-up emails, he never returned it. I was able to gather most of the information on the survey from his interview.

<sup>3</sup> About 50% of NFL players have college degrees (Abrams 2009). The number is likely higher for retirees because many finish their degrees after a career in professional football.

between interviewer and respondent. Being in the same room is more conducive to making personal connections, creating a less formal environment. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), people are more likely to talk to you if they know you and this familiarity is best created in person.

In each interview, I asked respondents to tell me their “football life history”, beginning with how they got started playing football and moving through to the end of their career and how they transitioned to into life after sport. I also asked all of my respondents about their lives after football including questions about their career, whether or not they had any issues with money, relationships, drugs and alcohol, and about their physical and mental health. Finally, I asked respondents to do a little reflecting on their lives, asking them what they hope others might learn from their experience, what they wish they would have accomplished, and how they feel that they have changed (or not changed) since their days of playing football. Most of the interviews took a very conversational tone and flowed along at the direction of interviewees. I probed them often for more details or for an explanation about specific statements, and most of the time they answered without hesitation. I also shifted conversational gears at times when I felt like our discussion needed to be reined in a little. The drudgery of recruitment and scheduling was rewarded with very rich and warm and interesting conversations about the retirees’ lives. Many were very candid, telling me that they were sharing things that they hadn’t ever really talked about before. One retiree even told me that I was “better than having a shrink” (Louis). For the most part, interviewees were very forthcoming about their experiences, as well as their opinions (and sometimes even emotions) about those experiences. Only one retiree was exceptionally concerned about confidentiality

after having negative experiences with sports media during his football career. I assured him that I would not only change his name, but any identifying information as well.

In order to provide all respondents with confidentiality, I have assigned each one a pseudonym and have included only relevant demographic information in the body of this dissertation. For instance, there were only minor, insignificant regional differences between retirees, so I have almost always excluded the geographical area of retirees, including the names and locations of where they went to college and where they played professionally. Some of the relevant data that I have included are the retirees' races, social class backgrounds, and ages. This information should not be enough to identify individual players, and all included statements from retirees have been edited to maintain confidentiality.

### *Data Analysis*

During each interview, I took sparse field notes. I tried to write down as much about the setting as I could, especially if we were in their home or place of employment: did they display any football memorabilia? Would I know that this person was a professional football retiree if I only had the physical space to analyze? I recorded these observations while my interviewees filled out the demographic survey. During the course of the interview, I tried to take as many notes as possible on body language and the general mood or tone of the conversation. As I said above, however, these notes were sparse. I discovered early on that it was difficult to maintain an organic flow of conversation while also taking notes about what was going on outside of the conversation. Because I didn't have a lot of time or opportunity to take notes during the

interview, I did set aside time after each interview to write down my impressions of the interview and any non-verbal cues that might be missing from the audio-recording.

Transcription was another part of the data analysis process. I began transcribing shortly after my first set of about six interviews and went on to transcribe about one third of my total interviews.<sup>4</sup> Before I started transcribing interviews, I would re-read any notes that I took during or after the interview in order to metaphorically transport me back to the moment of the interview. The process of transcription, along with reflecting on my previously taken notes, allowed me to listen reflexively not only to what my interviewees were saying, but also to how I performed as an interviewer. This process was helpful in shaping the way I interacted with future respondents, giving me important insights into the consequences of how I phrased certain questions or the order in which I brought up sensitive subjects. Doing a portion of my own transcription was an important part of both the data collection and analysis process, helping me to better hear respondents telling their own story (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

Once each transcription was finished, either by myself or by a hired transcriptionist, I read it through completely (with my field notes open) and wrote a short summary memo about the interview. I included some of the pertinent facts of the individual's life. I noted things like, "not a huge recruit – made use of happenstance encounter with local pro football player who helped him get a college scholarship" and "Only had two careers in life: football and real estate. Football career has definitely opened doors – people like to talk about it. Consciously keeps memorabilia up in office as conversation piece." In addition to recording the interesting facts from each interview,

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<sup>4</sup> The other two thirds of interviews were transcribed by three transcriptionists who were paid for their time and who all signed a confidentiality agreement. Often, however, I would have to go through and correct misheard words or phrases, so I ended up doing bits and pieces of many of the professional transcriptions.

I also noted trends that I thought might be patterns, as well as events or traits that seemed to be exceptions to patterns. At the end of each memo, I had a section entitled “So What?” where I tried to make sense of what I had observed.

From these interview memos, I compiled a list of themes to explore in greater depth. Using these themes, I did a line-by-line coding analysis of a small selection of interviews. This allowed me to test whether or not the trends I had previously identified were relevant, and also created space for new codes to emerge directly from the interviews (Charmaz 2006; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995; Rubin and Rubin 2005). This semi-structured coding process, which was extremely time consuming given the length of my interviews, was essential to prioritizing the voices of my respondents, rather than my own previously held assumptions. After a very careful coding of about seven interviews, I went back and refined the coding scheme, incorporating the relevant themes drawn from interview memos and the newly emerging codes drawn directly from the data. This was a fairly continuous process. As I coded more and more interviews, I would discover new themes and have to go back to include those in previously coded interviews. I also realized that some of my early themes or codes were not as relevant as I initially believed and these were edited out of the coding scheme.

Once all interviews were coded using the line-by-line method, I engaged in more focused coding, comparing instances of each code to see how they connected and where they diverged. For instance, one code that was very common was “treated different,” where retirees would talk about how they were treated differently than their peers because of their role as a football player. When I looked at this code more closely, I discovered that there were variations in the special treatment that retirees received during

their playing days. Most noticeable was the difference between the *perks* of being in a high status role and the unique *pressures* that accompany this same role. While both perks and pressures fell under the same code, retirees were actually describing opposite experiences of being in a high status, high visibility role. This focused coding, and integrative memo writing, helped to clarify and sharpen the larger themes that emerged from the data. It was during this process that I was able to identify more specific patterns and connections (Emerson 2001; Rubin and Rubin 2005). I then used these memos as a basis for all of the substantive chapters of this dissertation.

Though I mentioned it briefly before, it's important to note that all the data analysis processes described here were ongoing, simultaneous, and cyclical. This was not a linear step-by-step process where one step ended before another began. I might work on a transcription, conduct an interview, and code another all on the same day. I would finish one round of line-by-line coding and then return to the field notes and interview memos. The continual back and forth between the various tasks of data collection and data analysis was integral to maintaining a connection between theory and data. Anytime I started to analyze and use sociological theory to explain what might be going on, the coding techniques I employed forced me to return to the data. The themes that I saw emerging in early transcriptions and coding also shaped the questions I asked in later interviews, sharpening the focus of our conversations. This open-ended approach helped me remain true to the experiences of my respondents.

## **Methodological Limitations**

While my methodological approach afforded me many benefits in the implementation of this project, there were also significant limitations: lack of triangulation, sampling biases, and an overall lack of representativeness. These issues are all somewhat interrelated, but I will expand upon each of them below.

One of the most significant limitations of this project, due primarily to constraints on time and resources, is the use of a singular methodological technique: interviewing. Given more time and money, I would have added a contextual analysis to this project, examining the ways that popular media describes the lives of retired professional football players and how retirees themselves do this in autobiographies, memoirs, blog posts, or other written accounts of their football life histories. This supplement to the project would provide an additional window into not only how retirees see themselves, but also how they are seen and imagined by others. My data would also be complemented by a quantitative analysis of how professional retirees fare in life during and after football. Both of these additional methods would serve as a remedy of sorts to the small sample size included in my research project.

Related to the small sample size is the issue of *who* is included in my sample. Not only is my group a small one – only 28 men out of thousands of NFL retirees – but it also includes, for the most part, a very specific type of retiree. Almost half of the men I interviewed were retirees who I discovered through their participation in some kind of formal alumni network (be it professional or college). Many of these alumni networks are known for their charity and volunteer work, signaling that the men who choose to be involved in such a group are likely to have more expendable time and income than those

who have struggled in life after football. In other words, financially secure retirees may be better networked and thus more likely to be contacted for an interview. Further, of those who were contacted (whether through formal networks or through personal contacts/ cold calling), it's possible that only those with the most time and least financial need agreed to participate. There was no financial reward for participating and each interview took an average of about 2 hours to conduct, no small chunk of time. This sample also included only those retirees who could be reached by phone or email.

Networking aside, there is also a self-selection bias in my sample. Because my sample was largely one of convenience, I interviewed only those who were interested in the project. The few interviews that came from NFL alumni networks definitely demonstrate this bias. They were never contacted directly by me and chose, out of the goodness of their hearts, to respond. This indirect method of recruitment excludes those retirees who believed they had nothing interesting to share, those who were suspicious of me or my project, those who simply didn't have time, and probably most importantly, those who were ashamed of or unwilling to discuss their life after football. This was evidenced by the one direct decline that I received from a retiree who was struggling both financially and mentally in life after football. I suspect that many of the most impoverished, mentally or physically ill, addicted, or disillusioned retirees were left out of my research completely, either because they were not available to be contacted or because they were unwilling to share their negative experiences.

These sampling issues relate directly to the lack of generalizability of my research. My sample of retirees, according to everything I've read about NFL retirees, had longer playing careers, were more educated, and had more financial success in their

lives after football. They do not give us a realistic picture of professional football players as a whole. Because my data is not generalizable, however, does not mean that it's worthless. For instance, we can think of this particular sample as "best case scenario." Because they fairly diverse in terms of age, race, and social class background, their wide-ranging experiences still provide a good basis of analysis for issues of identity, masculinity, and inequality.

Future research would benefit from a more systematic sample – perhaps drawn from a database of all professional football retirees. This would probably require an "insider" researcher, someone with a lot of contacts in the world of professional football, and/or more buy-in from professional and college alumni networks. I think future projects would also benefit from working more closely with non-profit organizations, in order to reach out to those who are struggling the most. An ethnographic account of one of these organizations would also be an interesting take. My hope is that this smaller scale project would inspire a larger investigation into the process of role exit from professional football and the obstacles that many retirees face.

## CHAPTER III

### LIFE DURING FOOTBALL

In the U.S. popular imagination, professional football players are quite literally the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. They enjoy large amounts of social prestige and earn very high wages. They are physically dominant and exert a high degree of control over themselves and others. It's easy to see this population as exceedingly privileged. The way this privilege is experienced, however, is not uniform. Furthermore, there are certain costs to performing the expected roles that go along with their privileged positions as male and members of the upper class. In the chapter that follows, I will examine both the perks and pressures of capital accumulation.

#### **Forms of Capital in Football**

While football retirees are extremely diverse in a number of ways, they all share the experience of occupying a high status position, even if it is for a short time. In this chapter, I examine this shared experience using Bourdieu's model of understanding class relations based on a variety of types of capital. I describe the ways players earn and trade economic, cultural, social, symbolic, and gender capital during their playing careers. I also discuss how capital is unevenly distributed amongst high status football players, primarily on the basis of race and social class of origin. Finally, I devote some attention to the costs of possessing and trading capital, looking at the negative side of a high status position. While this is mainly a descriptive chapter, it is an informative starting point for understanding the way that capital works in the lives of these football players and how it later shapes the role exit process of leaving football.

### *Economic Capital*

The most obvious material benefit of a professional football career is the salary. The vast majority of my respondents mentioned the substantial pay that comes along with a football career. In fact, when asked what they missed about football, money was one of the most common responses. Many players also mentioned that this was one of the hardest parts about making the transition out of sport. There was an interesting division, however, by age. For those who played before the era of unrestricted free agency (beginning in 1992), the money was nothing like it is today. In fact, the only three respondents who did *not* mention the sizable wages from football, instead talked about how little money they made compared with athletes today:

I mean, you have to understand that in those days there wasn't enough money in the game. I think in the last year I made 73 or 77 thousand dollars. I was high compared to some of the other guys on the team, and all the centers. But it was not very much money. (Pete)

The money's, I'll give you a comparison ... I was the third pick. I signed for what was then a record. I got a 250 thousand dollar bonus. The third pick in the draft today, guaranteed 38 million. Without even going out on the field. Guaranteed. (Louis)

While other older players made similar comparisons, they also acknowledged that their wages were quite good, compared with other professions or compared with their jobs today. Salary, or what Bourdieu would label economic capital, was the most straightforward of the material benefits to playing football.

In addition to accruing economic capital, about a quarter of my respondents also mention the indirect economic benefits of being a football player, which include seemingly trivial things like free food and drinks, discounted cars, and other promotional merchandise:

We had a nice meal and everything. And then you ask for the check and they're like, "Oh, it's on us." And I didn't ask for it. I didn't expect, you know, and I said, "No, we're okay." And manager come over, "No, we appreciate you coming in here." And I'm going "Oh gosh." You know, that kinda thing right there. That's what totally amazed me. You go buy a car, you know, they find out who you are. I'm just in there trying to buy a car. They find out who you are and suddenly the sales manager's coming out and you're going to get a deal. Or maybe you'll do a promotional deal for us or some advertisement and we'll just give it to you as a demo for six months and every six months we'll give you another one. (Ralph)

The ways that players gain these more tangible assets highlights the way that various forms of capital work together to reproduce the class structure. High-status football players are able to use their symbolic capital, or prestige, to create important social networks that lead to gains in economic capital (or material goods). This exchange, however, is not just the exchange of material goods, but also of symbolic capital. The business owner gains a measure of legitimacy (or symbolic capital) through the public interactions he or she has with a high status football player. These interactions, by opening up important business connections, also pave the way for increased social capital for both parties. We see here an exchange – players gain economic capital in exchange for sharing their social and symbolic capital with business owners.

### *Cultural Capital*

The symbolic, intangible resources that help us to function and thrive in mainstream or elite social circles make up cultural capital. Unlike economic capital, this form of capital is often largely dependent on the field, or social context, in which it exists. One of the most important forms of cultural capital that came along with being a high status athlete was education. Getting an education is important for building embodied cultural capital, as those who go through the academic system tend to learn and

internalize socially valued dispositions and tastes. Players talked about the variety of skills and knowledge they gained from attending college. For some, it was learning how to study and think critically about the world:

I did not know how to study ... I did not, coming out of high school, I don't know whether it was just that easy where I went to school, whether I was just that smart for it or whatever, but when I got into college, I had to learn to study and it was a whole new concept. (Ralph)

What I got ... out of college, more than anything was just the way to learn. You know, learn how to learn. And I think that helped me as far as just being prepared for, I mean, you know the NFL playbook is a big playbook. (Nolan)

[School] is good practice. Right? It's good training for the mind to practice at something that is difficult and to figure out what's required. (Martin)

Others gained embodied cultural capital in the form of specific job skills that could be carried over to their lives after sport:

I was thinking about doing some broadcasting ... And so I was getting a little extra work by playing football because I would get interviewed. So when you get interviewed all the time, you're able to speak in front of the camera, talk in front of the camera and they asked me to do a couple shows, you know, "Come on and do the coach's show or come speak at the [team] luncheon." So I was able to take that and apply what I was learning in the classroom to what I was doing. (Bryan)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, were the interpersonal skills that players learned through immersion in academia:

Because of the class sizes and the number of, the larger classes, if I made the effort to go and talk to either the professor or a teaching assistant, it seemed to make a difference both to me in terms of how I responded to them and also them in terms of how they responded to me ... I mean, you can get, in any school, you can kinda get lost in the shuffle a little bit if you wanna kinda disappear. And to the degree that you're kind of linked up with a class or a teacher or something like that, you feel more of an obligation in yourself to perform. (Ted)

All of the job skills acquired through education, as well as more intangible skills of self-discipline, accountability, and critical thinking, were transferred into cultural capital as

players internalized these ways of being and were able to draw upon these skill sets in fields outside of education or sports.

Perhaps more importantly, however, were the educational credentials that served as institutionalized cultural capital. Institutionalized cultural capital is a more standardized form of capital that cuts across fields and can be directly exchanged for economic capital. Many of the retirees I interviewed were awarded athletic scholarships and were able to go to college for free or a reduced rate. For those who graduate, the educational credentials they received in exchange for their athletic services are an extremely valuable form of capital that help them in their lives after sport.

### *Gender Capital*

A particular form of embodied cultural capital is what Bridges (2009) terms *gender capital*. Men learn through various agents of socialization the “appropriate” way to be masculine in the U.S. today – strong, dominant, rational, and in control. In athletics, particularly in sports like football that are centered on these very traits, having internalized the norms of hegemonic masculinity is a valuable resource that can be exchanged for other forms of capital. This may be translated to economic capital in the form of a salary or symbolic capital in the form of legitimacy (being seen as a “real man”). Football is an important site for both demonstrating and accumulating gender capital.

Performing “manhood acts” on the field, or demonstrating one’s possession of gender capital, often involves actions that require a high degree of physicality and aggression. This leads to a lot of beat-up bodies. As one of my respondents, Nolan, told

me, “The injury rate in the NFL is 100%.” In order to both maintain and accrue more gender capital, players must develop strategies to continue returning to the field every play. This means viewing the *body as an instrument* or tool and *playing through pain*. Both of these bodily practices are ways of demonstrating and building up stores of gender capital. The more players show toughness on the gridiron, the more legitimacy they have as both football players and men. However, as I will discuss in later chapters, these manhood acts, while building and showing off gender capital, simultaneously deplete these same stores of gender capital.

One strategy for maintaining gender capital, as well as a place on the football team, was to view the body as an instrument or a tool, designed for a specific purpose. A few retirees described themselves using very literal instrumental language:

I’ve always felt that, I’m a machine. Send me out. I’m a machine. And I’ve always kind of had the young man’s testosterone invincibility... I mean I never had the thought this clearly, but kind of on a subtle level, if I was about to have a collision, subtly I would think, “I hope he’s OK after this.” You know, I never really thought, “I hope I’m going to be OK.”... My estimation is that 90 percent of players are physical laborers in the same way that a construction worker is a physical laborer, or somebody who digs trenches or whatever. You’re using your body. It’s a tool. You’ve got to get this job done. (Will)

For others, the correlation of the body to an instrument or tool to be controlled was subtler. One player, Percy, said the following in response to questions about how he dealt with pain during his playing days:

As I think so I am... And if the body tells me it wants to hurt, I just tell it, I ain’t got time for it. (Percy)

In this quote, Percy illustrates a distinct separation between his mental and physical self, essentially arguing that he can control his body with his thoughts. Note, as well, his use of “*the body*” rather than “*my body*”, discursively separating self from body and

depersonalizing his pain (White, Young and McTeer 1995). This very subtle language usage was quite common – men referring to their own bodies as “the” or “your” body rather than “my” body. By viewing their bodies as machines to be used or manipulated in the name of efficiency or maximizing output, players demonstrate not only toughness, but control (Trujillo 1995).

The instrumental use of the body extended beyond using bodies as machines to also using them as weapons to harm opponents. While aggression and violence are taken-for-granted aspects of hegemonic masculinity, these traits are actually rewarded on the football field. One scholar (and former college football player) writes, “I learned to be an animal. Coaches took notice of animals. Animals made first team.” (Sabo 1994: 84). In other words, a way to build gender capital was to treat oneself as a weapon, or in the words of one player, Roger, as a “trained killer”.

Bodies as weapons are not only valorized by coaches, but also supported by media coverage of football. The militarization of football is readily apparent in commentators’ comparisons to war, describing players as “missiles”, “shields”, and “rockets” (Trujillo 1995: 411). Players themselves may also value this violent orientation toward the game or at least recognize its use value in the world of professional football. Ralph talks here about the necessity of being alienated from others, even off the field, as a survival tactic:

You’re a very selfish person. You’re so about you. And I think you have to be to a certain degree. You have to have an invincible attitude about yourself. You have to really feel that about yourself... You have to think you’re the baddest son of a bitch out there. And I did. I thought I was just, you couldn’t kill me. And I could kill you and I would. You were so into yourself, into your body, into the mentality of it and working out, everything else is just, it’s all a distant second. I don’t understand how a guy has a family and is able to separate the two. I couldn’t. I don’t think I would have been able to, to have a wife and kids and to be able to

separate them from the mentality necessary for me to be a player. (Ralph)

Ralph recognized that in order to continue accruing gender capital and performing manhood acts on the field, he had to maintain an emotional distance from not only his opponents, but anyone who might distract him from thinking of himself as a violent killer. Not all players were completely uncritical, however, about using their bodies as weapons. One former player described his “confused joy at breaking up another man’s body”, arguing that this cognitive and emotional disconnect was one of the main reasons he left football (Meggyesy 1970: 8). Paradoxically, the instrumental use of one’s body and accumulation of gender capital can ultimately lead to a lifetime of pain, injury, and disability – factors that ultimately deplete one’s gender capital resources.

In order to maintain the instrumental use of the body, players often had to repress or ignore pain. Playing through pain is not just a central tenet for football players, but also a key ideal of hegemonic masculinity and basis for accumulating gender capital. As White et al (1995) say, “In sport, playing with pain is viewed as appropriate and normal male behavior” (168). Sabo (1994; 2004) calls this the “pain principle.” According to Sabo, the pain principle is not reserved for sport alone. He argues that it is a widespread narrative in patriarchal societies, coming out of Western ideas about morality. The pain principle assumes that pain is inevitable, that it is a more worthy experience than pleasure, and that the endurance of pain demonstrates moral worth (2004: 64). In football, where pain truly is inevitable, this principle takes on more urgent meaning. In order for players to be seen as morally “good” humans, to demonstrate and accumulate gender capital, and maintain their position in the status hierarchy, they must not only play through pain, but also suppress any emotions around that pain or injury.

Retirees gave numerous accounts of playing through pain. In most cases, this practice was completely normalized, demonstrating retirees' sense of pain as an inherent part of their football careers. Some retirees spoke about pain more generally. Arnold said, "I can't ever remember playing where you weren't in some kind of pain." Oscar echoed this sentiment: "I played hurt for two years there. I was always hurt. Everyone's always hurt." Others spoke specifically about injuries and treatments. Because injury was such a normal part of the athlete's life, players were constantly going through rehabilitation in order to continue returning to the field:

So I was just trying to get through the game ... It was tough for an old man like me just coming off this knee, man, because I still had scar tissue I was working out ... That whole year I played and I took my Toradol shots, pain shots and everything just to play because they needed me ... You get it numb for the game. You try to pace yourself in practice as much as you can but you can't pace yourself too much ... So practices are hard. They hurt because you try not to take the pain medicine. I started to take a lot of pain medicine, excluding Toradol, during practice. I was taking the Aleves and all types of aspirin and Indocin, Vioxx, all those anti-inflammatories, everything, just to practice. And then in the game, I got the big dog. So it was like, that's what we had to do to get ready.  
(Cameron)

I had both knees, every Sunday, for [two years], I would have the knees drained and shot with cortisone, and right before the game, and it gets kind of old. Half the time, or part of the time anyways, I couldn't get up the steps to go to bed. I had to sleep downstairs because I was in such bad shape. But, I was able to play every Sunday, so... (Pete)

It's worth mentioning here that Pete was the oldest interviewee in my study, having retired from football in the late 1960s, while Cameron was the most recent retiree, having left football only three years before our interview. While medical technology has certainly evolved dramatically in the last half-century, we see strikingly similar treatments for pain and injury on the sidelines of professional football throughout the

years<sup>5</sup>. For both of these players, getting steroid shots before games was not just part of the routine, but also served as an important marker of gender capital, demonstrating toughness, sacrifice, and fortitude in the face of injury.

It was not just physical adaptations that players made in order to play through pain, they also had to train their psyches:

Football hurt from the first day I stepped on the field and I was a realist about it. But I was shocked at how much more it hurt once I got to the top. It was, like, shocking. But, of course, it's a slow and gradual process, and so you train yourself in creating a different relationship with pain. You start to think of it as intense feeling or just intense sensation. And you have to shift your relationship with pain to be able to play at that level, because it hurts. I'm here to tell you. It hurts. (Martin)

You can't love football as an offensive lineman ... Football is enduring a lot of unpleasant stuff and you do it, I did it, I shouldn't speak for everybody, but I did it not out of love, the joy I got from the game, but for a certain satisfaction, of proving stuff to myself about myself. Certainly with moments of just joy and pleasure, but a whole lot of putting up with it and enduring it and that sort of thing. These are corny little clichés, but there's some kind of character building going on. But there's also a whole lot of psychological maintenance going on. (Bart)

Martin and Bart described the psychological work that goes into dealing with pain. It was not just about changing one's playing style, training methods, or drug regimen, but involved a great deal of mental energy. Demonstrating this mental toughness and control over both body and emotions was a means of putting gender capital to use. As Bart says above, he was "proving stuff to [him]self about [him]self", or holding himself accountable for his gender presentation. Bart had been socialized since boyhood into the norms and values of hegemonic masculinity. By enduring "unpleasant stuff" on the

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<sup>5</sup> In Cameron's quote, we see that it's not just steroid shots that players use to manage pain and injury. The availability and encouragement of painkiller use has serious consequences for many professional football players and retirees. While none of the retirees I interviewed reported dealing with pill addiction, it has been widely documented that this is one of the most pressing issues facing NFL retirees today (Huizenga 1995; Jenkins and Maese 2013; Solotaroff 2012)

football field, he was able to show that he had internalized the lessons of masculinity and prove to himself and others that he deserved his place in the gender hierarchy. While most men did not explicitly link playing through pain to maintaining their place in the gender hierarchy, their comments do reflect an adherence to the often unspoken norms of hegemonic masculinity.

Players also endured “meritocratic pain” in order to maintain their position in the football status hierarchy. Meritocratic pain is associated with upward social mobility and is characterized as a necessary evil (Sabo 2004). One of the most prevalent reasons retirees expressed for playing through pain was the desire to make it into professional football or to stay there. Players discussed playing through pain in order to avoid being cut, to avoid being edged out by other players, and to continue making a paycheck to support their families:

I mean, you're gonna play through pain. You have to. I remember when I was in [city], I had this tear in my quadriceps. And, it was like a divot. But, I just couldn't not play. They would cut me. So, I had to, somehow I just got through it, you know ... So, I think players just play with a lot of, it's just, you just do it. And I think some players play with a great deal of pain. (Nolan)

Back in those days everybody played with injuries... Somebody might come along and out play you. You didn't want to sit on the bench... You play because number one, you love the game. Two, you didn't want to lose your job. Number three, you got paid money. (Larry)

I was, you know, it was a little fear because, you know, at that point, we were gonna have a family. We had a life in [NFL city]. So, my full energy was, “I'm gonna make it back. I've done it before, so I can make it back again.” (Chris)

Players know that “sucking it up” will help them to maintain their position in professional football. Sabo argues, however, that the concept of “meritocratic pain” goes beyond the attitudes of individual athletes; that it is part of a larger cultural narrative about “paying

ones dues”, or sacrificing to get ahead in life. This attitude seems to be especially important for men, who, as part of the performance of hegemonic masculinity, are expected to be dominant in all spheres of life which means playing the role of the primary breadwinner and patriarch. The sacrifice of their bodies for something greater than individual glory was another way of gaining gender capital.

The treatment of one’s body as an instrument and the experience of playing through pain were not universal. Or at least, these experiences were not universally discussed by retirees. Compared to their working class peers and peers of color, White retirees from middle class backgrounds were much less likely to describe their bodies using instrumental terms and to discuss playing through pain. Further, the White middle class retirees who did mention playing through pain were more likely than their peers to explain *why* they did so.

To explain this pattern, we must return to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. While this idealized type of masculinity is primarily used to define men in opposition to women, it also serves to rank men against one another. Scholars argue that while most men can never reach the pure standards of hegemonic masculinity, men with more capital (of various types) may have an easier time approximating this ideal than others. A career in professional football is unique because though it comes with high prestige and pay, it requires the use (and abuse) of the body. For working class men, their bodies, and physical labor that their bodies can produce, are the only assets they have to sell in the open market, whereas middle class men are more likely to possess skills (i.e. cultural capital) that do not require bodily engagement. Middle class men can, therefore, enact the dominant, authoritative image of masculinity through economic control rather than bodily

control, preserving their bodies and allowing them to work and be successful in this way into old age. Their earning capacity does not decrease as their bodies wear down (Connell 1995; Connell 2000; Donaldson 1991). In other words, economic and cultural capital facilitate greater opportunities for developing and maintaining gender capital.

Connell argues that, “working men may embrace the processes that consume their bodies, as their way of ‘doing’ masculinity, and claiming some self-respect in the damaging world of wage labour” (2000: 188). In the context of professional football, working class men may be more likely to see the instrumental use of one’s body or the practice of playing through pain as the only means of generating gender capital. Middle class men, who have larger and more capital-rich social networks to fall back on after football, as well as intangible skills in the form of cultural capital, do not have to invest as much in their bodily performance because they have other outlets for accruing and spending gender capital. This class difference may play out in how men *actually* use their bodies and it certainly shows in how they discuss their bodies. White middle class men almost never talked about their bodies in instrumental terms. They also accompanied all of their discussions of playing through pain with an explanation for why, as though it was not normal or expected. As seen in quotes above, these reasons ranged from fear of being cut to wanting to prove oneself.

Retirees of color, all of whom grew up poor, working class, or lower middle class, were very similar to their White working class peers in orientation toward the body. Certainly part of this can be explained by their similar class backgrounds. However, there was also an element of symbolic capital at work here. Because of persistent racism in modern Western societies, people of color are automatically assumed to have less

authority and legitimacy in virtually every field. Like their working class counterparts, these men may invest more worth into their bodies as a means of gaining status, self-respect, and respect from others. I will explore the intersections of race and symbolic capital at greater length in the section that follows.

While most men probably come into football having been socialized with the norms and expectations of hegemonic masculinity, the football field is an important site for demonstrating through the manhood acts of treating one's body as a tool and playing through pain that these norms have been understood and internalized. As men perform manhood acts on the field, they not only embody the gender capital they brought with them to football, but continue to accumulate more, gaining status and legitimacy as both a man and as a football player. This continued accrual of gender capital through masculine performance highlights the symbolic nature of gender capital.

### *Symbolic Capital*

Symbolic capital provides legitimacy. In order for other forms of capital to be traded in for economic capital, the actor (or the capital itself) must be seen as having value. This assignment of value, of course, is highly variable based on the field in which one is operating. Being an elite football player is certainly valued in the field of athletics, but this value also extends to American culture more generally. This means that the cultural and social capital these men have accrued can be converted into economic and other rewards.

One reward that players traded symbolic capital for was access to women and sex. The presence of these women in the lives of football players was both a result of and

source for increased symbolic capital. The legitimacy that football players had in the field of sport gives them a sense of entitlement to women's bodies. Further, being seen with women (especially if they are conventionally attractive or if there are many of them) cemented players' status as both legitimately masculine and authoritative in their field.

A small group of respondents discussed the relationship between heterosexual romantic attraction and symbolic capital, arguing that regardless of physical appearance, intelligence, or personality, there is something inherently attractive to women about successful football players:

I know guys that are so blasted ugly and ill mannered and just disgusting that they couldn't walk down a street with a \$100 bill in their pocket and attract anybody. And they're out with the finest looking person you've ever seen. And it isn't because he's a rocket scientist or a good guy. It's because he knows how to carry a football or something and that's always been real funny to me (Ralph).

Some men (but certainly not all, or even most) capitalize on this assumed attraction, expressing a discourse of entitlement to women's bodies. This entitlement seems rooted in the goal of domination, an essential aspect of enacting hegemonic masculinity:

I wasn't a thug or anything, I didn't really drink or anything, but you know, a fight, what? Let me go jump on somebody. That sounds like fun to me, you know, and running around with a buncha different girls and all that sort of stuff. I was, hey, that's what it's all about when you're a football star. Those are the perks, you know (Chris).

There was a guy and this girl sitting there and he got up to go to the bathroom. Well, as far as I'm concerned that's an invitation for me to sit down and talk to her. In my mind, that's open season. So I sashay over there and I sit down with her and I start talking to her and she was talking back, you know? Things were going well and up comes her boyfriend, actually. And he's like, "What are you doing here?" I go, "Well, talking to this girl." He goes, "Well, this is my date and my chair" and I go, "I don't think so anymore. She seems to be wanting to go with me." And, you know, next thing, I just turned my back and next thing I know I was getting hit in the head with a beer bottle (Ralph).

In both of these cases, we see a confluence of sexuality and violence, stories of fighting with men and controlling women bound up in the same narrative. While neither of these retirees is discussing being violent *towards* a woman, both speak to what it means to “be a man” in this society: the ability to “conquer” and possess others.

Football players, already gladiators on the field, are afforded license to literally and physically enact this conquering narrative on the field of play and off. While street-fighting and chasing women may not be seen as appropriate behavior for all men, football players in this high-status position possess the gender capital necessary to be seen as legitimately enacting masculinity. They are not sanctioned for their “boys will be boys” behavior and may even be celebrated. This symbolic aspect of their gender capital provides them with a type of authority that allows and encourages this risk-taking behavior.

As demonstrated by the access that football players have to women, participation in sport often brings recognition from people outside that field. Fame and recognition may be part of the symbolic capital that is conferred upon high status athletes, but might be more specifically labeled “celebrity capital” (Dreissens 2013). Many retirees spoke in a positive way about the fame and notoriety that comes with this celebrity. This fame brought attention, often from women, but also from the campus and local community. The positive experience of being publically celebrated, even worshipped, was shared by about a third of my retirees, who said things like, “Eighty percent of students were football fanatics and they loved me,” (Cameron) and “Well obviously there's extra attention that you receive” (Thomas).

Some retirees pointed out that the attention and special treatment actually changed how they felt about themselves, creating a new sense of self. For some, this new self was a positive change, creating security and confidence:

[Football] was important for me, the sense of accomplishment and the kind of public self that you have as an athlete and the compensation for my adolescent awkwardness and embarrassments and shame and all of that kinda stuff. (Bart)

For others, it was more of an ego trip:

Yes, it does go to your head because you're treated differently... I was used to the hero worship of a football player around there. I mean, I worshipped them just because they were starters. If you were a starter on the varsity, it was a big deal. (Ralph)

For many of these retirees, the idea of hero worship seemed natural. As Ralph points out above, he worshipped high status players when he was young. Thus, it wasn't a huge shock to be on the receiving end of such adoration. While many retirees enjoyed playing the role of local god, they also noted that this notoriety came with a host of negative consequences that I will discuss in a later section.

It was not just students and fans that treated athletes differently because of their celebrity status. A few retirees talked about teachers and professors being more lenient with them because of their status as athletes:

There would be a lot of kids who didn't have the grades to play and it was interesting how the pressure would be on the teacher because he couldn't play. What they were doing was they wouldn't give them a grade ... I saw, "I'll give you some extra work. And you're going to have to do this. But, if you do this extra work or retake this test then you might get your grade up to where you're eligible to play." (Ralph)

We always used to joke, the nuns [teachers at his Catholic high school] would give you an A for athlete, B for boy, C for co-ed. If you were a good kid and you played sports, you were going to do OK. (Lee)

The recognition and legitimation of these players outside the field of sport and inside the classroom speaks to the concept of celebrity capital and its ability to cut across diverse fields.

While some teachers were simply enamored of football players because of their iconic status in U.S. lore, others were surprised by their intelligence and hard work. Because of the pervasive stereotype of the “dumb jock”, the players who actively resisted this caricature were also treated differently than their peers:

I think it [being a football player] probably made me interesting to them. Had I not been this eager beaver, consume books, love books kinda kid, it would have been different. I'm sure they had good students from the football team in their classes over the years but each time you have one they're probably a little bit different from the rest of the students. (Bart)

There was, back then, so much of that, "I'm entitled and give me a grade and I'm in the back sleeping. I don't care." I'd use the opposite tactic and it benefitted me because there were some times that I think I probably, and I don't think it was necessarily because I was an athlete, I think it was because I played the game properly. But it didn't hurt that I was an athlete because it put me apart from the other guys ... I was the opposite of the stereotype so I think that I got some benefit from that. (Ralph)

For these players, who both naturally and strategically countered the popularly held notion that football players are less intelligent, there was some payoff to the “dumb jock” stereotype. They were able to work it to their advantage. For most retirees, however, this stereotype was more damaging than helpful. I will discuss the negative side of the “dumb jock” stereotype later in this chapter.

Symbolic capital provides actors with prestige, legitimacy, and authority within the field of sport. This form of capital not only brings economic rewards in the form of material goods, it also gives players special access to women in romantic or sexual relationships. Because these men occupy high profile positions, they also accrue celebrity

capital that brings them fame and recognition across fields. In the field of education, we see how this celebrity capital can, at times, be a blessing.

### *Social Capital*

The final form of capital investigated here is social capital, or the networks of relationships individuals can tap into to help them move up the social ladder. Social capital, or put more simply, “who you know”, is especially important for those who don’t have access to a lot of other forms of capital. Scholars have described various forms of social capital, including bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Each of these types provide different kinds of resources, including empowerment, connection to new networks, and links to larger institutions. Players come into the field of sport with varying levels and types of social capital and also accrue and develop these through their participation in football.

One way that social capital is generated through participation in football is through the creation of new friendships. About a third of players mentioned the ways that built-in networks facilitated by football mediated potentially difficult social situations. A few African American retirees discussed how navigating a majority White university as a racial minority was made easier because of their membership on the football team:

It was a - you know, as an African American going to [a university in the South] - I guess I didn't realize it at the time, but my social network was already built in. A lot of things were made a lot easier for you because you played football.  
(Arnold)

Culturally, it can have a different experience if you come from a small minority group as it relates to what [a university in the Pacific Northwest] looks like. But, I think athletes are insulated a little bit because we spend so much of our time in that world, you know, and we eat dinner down there [at the athletic facility] most of the year. We train down there. We have Study Table down there. We're so

insulated. (Chris)

These men hinted at the ways that being Black at a predominantly White school might shape the social experience of college. Bonding social capital, capital generated within relatively closed, homogeneous groups, provided a sense of solidarity for players of color and served to empower and affirm those who may have been excluded from the mainstream. Not only did being a high status athlete come with a “built in social network”, but it also provided structure around this network – a schedule and a location for dining, working out, and studying. This is also a relatively low maintenance form of social capital – it exists without having to be emotionally nurtured. As long as the player maintains their position on the football team, this network exists.

While bonding social capital was important for players, especially those from non-White or working class backgrounds, the built-in nature and structure of team life also facilitated the creation and expansion of linking social capital. Linking social capital connects people directly to institutions, giving them access to resources beyond their personal networks. About a quarter of retirees talked about the ways in which their academic lives were highly structured by advisors, schedulers, and tutors who worked specifically with student-athletes. Having this linking social capital gave football players access to priority scheduling (Nolan), inside information about different professors’ grading styles (Cameron), and free tutoring services, often right in their dorms (Allen, Bryan, Dan, Roger). Many also mentioned a mandatory study hall period, usually for first-year students and for those who were struggling academically. The linking social capital accrued through membership on the football team was an important source for generating cultural capital, in the form of education.

It's important to note, however, that these services were not necessarily provided for the academic enrichment of student-athletes, but rather to keep their grades high enough so that they could remain eligible to play. Further, even though these high-status athletes were able to cash in their social capital to obtain a set of benefits not available to the average student, they arguably faced greater demands on their time, not to mention bringing significant exposure and money to the university. In other words, the exchange of social for cultural capital may have come at a cost to individual athletes.

While the community created *within* the football team and university was important for some, others noted how being a high status athlete also facilitated their inclusion in communities outside football. A few retirees related their experiences being new in town and having the welcome mat rolled out for them because of their status as football players:

I don't know, you know, for some reason I just thought in my mind, I said, "Well, maybe I won't do that [try out for football]." Nobody knows me or anything. I was pretty much bigger than most people and they said, "Well, why don't you go out for football?" And I did and I think it just kind of integrated me right away. You know sports have a tendency to, if you're successful in sports, it just has the ability to bring recognition to you and people know you and it's always been like a lead-in to things ... It's a way to get accepted a lot easier. (Nolan)

I was very shy, yet I saw that when I got to college, I had this opportunity to reinvent myself, basically, because nobody knew who I was and there was no familiarity there. And I was blown away by the friendliness ... Like all of a sudden people were just like - I mean it was [a city in the Northwest] in 1982 and it was still a small town and it was just a friendly, welcoming - and I was a football player, and so I was like welcomed... (Martin)

For these men, being newcomers in town was easier because of their association with the football team. Their positions on the football team generated bridging social capital, opening up lines of communication that extended beyond their immediate social groups. This kind of capital is important in that it brings together diverse social networks,

opening up doors for all kinds of opportunities that might not exist within an individual player's more limited social network. This bridging social capital allowed players to become more integrated into the school and local community in ways that might not have been possible without their high position on the status hierarchy. As with the Black athletes at White colleges, these men, being new in town, didn't have much symbolic capital to throw around. Being on the football team, however, provided both social ties (social capital) and legitimacy (symbolic capital).

Both bridging and bonding social capital also played an important role in moving players up the hierarchy of football. Players established important social and professional networks that they were able to tap into both during and after their professional careers. About half of the retirees discussed a variety of opportunities resulting from networks they created through football. These included entry into and continuation of their professional football careers, as well as job opportunities and business prospects in their lives after sport. Below I focus on the career networks they created and used *during* their football careers. I focus on how retirees used these networks in life *after* sport in later chapters.

For many retirees, gaining entry into college and professional football was, at least in part, due to the bonding social capital they generated with other high status actors in the world of football. Several retirees talked about how their more talented teammates attracted college and professional scouts who, when they came to see teammates, actually furthered their own chances in football:

I was a defensive end in college and played next to a guy who was a first-round draft choice ... And he would get a hold of me when the scouts were showing up. They'd contact him and he'd let me know, and I'd just happen to be there and work out for them. So that helped out a lot there. (Allen)

I had another guy who was a tight end when I was there ... and, what he did was, he was a real good tight end and he got drafted up in the 4th round, pretty high by the [NFL team]. And we were the same age. We would alternate plays. You know, he'd go in for a play, I'd go in for a play. So, they would see him and then they would see me and then, you know, so that's kinda how they saw me and I got a chance as a free agent ... I think, you know, there was some scouts that were coming in and they just said, "Oh yeah, he looks like he can do some things." You know, so they gave me the chance. (Nolan)

Both of these players noted that their opportunities to play professional football were increased just by playing with other high status players. Their social capital was multiplied by the status of those within their social networks.

Another retiree talked about playing *against* high status players in high school and how that increased his chances of getting a scholarship:

I had a really good game against a private school that is known for pumping out athletes. And that's, you know, you've got kids that - they're lying about where they live just so they can go to this school because if you go to this school, then you're going to go to college. And so a lot of parents would do that, you know, and try to get their kids in this school. So they ended up getting a lot of talent because of that. But, you know, I didn't care about that ... I had a great game against them and at that game, there happened to be college scouts that seen me play against them, and that's, I think for the most part, is pretty much how I got on the radar. (Calvin)

This description highlights the power of bridging social capital in a few ways. Calvin recognized that schools matter in making the right connections to further an athletic career. He, and others in the community, knew that the social networks at this school were powerful and went to extreme lengths to get their children in. While he did not explicitly discuss social capital, it is clear that this is what people are trying to access in sending their children to this school. This story also raised some interesting questions about the relationship between economic and social capital. It is notable that Calvin, a Pacific Islander from a working-class background and neighborhood, became visible to

college recruiters only because he played against a private school “known for pumping out athletes.” But, what happens to good athletes, like Calvin, who are not lucky enough to get this kind of exposure? More importantly, what happens to good athletes whose families do not have the economic, cultural, or social capital to get their children into private school? They miss out on this bridging social capital, which is crucial for advancing a football career and thus, the potential for accumulating further capital.

Players with high status teammates (or opponents) not only had the chance to be seen by college and professional scouts, they were also used as bait by these same scouts. One retiree told the story of how he was recruited to college football as a means of enticing another star player from the state. One booster even offered him illegal payments to make sure that his friend came with him:

He was the number one recruit out of [a Northwest state] that year and [a flagship university in the Northwest] had this alumnus who was a dentist, I forget his name. He was the alumnus who took care of me and when push came to shove, he literally said to me, "Hey, you come to [a flagship university in the Northwest], I'll take care of you. I'll get you \$1,500." But this was back in the day. But he goes, "If you can get [star player] ... I'm talking 5 Gs." (Louis)

Again, questions of class arise. Poor and working-class athletes have less opportunity to tap into the high status networks that ease entry into college and professional football. This may make them more vulnerable to the predatory actions of unethical recruiters, putting their football careers in jeopardy. In this case, however, Louis, also a working-class Pacific Islander, did not take the bait.

Football networks, along with facilitating entry into elite status, also helped players maintain this status and extend their professional careers at the highest levels of football. Because NFL careers are highly mobile, with players and coaches constantly moving from team to team, players' relationships with former coaches and teammates are

significant for staying in the league. One retiree summed up this dependence on networks, saying, “It’s who you know and how good you are. But it really is who you know. It’s politics” (Percy). Connections with coaches and team executives proved to be an important factor in career longevity for many players. This is demonstrated in one retiree’s discussion of “sponsorship”:

[A coach] liked me. That's why he drafted me. But he was also invested in me. He wanted to continue to like me because I was his guy. He went out on a limb for me. If I had played poorly or treated him poorly or done stupid stuff, I would have lost that support but ... he wanted me to succeed. There are other times when there are coaching changes. When a new group comes in where you're one of their guys, not one of my guys. So at that point you sometimes get judged more harshly because nobody is sponsoring you. (Frank)

The experience of being traded or released after a coaching change was quite common for many players. It was at these moments that they were able to use their bridging social capital and tap into their high status networks of former coaches and players. Many retirees talk about their former coaches and teammates helping them find new positions:

My line coach with the [NFL team] contacted his a guy he knew there [in the Canadian Football League], worked with him. I think that's the way they found out about me. But then they contacted me. Yeah I didn't seek them out. They called me. And I think my position coach made that happen. (Bart)

I had good film from my senior year and my old line coach, who's coached the [NFL team] now, he played for a long time in the NFL and called people he knew and did those sorts of things, networking, did some work, helped me out. (Russ)

Professional networks created valuable social capital that aided players in getting into college and professional football, as well as extending their careers once they were there.

These networks, however, did not seem to extend to everyone equally. For some players, creating networks was a matter of luck; for others, it was a matter of forging important relationships; and for others still, it was shaped by an individual’s

socioeconomic position. As elementary and secondary schools around the U.S. are becoming increasingly segregated by both race and social class, resources are funneled into schools populated by primarily White middle and upper class children (Orfield and Lee 2007; Rotberg 2014; Rothstein 2013). This means more money to devote to extracurricular activities, infrastructure, and more parent and booster support. As a result, schools with money (and by extension, families with money) are more likely to have championship sports teams and thus more likely to draw the attention of college scouts and recruiters (Brady and Sylwester 2004; Eitzen 1996)

Of course, we know that not all college athletes, particularly in football, are from middle and upper class families. While rich schools get attention for their successful programs, recruiters also target poor and working class individuals. As mentioned previously, this attention is not always positive. One of my retirees spoke directly about being offered money to attend a certain college (Louis). Others made more indirect references to not only being paid by recruiters, but also being paid by boosters once they were in college (Bill). Both of these practices are a violation of institutional policy and can get players suspended, or even removed, from a team. This practice is but one example of the ways in which players with less economic, cultural, and social capital are taken advantage of by those with greater power within the college football system.

While all professional football players are likely to generate some form of social capital during their careers, it is clear that there are race and class differences in how this capital is allotted. Players of color relied more on bonding capital generated within the team. On the other hand, White players and those who came from middle class backgrounds were more likely to accrue the bridging social capital necessary to begin and

maintain a professional football career, and thus, begin to stockpile all sorts of capital. This is particularly interesting because it is these players who are more likely to have this kind of capital to begin with. In other words, capital begets capital. This, Bourdieu argues, is how systems of power and privilege are maintained with very little resistance (Swartz 1998).

### **Costs of Capital**

While football was a site for generating many different forms of capital that could be traded for both material and intangible resources, the accumulation of this capital did not come without cost. The visibility and accountability that came along with both celebrity and gender capital was a burden that had many negative outcomes for professional football players.

### *Celebrity Capital*

Visibility that comes along with celebrity capital is “a double-edged sword: it can be empowering as well as disempowering” (Brighenti 2007: 335). While players benefitted in a variety of ways from being well known, they also suffered for this capital. Many players were dissatisfied with their status as a public figure when they were the subjects of shallow hero worship. All of the attention, praise, and expectation heaped upon high status football players was actually being heaped on the *idea* of them. They were worshipped (and hated) for the positions they occupied, rather than the person they were. About a quarter of my retirees discussed their frustration or discomfort with this blind adoration. One retiree sums this up nicely:

I didn't know anybody in this town, but everywhere I would go, I would be introduced like "Here's [player's name]". Ahhhhh! People started cheering. They don't even know me. Or you go to the stadium and people are cheering like crazy when you're at home and they're booing you like crazy when you're on the road. And, you know, it took me a couple of years to realize that they're not cheering me, they're not booing me. They're cheering the uniform and they're booing the uniform. (Will)

The public view of football players as simple placeholders wearing the right uniform affected retirees' friendships and social relationships with peers. Because there was no substance to the hero worship relationship, retirees often feel as though they could not trust the motivations of the fans that "loved" them. One retiree, Pete, talked about leaving the city he played football in during off-seasons to avoid the "hang-arounders". He said, "I never knew when we were out there [in public] whether someone really liked you as a person or as a football player." (Pete)

On the flip side of this hero-worship was the hatred some players received because of their high-status position. This bi-polar relationship with fans is highlighted in the above comment from Will. This also made developing friendship networks outside of football difficult. One retiree mentioned the troubles he had integrating his football and non-football friends. He said:

There's also the 'every football player is an asshole' [stereotype]... My football friends and my outside friends didn't co-mingle that often but when they did, my outside friends would always say, "Gosh, so and so is a really nice guy!" And it'd always baffle me because really they're just guys, you know. We like to hunt, fish and cars and girls and everything else just like any other guy out there (Russ).

Because of the very public nature of their lives, many high status athletes were stereotyped as two-dimensional caricatures to be either worshipped or demonized. Russ stated that high status athletes were "just like any other guy." It is clear, however, that

this is not exactly true. Their position in the status hierarchy did not allow them the normalcy that they often times craved.

Heightened visibility became a trap of surveillance and control, where players were constantly under the microscope of public and private scrutiny. About a third of the retirees I interviewed talked about the immense pressure from coaches, teammates, media, and fans to perform both on and off the field, leading to the sensation of always being “on”. Some retirees focused on the way their play, both as an individual and a member of a team, was highly scrutinized:

I was going [to the grocery store] at midnight because I was tired of people stopping me, "What happened to you guys?" It's just, they still wanted to know so at first I was trying to get away from the adulation and then it was I would go at midnight to get away from the questions (Ralph)

People don't, unless you've been in the NFL, you don't realize how much pressure is on you, to perform. Every single – not game – but every day because you're under the microscope, somebody is challenging you for your position (Michael).

The very public nature of one’s career successes and failures, along with a lack of control over the twists and turns a professional football career can take, made the feeling of living under a microscope very real for these retirees. In addition to being scrutinized for their play on the field, many also commented on being watched and evaluated for their lives off the field. A few players talked about being recognized in public and the discomfort or pressure that came with those interactions:

Somebody in the public might see you out. You're always on. You're on the cover of Sports Illustrated and in the front page of the paper, the sports page, for six years, your picture, somebody might say something bad to you but it just becomes this deal that you just recognize, “Well, I'm out at the club, somebody sees me with you and snaps a picture, you know”, and it's just like you're just always on (Michael).

I took a date to a movie theatre and somebody said, "Oh, you're on the team, aren't ya?" "Yeah." And the guy started to ask me questions and people around

were looking and I just got so embarrassed. I was sweating profusely. Like I really don't want to be recognized ... I guess just people looking at me and actually hanging on every word like it meant something. But it didn't mean squat (Larry)

For some players, the gaze of the public eye meant being “on” all the time or being judged for life choices outside of football. Interestingly, however, Brighenti (2007) argues “the mere fact of being aware of one’s own visibility status – and not the fact of being under actual control – effectively influences one’s behavior” (336). In other words, it didn’t really matter how much players were actually being watched. The fact that they occupied a high status, high visibility position that *may* incur surveillance was enough for them to feel that they had to alter their behavior. This accountability to an imagined other shaped players’ understandings of themselves as behaving appropriately or not (Hollander 2013).

As evidenced by the comments above, most players believe that they had to behave in a deferential and highly controlled manner. For others, however, notoriety had an opposite effect. Rather than feeling like you always had to be on good behavior, some argued that the media spotlight makes you feel invincible, or as if the rules don’t apply:

You get thrown in this limelight. This new aura. From college into the pros and everything they provided for you. So you develop this whole Machiavellian attitude that the laws don’t apply to you cause they treat you different (Percy)

This particular retiree found out the hard way that the rules did, indeed, apply to him as he had several run-ins with the law due to drug use both during and after football.

Other retirees spoke about the way this relationship between player and public has changed over time, arguing that “back in the day”, football players could get away with a lot more because of their high status. They point out that now, with an increase in

communications technology and sports journalism, everything athletes do finds its way into the media. One retiree talked at length about this change:

Well, nowadays there certainly is [a downside to fame] for these guys. Back then, the fact that again, it's before the Internet and the way the world is so wired with everything. You can do a lot of things you shouldn't have done and get away with it. And nobody would call a sportscaster or a newsman and say, you know, "I saw this player doing this, this this." If they did it, that kinda thing, they [news outlets] killed it. They didn't care. Now they're going to investigate it. It's news. They need a story. And so the things that – being a bad boy celebrity deal or even a whatever you did back then, it changed while I was playing. You actually saw it. You saw it change where at the beginning of my career if somebody did something, you saw it swept under the rug ... You realize I probably wouldn't play college football right now because I'd have been on suspension always? So, it's funny that nowadays if you got in a fight with somebody, I mean ... even if you get in a fight and it's not your fault, they'll suspend you nowadays in college ... You can't get away with it. And back then you could. Nowadays your name would be in the paper. Front page. It's different now. (Ralph)

This is a good example of what Brighenti (2007) calls “*maddened* visibility, whereby people who are quite accustomed to being visible, and indeed, people who have built their career and fortune on being visible, find themselves suddenly haunted by visibility” (335). This is most applicable to those who have fallen from grace or been downgraded in status because of some type of negative publicity. While it's not necessarily desirable to cover up athletes' bad behavior, it's also unfair to put it all on public display. This is especially true when we're talking about college athletes who, for the most part, become objects of public ridicule for engaging in the same behaviors as their non-athlete peers (fighting, drinking, drug use). The constant surveillance (or perception of surveillance) and shallow hero worship that high status athletes experience demonstrates the way in which they are often perceived as one-dimensional and treated as such.

Another area where celebrity capital fashions football players into stereotypical caricatures is in education. While a few retirees mentioned getting positive treatment

simply for being football players, many others felt that teachers *did not* like them for this same reason. In addition to celebration of celebrity, there also exists contempt of celebrity, largely based on how someone became “famous” (Driessens 2013). The field of academia may be particularly suspect of athletic celebrity, viewing this type of prestige as illegitimate, especially in reaction to their peers who exhibit more of a blind worship of athletic “stars”.

One White retiree recalls being accused of plagiarism because “the teacher's expectation was that the work was too good for a football player to have done” (Frank).

Another recalls having his very presence in certain classes questioned:

When I went into my metaphysics class, level 400 philosophy, there were only five other students in the class. And the professor had horn-rimmed black glasses, shorts, Jesus sandals with socks and I went in with my registration card and sat down and he said, "Aren't you on the football team?" I said, "yeah." He said: "Well, what are you doing in this class?" (Larry)

This retiree, along with others, also noted that once professors realized that they weren't “dumb jocks,” their status as athletes may have actually put them at an advantage because they were seen as somehow exceptional.

For retirees of color, it was difficult for them to parse out which parts of their identity shaped their experience of being judged as less intelligent than their peers. One Black retiree talks about the way people spoke when explaining things to him: “The thing that was always probably most noticeable was when somebody increased the volume of their voice when they're talking to you. Or they slow their speech down” (Michael).

Another talks more explicitly about the lowered expectations of others:

I'll tell you one thing I do hear a lot and even to this day, I end up speaking at different events, you know, public appearances and that sort of stuff. And, I still hear, “Wow! You really speak well.” And I'm almost like, “Well, so, what did you expect when I walked up here? Because I'm a former football player. Because

I'm a minority. Is there some expectation, maybe, that I'm not going to speak well?" (Chris)

These interactions are examples of what Sue et al (2007) term racial microaggressions, "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group" (72). Sue et al (2008) argue that racial microaggressions fall into three categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Both of the above examples are microinsults, "actions (verbal, nonverbal, environmental) that convey insensitivity, are rude, or directly demean a person's racial identity or heritage" (330). The underlying message of both of the behaviors described by these Black retirees is that Black people as a whole are unintelligent. The racial implications of these comments are compounded by retirees' positions as high status athletes, which may confer either positive or negative attention on them in the classroom.

The flipside of lowered expectations for Black athletes are the heightened standards that some Black athletes faced. One retiree describes the feeling of having to go above and beyond to prove himself worthy of a college degree:

I don't fit the engineering mold. And so they [his teachers] really made - I don't want to say they did everything they could do to make sure I *didn't* graduate, but they made sure that I deserved to graduate. I felt like I was put through a lot more scrutiny than other students because of my skin color and the fact that I was a - and not only because of my skin color, because, there are very intelligent African Americans and so on. Not to say that if you're African American, you're not intelligent and people put you through the ringer, whatever, but I think my skin color coupled with the fact that I was a football player, and all the stereotypes about football players, they actually, they made sure that if I got that piece of paper, I got that grade, it was what I deserved. I don't think it's totally atypical to see an African American walking to into an engineering class or a biology class. But, you couple that skin color with being athlete and it's like big red flag. I think

being a minority, there is a little bit of a pause and a little bit of a question. But you couple that with being an athlete, it is a big red flag. (Arnold)

This compounding effect of stereotypes about Black intelligence and stereotypes about “dumb jocks” had important ramifications for athletes of color. These men were less likely to talk about the educational benefits of being a high status athlete and more likely to mention experiencing the “dumb jock” stereotype. In other words, athletes of color had a more difficult time than their White peers navigating the dual role of student-athlete. Because of the negative stereotypes surrounding them, these players did not have enough symbolic capital to either gain or spend cultural capital. Players of color, by virtue of being members of oppressed racial groups, are automatically endowed, in most fields, with less symbolic capital than their White peers. They are seen as less attractive, less intelligent, less authoritative, and as having less legitimate claim to other forms of capital (Nakano Glenn 2008; Stoebenau 2009; Winddance Twine 2010). Thus, the cultural capital that Black student athletes had accrued was masked, or seen as illegitimate, because of their subordinated statuses as Black and athletic.

Though there were certainly some perks to occupying the highly visible role of football player, players also experienced serious consequences as a result of their celebrity status. The construction of football players by fans, media, and even professors, into one-dimensional stereotypes was dehumanizing. Further, these stereotypes, both positive and negative, had very real impacts on players’ relationships with friends and partners, as well as their educational endeavors.

## *Gender Capital*

The surveillance and accountability that accompany celebrity status are also part of the accumulation and embodiment of gender capital. As noted above, players feel they must adjust their public behavior in anticipation of being evaluated by others. This is true not just of their behavior and visibility as football players, but also performances of masculinity. The manhood acts that players perform in the quest for gender capital are enacted not only as part and parcel of a football career, but also as a type of gender performance for actual and assumed audiences. In other words, being tough, playing through pain, and stifling feminized emotions is not a natural way of being for these men, but rather part of a performance to prove their position in the gender hierarchy. This constant back and forth of gender performance and accountability left players frustrated and often further injured.

One of the manhood acts that players performed in an attempt to demonstrate and further acquire gender capital was to play through pain. They did this for a number of reasons, including love of the game, commitment to teammates, or as a means of keeping their jobs. However, as Roger describes below, there was often pressure, both from within and without to return to a game with injuries:

R: You hear the whispers and stuff, so you're always trying to be on the field ... On a few occasions [I came back too early from injury]. I know I dislocated my shoulder and I was playing in five weeks. I mean, I had shoulder surgery and I was back on the field playing. And I couldn't lift my arm above my head.

K: Was it motivated by, like you said, hearing whispers?...Why do that?

R: I think the love of football and the knowledge that your peers or your teammates at the beginning of the year, they're counting on you. And you go to battle together and when you go down, your next aim is to try and get back and go again. So you're definitely rushing to get back out there...For team and you know, it's what I do. So you're always trying to get back on the field. (Roger)

Here Roger says at first that he is feeling pressured by teammates and coaches (“whispers”) to return to play after injury, but follows that up with an explanation of his own internal motivations: being part of a team, loving the game, enacting his identity (“It’s what I do”). We can see here accountability to others and self. In playing through pain, Roger is proving his masculinity to his coaches, teammates and self. The outcome, however, is that even though Roger may gain esteem in the eyes of his team, he further injured his shoulder by coming back too early.

As Roger mentions in the earlier quote, there were often “whispers” surrounding a player’s injury and many retirees spoke about how they felt the pressure from coaches and other players to return. Meggyesy (1971) writes, “A guy who gets hurt...is immediately ostracized by the coaching staff. Healthy ball players don’t like to fraternize with an injured man either. It’s like some voodoo in which the injured player becomes a sort of leper. Most coaches believe in mind over matter where injury is concerned” (132). Young (2005) characterizes this experience as “unwelcome pain”, arguing that players know expressions of pain “may be poorly received by team-mates, coaches, and others and that acknowledging it may lead to sanctions” (11). Oscar experienced these sanctions in a rather dramatic fashion when his college football coach spread vicious rumors about him to NFL teams after Oscar refused to play hurt:

So I went in and saw [coach] and said, “Coach, I think under the circumstances, I shouldn't play.” He called me a loser, said, “You're gutless.” I just figured that I got one more game here then I can slug the guy. I wanted to slug him ... The thing came back to haunt me. Now we're getting ready for the NFL draft. In those days, they didn't have combines and all that stuff, and then I'm finding out that [coach] is ripping me. He's saying, “Yeah, he's got a really great arm but he's gutless. He won't play hurt.” ... It hurt me in the NFL draft, no doubt about it. (Oscar)

Pete demonstrated that it wasn't just coaches who sanctioned players for expressing pain.

He describes a time when he chastised a teammate for wanting to sit out due to injury:

Strap me up, tape me up, and send me back in ... That's the way they played in those days. Some guys just wouldn't do it, so they didn't last long. You're expected to play ... I remember we were playing [team] and one of the guys had a shoulder burner, or a pinched nerve of the neck, you know, where your arm just feels like hot water running down it. And he says, "I gotta go. I gotta go. I got a burner and I can't play." And I said, "Listen Joe, we ain't got anybody else. Suck it up." Which I did all the time. I had those burners too ... He hated me after that. (Pete)

The decision to play hurt is not made in a vacuum. Players are constantly evaluating where they stand amongst their peers and coaches and "considering what accounts their appearance and behavior may elicit" (Hollander 2013: 10). In other words, the performance of manhood acts is much more of an interactional process of accountability than it appears to be on the surface.

The accountability associated with embodying gender capital was a burden for players in that it often involved both direct and indirect questioning of their gender performance. In an aspect of accountability that Hollander (2013) labels enforcement, players were "held responsible for their accomplishment of gender" by coaches' and teammates' social sanctions (10). Meggyesy describes the way coaches enforce hegemonic masculinity: "He [coach] said ... that I looked 'almost feminine' in making the tackle. This sort of attack on a player's manhood is a coach's doomsday weapon. And it almost always works, for the players have wrapped up their identity in their masculinity, which is eternally precarious" (1971: 56). We see here coaches reinforcing hegemonic masculinity by comparing tentative players with women, thus challenging their place in the gender hierarchy and calling into question the legitimacy of their gender capital. Players, many of whom thrived on the attention and praise from playing football,

are then compelled to demonstrate appropriate masculinity by not only returning to play, but also continuing to be dominant, aggressive and physical on the field despite pain or injury. As I will discuss in later chapters, the long-term consequences of acquiring gender capital through instrumental use of the body and playing through pain often meant players had fewer opportunities for further accruing gender (and other forms) of capital.

### **Summary**

Players bring differing levels and types of capital to this high status position of football player, based largely on their position in the status hierarchy of race and class. Those from middle class backgrounds have the social capital to get them into elite football schools that can help them to be seen by college and NFL recruiters. By being part of capital rich social networks, these players have different opportunities than their lower class peers. The symbolic capital afforded to White players also paves the way for them to garner stores of cultural capital in the education system, as illustrated by the stereotypes about “dumb jocks” and the racial dynamics that shape this assumption.

These players also leave football with varying stores of capital. Many are able to amass generous amounts of economic capital from their football salaries, though this certainly varied by age. Some gain institutionalized cultural capital by earning college degrees. Players often begin their careers with high levels of gender capital, but these amounts dwindle as they perform hegemonic masculinity in ways that wear out their bodies. Some players are able to create and nurture important social networks that can provide many opportunities both during and in life after football. And, while not all men experience the same level of celebrity, they all discuss the special treatment that flows

their direction simply by virtue of being a member of the football team. This capital does not come without cost. Both celebrity capital and gender capital, while leading to the accrual of other forms of capital, can also deplete these stores over time. While I have separated out these forms of capital for analytic purposes, it's clear that they are consistently working together and overlapping.

In short, players both enter and exit football with varying levels and types of capital. This capital, acquired, traded, and developed during their occupation of the football player role, plays an important role in how players exit football and in their lives after football. I will explore this transition out of sport in the chapter that follows.

## CHAPTER IV

### LIFE IN TRANSITION

As discussed in the previous pages, professional football players all occupy a position of high status and privilege for at least a short period of time. This shared position, however, begets differing levels and types of capital for different individuals. These differences, as noted previously, are based largely on external characteristics such as race and social class of origin. How, then, do these structural inequalities of capital, class, and race affect the process of role exit for individual football players? Drawing largely from Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), I lay out a step-by-step process of role exit that includes players' *first doubts* about their football careers, the ways they begin *seeking alternatives* to their existing roles (or conversely, how they ignore the impending changes to their careers and identities) and the actual *turning points* when players end their professional football careers and move out of the role of "football player." As I move through these steps of the role exit process, I link players' individual experiences to larger inequalities of capital, class, and race.

For analytical purposes, I have divided players into three groups based on both their social position in the status hierarchy and their preparation (or lack thereof) for life after football. These three groups are the *early exiters*, the *explorers*, and the *engrossed*. As I will discuss in greater detail below, early exiters (the players with the largest stores of economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital) were more likely to disidentify with football before actually disengaging from it. In other words, they very deliberately fashioned new or alternative identities for themselves while playing football, rather than letting football define them solely. This sequence of disidentification preceding

disengagement better prepared players for life outside of sport. At the other extreme, the engrossed players (those with relatively low levels of non-football capital) did not really prepare at all for the transition out of football and subsequently had a more difficult time adjusting to life after sport. I will go into greater depth about post-football life in my final substantive chapter. In this chapter, I focus on the transitional period of role exit as football players become ex-football players.

### **Types of Role Exiters**

Even though players rationally know that their professional football careers will not last forever, most do not consciously acknowledge this fact until the end is upon them. Retirees give a number of reasons for this denial. One reason is that they are young, and like most young people (young men, in particular), they have a sense of immortality:

When you're playing, you don't look at the consequences of being a 55-year-old cripple. That's down the road. "It's not going to happen to me." (Larry)

I think that we all, we're young men. We're loaded with testosterone. We all feel a little bit invincible, and we really just don't believe that, yeah this particular collision, no, is not going to [hurt anyone]. (Will)

In other words, according to retirees, professional football players are no different than any other group of young people in the sense that none of them are particularly future-oriented (Brannen and Nilsen 2002).

Along with the tendency to live in the moment, another reason football players tend not to think about the end of their careers is psychological survival. For many retirees, they have had a singular focus on attaining their goals of being a professional

player since they were children. When I asked Roger if he had ever, even as a child, considered a career outside of sports, this was his response:

I really didn't. To be honest, I thought football the whole way. And you know, I was pretty good basketball player. We played on a state championship team, but no, football was kind of it. It was what I had my mind made up to do and I didn't think anybody could stop that. (Roger)

For these men, thinking about the fleeting nature of the career they are building does not serve them well in reaching goals. Others, because of the time and energy required to excel in professional football, simply did not have the time to prepare for careers after sport because so much of their lives were dictated by football:

I didn't do much to prepare myself for a career after [football] because, even in the off-season, we had to stay in [NFL team's city] and we had to work out. So really, could I have done something to prepare myself professionally for another career? Yes. Did I? No. I didn't. I focused on football, I focused on working out and really didn't start focusing on a career until I went back to school. (Arnold)

Players varied widely both in their reasons for ignoring the end of football and in how much they allowed themselves to think about life after football.

Based on level of preparation for life after football, I divided players into three general categories: 1) the *early exiters*, those who had alternative careers started before disengaging from professional football, 2) the *explorers*, the players who began seeking alternatives but did not really disidentify with football until they actually disengaged, and 3) the *engrossed*, the players who did not prepare at all for the end of their football careers. Engrossed players were those most likely to have foreclosed on an athlete identity to the detriment of alternative identity development. In addition to varying in preparedness, these categories also reflect differences in capital and social position. I will briefly describe each group below and follow up these descriptions with an explanation of the significance of the demographic information I provide.

*Early Exiters (n=8)*<sup>6</sup>

Players who created new identities for themselves while simultaneously playing professional football demonstrate the inversion of Fuchs Ebaugh's claim that "disengagement leads to disidentification" (1988: 4). These men prepared themselves for a life after football by beginning new careers, creating new social networks, and accumulating new cultural and symbolic capital, all while continuing to engage in the normative behaviors associated with their roles as football players. In addition to forging new career paths, early exiters also formed families, demonstrating that football was not the primary source of their identity.

With regards to capital accumulation and social position, this group was certainly the most privileged. Over two-thirds of early exiters were White. Only one came from a poor economic background; the others were fairly evenly split between middle and working class backgrounds<sup>7</sup>. All of the early exiters had college degrees. The vast majority was married with children during their professional football careers. The average career length for men in this group was about 8 years, slightly longer than the average career length of their peers in other groups. The early exiters were also the group with the most agency surrounding retirement from football. While the actual exits from football were complicated and multi-faceted, it was clear that this group had the highest degree of individual choice in when they left their football careers.

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<sup>6</sup> Two interviewees remain unclassified because interviews were interrupted or abbreviated and I was not able to deduce which category they belonged in.

<sup>7</sup> I operationalized class background (or social class of origin) using two demographic markers from a survey completed by respondents: parents' level of education and parents' occupation. I also relied on qualitative statements made by respondents to refine this classification system.

*Explorers* (n=10)

The explorers group included men who prepared for life after football in more covert and less intentional ways, such as furthering their education, working part-time jobs, developing sustainable spending habits, or maintaining relationships with people from their college or hometown. These men did *not* begin new careers during football, but did begin thinking in various ways about what life might be like once football was over. In other words, even though explorers demonstrated some inclination towards the future, their primary identities were still very much bound up with football during their playing careers.

The explorers were a racially diverse group made up of 4 White men, 4 Black men and 2 Pacific Islanders. Three came from middle class backgrounds, the rest from working class and poor families. Like the early exiters, most were married with children during their football careers. All but two had college degrees. Explorers have a shorter average career length than the early exiters, playing for an average of about 6 to 7.5 years.<sup>8</sup> A few of the men in this group resembled the early exiters closely in demographics. Explorers, however, had a lower degree of choice in when they left football. In other words, they were less likely to walk away from football on their own terms, but were instead forced out by injury or being cut from the team.

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<sup>8</sup> The average was 7.4 years but one player in this group played for an astronomical 17 years. When I removed him from the sample, the average was 6.3 years.

*Engrossed* (n=8)

Players in the engrossed category did not really prepare for lives outside of football. While the early exiters and explorers began to seek alternatives during their professional careers, the engrossed players skipped this step and moved right into the turning points that ended their careers. Though some of these players expressed first doubts, these doubts were not enough to push them into either disengaging or disidentifying with their roles as professional football players.

In looking at social positions of the engrossed players, we can see stark differences between this group and the other two. The majority of engrossed players were White men from working class and poor backgrounds. Only one player in this group came from a middle class family. Only half of this group had a college degree. Slightly over half were married during their professional football careers; however, only two had children during this time. This group also had the shortest average career length at a little over 4.5 years. Like the explorers, they also had less choice than early exiters about when to retire from football. In the section that follows, I will examine the demographic and qualitative differences between groups and the role that these differences play in players' identity commitment to professional football.

### **Capital and Disidentification**

We can see from the patterns of disidentification that this social-psychological withdrawal from professional football, or the process of ceasing to think of oneself as a football player, may be a luxury most easily afforded to those with higher levels of capital. I have operationalized capital here using five variables: 1) race; 2) social class of

origin; 3) education level; 4) family status; and 5) career length. Each of these variables demonstrates the linkage between the various forms of capital outlined in previous chapters and players' level of identity commitment to football. For men with lower levels of capital, sport is often embraced as one of few legitimate means of social mobility. These men are thus at greater risk of identity foreclosure and over-commitment to the role of football player (Beamon 2012). The final pattern I note in the above descriptions of different types of role exiters is related to the degree of control that players exercise over their exit from football. I will discuss this issue of agency later in the chapter.

### *Race*

As discussed in the previous chapter, people of color are automatically imbued with lower levels of symbolic capital in almost all social fields. They are seen as less authoritative, less intelligent, and less entitled to positions of power (Nakano Glenn 2008; Stoebenau 2009; Winddance Twine 2010). This lack of symbolic capital limits options for men of color both within and outside of sport. They are seen as less intelligent – as seen in quotes from several players of color who felt that the “dumb jock” stereotype was compounded by their race. The flip side of that assumption is that they must excel in athletics (and only athletics). This dual sided assumption about the abilities of men of color can shape not only their experience in sport, but also their experience in the labor market after sport. As Will, a Black player, discusses below, he didn't experience any outward racism during his college playing days, but he believes this is only because he remained within the bounds of acceptability for his race:

There are so many black players, African-American players, anyway and the expectation is that we are athletic and that's what we do. So, you know, I wasn't

trying to play quarterback. You know, I wasn't applying to be a coach. I think if I had been in those two categories, I definitely would have had a different experience, but I was a running back, you know, so I kind of fit the stereotype ... But there's still the expectation that a black quarterback could never run an offense the way Peyton Manning [a White quarterback] does. I mean, he's an intellectual, and that's not going to be Michael Vick [a Black quarterback]. You know, that's the expectation ... I think that if you're a black coach, running backs coach, absolutely; defensive backs coach, absolutely; linebackers coach, absolutely; defensive line coach, absolutely. Offensive line coach? Uhhhh, probably not. Most of those offensive linemen are white. And so, offensive line coaches, for the most part, are white. Quarterback coach, I don't know if there's a black one in the country. Even if we have a black quarterback, the idea is, offense is so complicated, you can't be a quarterback's coach if you're black ... A big part of the racism that still exists in football is who's going to lead. It's sort of like having a female boss. Some people would say, "Well yeah, females can do a lot of these jobs, but I don't want to work for one." And I think that that's kind of how it is in the NFL, like with head coaching and being offensive coordinator, it's like, "Yeah, we think you're smart, but we don't think that these white players will follow you," that they don't want to be coached by you ... Like people's biases about who can be a leader. (Will)

Will's argument about coaching is supported by a plethora of data (Braddock II et al 2012; Lapchick 2009; Sabo and Jensen 1994; Woodward 2004). In all U.S. sports, we see a dearth of Black coaches, especially at the highest levels. This lack of Black leadership (or leadership of color at all) is not just reserved for the field of sport. People of color are systematically excluded from positions of high pay and high prestige in all occupations (Elliott and Smith 2004; Maume 1999; Moss and Tilly 1996; Reskin, McBrier and Kmec 1999). This complicates the role exit process for many players of color. If they know that they will not be considered for jobs in coaching or elsewhere based solely on their skin color, the identification with football becomes paramount in growing and maintaining capital.

### *Social Class of Origin*

Players who grew up in middle class families began their football careers with larger stores of economic and cultural capital. They had parents who worked white-collar jobs, often bringing a yearly salary, rather than hourly wages, and good benefits such as health care, sick and vacation leave, retirement plans, and family benefits. A few middle class retirees mentioned being able to go to college without a football scholarship, because their families had the economic capital to pay:

So I went to [a private university in the Midwest]. My dad was self-employed at the time. This was right before the business went in the tank. So he could afford to send me to [university] as a walk on, and also tuitions were so much cheaper, so going to [university] to walk on was not a hardship for my family. (Bart)

Having college as an option without the pressure to succeed in football was a psychological boon to players with greater economic capital.

Middle class players were also more likely to have at least one parent with a college degree. As mentioned in a previous chapter, this is an important form of cultural capital that can be shared with children. These parents could help their children apply to schools, understood what it took to get in and be successful in college, and were able to better relate to the struggles that their children might have in school because they had been there themselves (Bourdieu 1977; National Center for Education Studies 2001).

Middle class players, particularly those whose parents attended college were much more likely to choose a school based on both academics and athletics, rather than focusing solely on the football aspect:

I wanted to be an architect. My dad did building when I was growing up, on the side. Built two or three houses a year and I just loved architecture. I wanted to become a major in architecture. They have a school at the [university in the Northwest]. They also have a good one in [another university in the Northwest],

right? I was recruited. So I chose between those two schools and decided to go to [the first school]. (Frank)

As a 17- 18-year-old kid, of course, you want to go to a team and a school that you like and that's winning. OK? And my parents, they were OK with that, but they were focusing on, what school can he go to where he's going to get a quality education? Because there are a lot of schools that were winning that, necessarily, you know, weren't topnotch academically. And so the tough part about it was finding that balance between a winning program and a good school, and one that you really liked. And so that was the reason why I chose [a university in the South], because it was a great atmosphere, it was in a small town and it wasn't a big city with a lot of distractions, it was a nationally recognized school in general, and had a good football program. So in choosing [university], it was a win-win situation all around. (Arnold)

Middle class parents not only encouraged their children to think about the academic side of college, they also encouraged them to look to life after football:

My step-father at the time had suggested that if I was gonna go to a college that he thought that if you made a name for yourself in the community that you'd have kind of a leg up on everybody else in terms of name recognition and stuff. He says, "Maybe you should think about staying here at the [local university]." ... So I did that and ended up going to school there. (Ted)

In all of these examples, we see the influence that parents had on helping their children choose a college.

Because these players were raised with more economic resources and greater cultural capital, they were better able to view football as an extracurricular activity and a temporary career, rather than a primary means of making it:

As a senior in high school I always knew I was going on to college. Playing college football was not a factor. ... So it was a part of my life but it wasn't, I suppose I must say I had fantasies about playing but it wasn't my life plan or anything like that. (Bart)

Having this looser attitude about football, as well as more foresight into life after sport, may make it easier to disidentify when one's career begins to wane. Further, this orientation toward football also allowed capital rich players to begin developing

alternative identities at a young age, rather than devoting all of their time and energy to sport.

### *Educational Achievement*

As outlined above, this factor is undoubtedly related to one's social class of origin. Having parents who attended college makes one's own path to college graduation markedly smoother. However, education is not only a *product* of one's capital but is also a means of creating new capital, particularly institutionalized cultural capital. Having a college degree, regardless of the actual knowledge you possess, is of utmost important in our increasingly credentialized society (Collins 1979). Players with college degrees felt like they had options for solid, well-paying employment outside of football, opening the door for exploration or exit into new fields:

People just want to know you went through college. You started college. You finished it. You got a degree. Now we'll train you in what we want you to do. And that's kinda what I was thinking. (Russ)

For those retirees without college degrees, we can also see the role that economic and cultural capital play in educational achievement. Parents of working class players had varying levels of education, but none had graduated from college. Many of these respondents mentioned that college was never an option or even in the realm of possibility until they experienced success in football and interest from college recruiters:

I didn't want to [go to college]. Actually, I wanted to drop out in eighth grade. Where I grew up there was a lot of crime, a lot of drug-dealing, gangs, and I was in the center of all that. And so I played football, did my thing in football, you know, sell some dope, you know, drink some beer.... and then I started, I actually got some [recruitment] letters hand delivered to me as a sophomore ... But that's the first time it really struck a chord with me, me and college. I don't know about that, but, you know, it was put on my radar. I don't even know if it was a

possibility. But, I was at least aware of it. (Calvin)

Once Calvin made the commitment to go to college, he knew that football was the main thing keeping him there. It had to be his priority. We see here an overlap between identity commitment and capital. For some men, the foreclosure on an athlete identity, regardless of capital, blotted out any other identity options, including an academic identity.

However, even for those players, like Calvin, who were less internally committed to the football player role, they recognized that focusing on this role might be their only means of social mobility.

### *Family Status*

An interesting distinction between the early exiters/ explorers and the engrossed players was their family status during their professional football career. Early exiters and explorers were much more likely to be married and have children than their peers in the engrossed category. Whether having a family was a cause or consequence of one's level of identity commitment to football is difficult to say, but it is clear that it made a difference in how players left football. While we don't normally view families as a form of capital, they may actually provide men with a measure of gender capital. Through enacting the role of father and husband, players are able to demonstrate their masculinity in ways that are not attached to being physically dominant or violent on the football field. These interpersonal relationships give men greater opportunities for accumulating and demonstrating gender capital.

In addition to providing men with an outlet for performing masculinity, being part of a newly formed family also increases the diversity of men's identity hierarchies. As

Stryker (1980) argues, the greater commitment an individual has to an identity (and its corresponding role), the greater salience that identity will have in his or her life.

Commitment is determined by both interactional and affective ties. Family relationships, especially those between spouses and between parents and children, are among the most intimate types of relationships one could have. The emotional, or affective, intensity of these bonds is often enough to increase the salience of the family identity within an individual's hierarchy of possible selves. Bryan illustrates the shifting identity commitments of football playing fathers here:

My life changed dramatically from how I look at things from my rookie year right up until my sixth, seventh year, where I got two kids now. The family thing. And your life and your passion to play the game is totally different. Your passion to play the game when you're a rookie, it was, for me, to come in, be a great football player, be a star, show everyone what I can do, do all this stuff. The passion as a football player in my seventh year or eighth year is, "This is income for my family, to feed my kids." So, it's a totally different story. Now it's no joke.  
(Bryan)

In short, doing "the family thing", for many players, was not only a means of gaining or continuing to accumulate gender capital, but also a more (or at least equally) important identity than the football one. Having this more diverse set of identities, particularly having an identity with deep emotional ties and important responsibilities, allowed some players to disidentify with football easier than others.

### *Career Length*

Another factor related to both capital and disidentification from football is how long an individual's career in professional football lasts. The engrossed players had the shortest average career length of the three groups. It's possible that because they played for less time they simply had less time to go through the process of role exit, and thus less

opportunity to begin disidentifying. Many of the early exiters and explorers began their process of disidentification later in their careers, once the reality of football's temporary nature set in. The engrossed men may have simply not had the time to come to grips with the fact that their professional football careers would someday come to an end.

It's also possible, however, that shorter career lengths meant that players had less time to accumulate cultural, social, and symbolic capital, important resources for beginning a life outside of football. As I will discuss in the chapter that follows, players' ability to construct an ex-role after football, one that incorporates attributes of their previous role as professional football player, rests heavily on the capital carried over from their football days. Longer careers mean wider (and possibly more capital rich) social networks as well as more symbolic or celebrity capital coming from greater exposure in the media. Further, players who work in the off-season have more time to accrue the necessary cultural capital for employment outside of sport. Players that are better able to tap into these networks, use their presumed prestige, or develop their workplace skills may also be able to disidentify sooner and start building a life outside of professional football.

### **Process of Role Exit**

Role exit describes the process of both leaving an important role, one that ranks high in an individual's identity hierarchy, and moving into a new role that retains vestiges of the previous one. This concept is not meant to describe the exiting process exclusively, but also the rebuilding of new identities. Further, role exit theory is specifically focused on the creation of an ex-role, or how a new role springs to life from the ashes of the old.

In other words, being a professional football retiree is different than both being a professional football player and being someone who has never played professional football. Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) breaks the process of role exit down into multiple phases: first doubts, seeking alternatives, turning points, and finally, becoming an ex. I will go through the first three here, applying her ideas to the role exit process of football retirees.

### *First Doubts*

While some players went through a period of first doubts prior to their role exit from professional football, many others did not. NFL retirees are a unique population for two reasons. First, retirees all knew upon entering football that their role would be temporary. Though some chose not to think about or prepare for this, the nature of the game is such that it doesn't last forever. The second thing that makes this population unique is that the vast majority of exits are involuntary, at least to some degree. Many, knowing their professional football careers will be over soon, are willing to deal with the negative aspects in order to reap the many benefits of being a professional football player.

According to Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), the first stage of becoming an ex is experiencing *first doubts*. Fuchs Ebaugh identifies four conditions that most typically precede the doubting stage: organizational changes, job burnout, relationship changes, and specific events. We can see three of these pre-conditions (organizational changes, job burnout and specific events) at work in the role exit process of professional football retirees.

While all of the retirees talk about at least one benefit or perk of playing football, many simultaneously discuss the hardships that come along with this role. Organizational changes, such as a coaching change or league failure, required players to tap into their cache of social capital. If they did not have adequate “sponsorship” from other coaches, managers, or players, this was often a time of increased doubt. Players had to reinterpret not only their worth as football players, but also the presumed meritocracy of their chosen career. Frank, who played professional football for 17 years, began to understand that his career was coming to an end upon going through a head coaching change:

[One coach] got fired. [Another coach] came in. And, the first mini camp, he did kinda one of these, “38-year-old balding guy sitting over here who weights 280 pounds and most centers are over 300.” Kinda like, “What are you doing here?” “I happen to be a player. I’m one of your centers.” At that point I was a back up. I was a very, very good deep snapper for the punts and field goals. And I didn’t get re-signed. It was disappointing. But I mean after 17 years you can hardly complain. (Frank)

As players entered this stage, they realized that it’s often more about interpersonal relationships, rather than specific skill sets.

Job burnout of high status football players is evident in their descriptions of the negative side of celebrity capital. Burnout, according to Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), is more specific than role-related frustration or stress and is a direct result of continuous interactions with clients or customers, or in the case of football players,. It is based in a disconnect or contradiction between what one is “taught to expect ... and what actually occurs in the course of practice” (61). Many players may be surprised at the amount of attention they receive simply by virtue of wearing the uniform. Others, unsurprised at attention, may be thrown off by the negative aspects of this visibility. Players, many of whom at one time enjoyed the perks of celebrity, often became disillusioned with the

depersonalized nature of relationships created through football networks and exhausted by the expectation that they must always be “on”.

Specific events leading to first doubts about a football career are often related to both organizational changes and job burnout. The negative feelings created by both of these experiences may crystalize around singular event and bring the negative feelings into focus. As mentioned above, some of these specific events might be career transitions: coaching change, team change, being cut, or even being injured. Cameron, in his last season playing professional football found himself on a new team in a new place, playing the role of “old guy”. All of these factors came together for him to begin shaping his exit from football:

So I was in an odd situation where, on the trips, you know how all the players go hang out? I was hanging out with the coaches... I was the old guy. And so I'm looking around like, “Man, this is a culture shock for me.” I don't even feel like a player and all the laughing and all the jokes in the locker room were really just going right over my head. They were too young for me. I said, “That's not even funny.”...And so they'd be like, “old man! What are we supposed to do on this coverage tonight?” And I'd kinda tell 'em. It was a different experience. It was coach talk. (Cameron)

Other specific events that shaped players first doubts involved family changes, political disagreements with teammates or coaches, and alternative career opportunities.

My last year out there, I had to have another knee surgery. And, my daughter was going into 6th grade. We had a new coach coming. And, I thought “Well, maybe now is time to quit.” And, I had a friend who I was in the brokerage business with who was going to get out of the business, and buy a sporting goods company up in [northern state]. (Pete)

For Pete, it was a combination of specific events that led to his eventual retirement: injury, family change, coaching change, and new career opportunities. As I mentioned previously, not all players went through this phase. Some never doubted their football

careers until they were over. Similarly, some players began seeking alternatives, while others did not.

### *Seeking Alternatives*

The process of seeking alternatives included systematically weighing the costs and benefits of one's current role and anticipated new roles, but also more spontaneous and emotional decision-making. It was both an individual and interactional process, whereby role exiters took in feedback from significant others, imagined themselves as part of new social groups, and even initiated contact with people connected to potential new roles. We can see these processes at work in the various ways that professional football players prepared for life after sport.

### Weighing Costs and Benefits

At the core of the process of seeking alternatives is the weighing of costs and benefits of a new role in relation to the currently occupied role. This involves both critically examining one's level of satisfaction with their current role as well as imagining what the future may hold. Both early exiters and explorers did some weighing of alternatives as they prepared for their lives after football. Interestingly, but not surprising, this process was absent in the lives of the engrossed.

Players who did begin to think about what they would do once football was over were motivated by both frustration and unhappiness in their current role and by excitement about potential futures. For some, the negative orientation toward their current role as professional football player was enough to push them toward a new role.

The feeling was it's time to move on. That was the feeling. Well, what helped that was the fact that my knee was killing me. So now I'm saying to myself,

"Man, my body just can't take this anymore." I mean I could barely walk. How could I go try out for a professional football team? You know. So that initially helped me make my decision that, OK, it's time to get back in school and start over again. (Arnold)

For this particular player (an explorer), his body was in bad enough shape that he could no longer enjoy or even fully embody his role as a professional football player. He did not have a new career started, as evidenced by his statement about "start[ing] over" and did not really have another role pulling him away from football. His dissatisfaction with the status quo was simply too much for him to remain in that position.

For Bart, an early exiter, the lure of new possibility and a new career was enough to pull him away from professional football.

I left football for a real career. In some ways a more real career than the kind of play acting career, so-called career of being a professional athlete. Played at a time when it was less a big deal. Played at a time when the money was not overwhelmingly important. Played at a time when it was not an all-consuming thing. Played as a back up offensive lineman instead of an all-pro wide receiver. (Bart)

He explains here that all the reasons why it was easier for him to do this that it may have been for others, but the fact remains that he didn't necessarily feel pushed out by his dissatisfaction with football, but rather pulled by his interest in pursuing other options.

For most early exiters and explorers, however, it was a simultaneous push-pull effect that hastened their disidentification from football. Both dissatisfaction with the present and hope for the future is what led most retirees to exit football and enter into a new role. We see this exemplified by Cameron, an early exiter, who was both frustrated with football and missing out on being a dad:

I would go home to that hotel room, stare at those four walls, watch that TV set, walk around the mall 20 times, watch the same movie three times, I'm like, "Dude, this is not what I want." I was just like, "Man, there's more to life and I'm missing my daughter's basketball games. My son's back there. He wants to play

football. He's five years old or whatever, six years old." And I'm like, "I got money. I got everything. I want to live a normal life now." One of those type of deals. Because it wasn't fun no more. It wasn't fun at all. (Cameron)

Cameron makes the classic cost/benefit analysis when he says, "Man, there's more to life." This realization represented the dual push-pull of his situation. He realized that he was unhappy with his role as football player and simultaneously, that he knew what he wanted instead.

For many players, there may be dissatisfaction with football, but no idea of what might take its place. This is a conundrum of identity foreclosure. Because they have devoted so much attention to one particular role, they don't have other well-developed identities to fall back on when their master status is no longer providing them with the tangible or emotional rewards that it once did. Players may wish to exit football and move into new roles, but there is anxiety about how they might achieve success elsewhere. There is also, for many men, the feeling that they can't leave football because they need the paycheck or the spotlight. Cameron's statement, "I got money. I got everything," demonstrates his readiness to leave football behind. Other role exiters, however, may not have the economic or symbolic resources that Cameron does. He has a family and a small business, not to mention healthy finances. Cameron is rich in both identity options and capital.

This idea of being trapped, restricted or having limited options is a common one. Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) argues that, "in most instances, the vast array of role alternatives is limited by the degree of translatability of skills, personal interest, and experience that the individual perceives between his or her present role and an alternative one under consideration" (92). In other words, most retirees are limited in some senses. Those who

are better able to use the cultural capital gained through college, job training, or even through playing professional football may have more options for role exit, or may just have clearer vision about what those options might be. Cameron, who started a small business during his second season in the NFL, talks here about putting his college education to good use:

R: I started off my second year in the NFL.

I: Wow. So you immediately got to work on work?

R: On business. Yeah, trying to, using my knowledge from college, business degree skills. I got a little kiosk in the [city] airport, sold soft pretzels and Pepsi products. (Cameron)

He was able to use the actual job skills and cultural capital gained through previous educational experiences to begin building a post-football career.

Other retirees mentioned how important the cultural capital accumulated in professional football has been for helping them weigh their options for life after sport. A few of them remained in careers that were related to sport (coaching, sports media, owning a sporting goods store), but even for those who did not pursue a new role in sport, their football skills helped them navigate new waters. One retiree, who pursued a number of jobs following football but ultimately ended up in construction, said, “I probably learned more in terms of how to operate in a business through sports than I did through the classroom” (Ted). This confidence in the “translatability of [his] skills” was important for Ted, an early exiter, in weighing his post-football options. Ted was able to call upon not only general life and business skills, but also the confidence and entitlement that he internalized through years of being successful in competitive sport.

For retirees who haven’t figured out how to put their football skills to good use or don’t have any specific training in a professional field, the idea of leaving football can be

more daunting. They may experience what Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) calls “role entrapment” where there is a lack of realistic alternative possibilities, making players feel trapped or stuck in the role of professional athlete. This experience was much more common for the engrossed players, or those who hadn’t begun to disidentify with football when they were forced with the prospect of inevitable disengagement. These players mention a lack of translatable skills, a lack of preparation for the future, and probably most importantly, a hyper focus on football to the exclusion of everything else:

So, now here you gotta create this new identity, this new self, and if you don’t have the right foundation under you, you’re in trouble. And so most guys don’t have a foundation. They, they, that’s it. All your eggs is in one basket. And so now, you done broke the basket. You know, so now what are you gonna do?  
(Percy)

This is a tough position for players because most professional football athletes have little choice about leaving the game. Eventually, they will become an ex, whether they have found a viable role to move into or not.

Another major constraint to considering alternative roles is what Becker (1960) calls “side bets.” These side bets are investments into aspects related to the current role. In other words, while actors usually receive something (salary, social capital, prestige) directly from their role, side bets are the indirect benefits that actors may invest in as a part of occupying that same role. These side bets may be in the form of tangible benefits (pensions, health care benefits), but they may also be more abstract (camaraderie, friendship, time, validation). The more a person has invested in side bets related to a particular role, the more difficult it is to give up that role. These side bets become costs when weighing alternatives because they mean giving something up in addition to the role itself.

Retirees from all preparation groups mention a variety of side bets. Bart planned from the beginning of his career to play only long enough to receive a full pension. He was two seasons short of his goal when he was released from his team and had to decide if it was important enough for him to continue trying to play professional football. He says the following about weighing the side bets he's made in terms of pension:

I guess I did have to think about, "okay, I got cut by the [NFL team]. Do I want to try to go home, stay in shape, hope for a call, try to sign with somebody as a free agent for the next year to get those two years in?" That would have been an alternative course to follow but I didn't even seriously consider that. I mean I had no desire to try to hang on, cling. In fact, I had a real negative feeling about it. I had too much of a sense of guys that were just hanging on out of desperation, just as long as they could because "oh my God the real world is out there waiting for me. I'm not ready for it." And I simply wasn't going to put myself through that but I had the luxury of not needing to put myself through that. (Bart)

Bart points out that, for him, the costs of staying in football outweighed the costs of giving up his side bet. But, he also acknowledges that he had the "luxury" of not having to worry too much about a pension. He was an early exitter, moving into a stable career as a university professor where he knew he would have access to similar benefits. Bart was able to give up football not only because he had secured economic stability through his new career, but also because he possessed valued cultural capital in the form of educational credentials and symbolic capital stemming from his prestigious job in academia. For players whose capital was more bound up with football, side bets took on increased importance

The side bet was not always about money or benefits, but rather about the time invested in the pursuit of the current role. There seemed to be some consensus amongst retirees that playing "too long" might make leaving football harder because you have invested so much time into building and occupying that role. These retirees described a

“good little time frame” for an optimal football career, one where you had enough time to have a lot of opportunities, but not so long that you became overly dependent on the sport:

I might have played kind of an optimum number of years, 8 years. If I had played 12, if I had played longer, it'd be like, I might have hung on to football more. If I had [played] less, I would have always thought I didn't get the opportunities. So ... that 8 to 10 years might be a good little time frame cause hey, I had a good, you know, I'm happy with what I did. (Nolan)

The guys who played a small amount of time [compared] to me has the easier in life after football because they didn't live a life of football long enough to understand what it's like. They were still young. Like coming out of the league at 34. I was embarrassed on things that I didn't really know as a young man living on my own as far as dealing with everyday stuff. I had my agent deal. I wasn't ... The team set it up. And then when you end up on your own you gotta get your own health insurance. "What? Health insurance. What are you talking about? My team did that. I don't know what to do." I'm 34 years old trying to figure out health insurance. Deductibles? What? Premiums? What are you talking about? It's a rude awakening. Because you don't know! You've been pampered your whole life. (Bryan)

Bryan's quote raises not only the issue of time invested, but also the investment in helplessness. He points out that upon leaving football, he had to learn to do the basic tasks of daily living and that because his career was longer, he had to learn these things as an older adult, something he felt ashamed about. This learned helplessness may have been an obstacle to Bryan's disidentification with football. As an explorer, Bryan did not begin looking outside of football until very late in his career.

Finally, retirees made various kinds of emotional side bets based on their roles as football players. Cameron talks about his sadness in leaving behind not his teammates, but all the people who worked for the team:

What I was going to miss was the equipment managers, the secretaries that were there for 30 years and that loved me as a person and my family. Our kids played together. We had Christmas parties and all of that stuff that you kinda take for granted sometimes. From the cook that knew what type of breakfast you wanted.

You just had to say, “You want the same?” “Yeah the same.” You know what I mean? For all those years. Barber, just leaving all of that, everything. (Cameron)

His friendship with these people was not a direct benefit flowing from his role as a professional football player; rather he chose to invest time and emotional energy in nurturing those relationships. Martin, an explorer, talks about investing in athletics as a means of building a relationship with his father and creating a confident sense of self:

I was easily frightened as a child. So I was somewhat timid. And my father would be frustrated with that and, you know, of course his male cultural way of dealing with frustration is to hit it. Right? So, you know, I’m like my fear is making my circumstances worse instead of better. And that connection, my first real connection I had was, again through my athleticism, I had this innate confidence about doing things, movement things. Emotionally I was a basket case, but physically I was doing OK. (Martin)

For Martin, leaving football was not just about leaving a job; it also meant leaving behind this point of connection between himself and his father, as well as a sense of self-acceptance. He goes on to say later that part of his anger and bitterness toward football was, “that I hadn’t fulfilled that need of acceptance yet. I’d done it externally, but I hadn’t done it internally” (Martin). An important part of Martin’s masculine self-image was rooted in his identity as an athlete. His gender capital was bound up with his physical capabilities because emotionally, he had not adequately internalized the norms of hegemonic masculinity. He was timid and frightened and a source of frustration to his primary male role model. Football was a place where he was able to generate gender capital and embody the masculine role that was expected of him. These emotional investments had to be included in the calculations players made when rationally weighing costs and benefits.

### Interactional Aspects

The process of seeking alternatives is not solely an individual one. Actors go through a number of interactional processes en route to becoming an ex. According to Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), individuals elicit feedback about the pursuit of alternative roles from important social supports, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. They also explore specific alternative roles through role rehearsals and shifting their reference groups.

The general consensus amongst the professional football players I interviewed was that the choice to leave football, however limited it may have been, was made individually. When asked if they consulted with teammates or loved ones about their decision to retire, the vast majority of retirees said that they just knew it was time to go:

I didn't talk it out with no one. Cause I already knew. (Cameron)

I: Did you and your partner talk about this [retirement] a lot?

R: Uh, no, not really, because there wasn't much to talk about. You know? They call you, say "you're done," and then you say, "OK, thanks." (Thomas)

I didn't have to consult with anybody. I knew. I just knew and my wife is very supportive and wasn't, she could see me hurting. (Russ)

These quotes raise questions about the voluntariness of role exit for professional football players. Many of these individual "choices" were constrained by players' injuries (Russ) or by their being cut from teams (Thomas). In other words, they often had very little agency in the move out of football. It is possible that players framed the very limited choices that they had as individual ones because the feedback they received couldn't really change the situation.

Despite claiming not to be influenced by anyone, a few players still mentioned the ways that they received feedback from peers on their decision to pursue alternatives

outside of football. Some of them framed this feedback in terms of advice that they got from veteran players:

Advice from some of my teammates came in handy because they would always say, "Well, try to live well below your means because if you live from paycheck to paycheck and your expenses go up and you try to have this lifestyle, then what happens when the game is over?"... One central message kinda rang true, was consistent. And that was that this game is short, you need to prepare for your future, whether it be saving money or whether it be getting your degree or whether it be not doing something stupid out there that's going to ruin your name in the media. Because you use this as a stepping-stone to the rest of your life. So that's kinda the central message, is use football as a way to prepare you for the rest of your life. Football will use you. We've seen a lot of that. But you gotta make sure you use football. (Michael)

While Michael did not necessarily seek out this advice or directly ask teammates what he should do to successfully transition out of football, this message got to him anyway. This is an example of how bonding social capital, the ties developed within tight-knit, homogeneous groups, can be translated into other forms of capital. In this case, Michael's internalization of his teammates' advice proved to be important cultural capital. He used this advice to imagine life after football and prepare himself by curbing spending and maintaining a good reputation.

Another retiree, Bart, an early exitter who left football for a career in education, discusses the response he received from teammates about his pursuing an advanced degree while playing professional football. Like Michael, he did not actively seek out advice or feedback, but absorbed the messages from his peers in a more indirect way:

I think what happened is that they in fact envied me knowing that I was working on a real life outside of football. In that era, people were really conscious of the fact that once it ends you gotta do something else and what the hell are you going to do?... So this was a real source of anxiety and here I was taking care of business in the off-season, becoming a professional outside of football and because I wasn't a jerk, because I was likeable, they were fine with that. And like I say I think probably sort of envied it. (Bart)

The perception Bart had of other players envying his preparation for life outside of football was a form of positive social support. It reinforced the idea that he was making the right decision in seeking out alternatives to professional football.

Another interactional process involved in the transitional phase of role exit is the shifting of reference groups. As individuals begin to hone in on an alternative role and become serious about leaving their current role, they begin to identify themselves with people and groups that are connected to the new role. As individuals begin shifting their reference group toward a new role, they also begin to think about and evaluate themselves in different ways. They may also internalize new norms and values related to the new role. Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) argues that this process of “anticipatory socialization” is a way of creating a bridge between identities where the individual can psychologically become a member of a new group without fully disengaging from the old one.

It is at this stage of the role exit process where we see overt disidentification taking place. As players begin to think of themselves as members of an alternate group and internalize the values and norms of that group, they are simultaneously letting go of the centrality of their football identity. Early exiters are the retirees who most fully disidentified with football before retiring and thus are the only ones who really began shifting their reference groups to identify with something other than football. The ability to find and fit in with new groups is largely dependent on a players’ social and cultural capital. Players must have the social capital necessary for making connections outside of football and meeting people to help initiate them into a new field. Cultural capital is also important as a person navigates unknown, or at least lesser traveled, territory. Having the

interpersonal and social skills necessary for interacting with a variety of people is a powerful resource. For people who have foreclosed on the athlete identity, the underdevelopment of skills and social networks outside of the sporting world hinder their ability to associate with a new reference group.

According to Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), reference groups serve three important functions for individuals: comparative, normative, and gatekeeping functions. Football retirees and their shifting identities demonstrate each of these. The *comparative* function of reference groups was to give individuals standards for the evaluation of self and others in the group. Reference groups provided context and a measuring stick of sorts. Cameron, a player who started a small business during his second year in the NFL, used his airport kiosk as a way to learn “about retail and about business.” Using the standards of this field, he described the revenues he was making on a relatively small investment:

Because I just wanted to learn and it was only a \$15,000 investment. And that was nothing at the time. So I'm like, "Okay, yeah, let's do it." And man I learned. Man I was dropping down ... to visit the little kiosk ... and you know, \$300 a day in revenue, it's cool. (Cameron)

Rather than identifying with other professional football players and what kinds of money they may be making, Cameron was already beginning to evaluate himself and his business in terms of the industry. He clearly felt very successful making \$300 per day, something that his teammates may have scoffed at.

Whereas the comparative functions of reference groups gave individuals a way to evaluate themselves and others, the *normative* function was to provide a set of values, beliefs and goals that individuals within the group should aspire to. Individuals internalized these norms, which then served as a roadmap for members. For some of the early exiters, the role of professional football player was never a perfect fit. When these

players began seeking alternatives, they found that the norms of new reference groups were much more comfortable. One example of such a shift in reference groups comes from Will, a retiree who began writing a column for the local newspaper when he signed with his first professional team:

It started off as a training camp diary. I was going to write about my experiences of being in training camp. But then once I made the team, they asked me if I wanted to continue during the season, and so I did that. And so yeah, I immediately started reestablishing kind of what I felt was my identity as a student athlete. I wanted to do some academic things. (Will)

Will was happy to discover that the expectations and values surrounding his new role were more intellectually focused, something that was important to him as a “student athlete.”

Finally, reference groups function as *gatekeepers* that can approve or deny one’s entrance or exit into a role. In the case of those who are shifting reference groups in anticipation of making a role exit, these reference group gatekeepers can “facilitate an exit by making it legitimate” (Fuchs Ebaugh 1988: 108) or giving permission. For some of the early exiters, the most important gatekeeper was someone who was well connected to a new career. Thus, bridging social capital was of utmost importance. The social networks that players developed *outside* of football played a crucial role in connecting players with those outside of sport. Russ, an early exiter who began a career selling insurance toward the end of his professional football career, gained entry (or permission) from friends both in and outside of football:

When I got up here to [new city], I had a buddy from college who's my business partner here now. Owned a couple insurance agencies and I said, "I've been thinking about [selling insurance]." There again, I was following the example of a guy that I played with in [old city] that had really good success when he left the game. I said, "Well, he did this while he was playing. I should do that." (Russ)

Both gatekeepers here, Russ's college buddy and his former teammate, demonstrated that Russ could legitimately enter into this new career, and new role, in insurance. Having this assurance helped Russ to begin the process of disidentification with football and transition into something new. For these early exiters, the ability to see themselves as, at least theoretically, part of a new group was a huge boon to their ability to disidentify with football and transition smoothly into a new role.

The next step, beyond simply imagining themselves as members of a new group, was for players to actually try out new roles, while still ensconced in their positions as football players. Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) calls this *role rehearsal*. She argues that these rehearsals can be both institutionalized and informal. They may be imagined through role-play or enacted in reality (112). For professional football players, the seasonal nature of their work allowed for ample role rehearsal opportunities. This was especially true for older retirees who played at a time when football salaries were not enough to support a family and when there were fewer demands on their time during the off-season. Ted, one of the oldest retirees in my sample, notes that younger men may have a tougher time transitioning because they don't have the same opportunities for role rehearsal:

You wanted to do something with your life, so, I mean, while you're playing football, at least you have the luxury of kinda figuring out what you want to do with the rest of your life. And even if you made nothing, you at least learned whether or not you wanted to be in this business or that business...That's probably one of the reasons it's harder for guys retiring now or even since the '80s...when you're working full time for 12 months a year on football and you don't have time to do anything else; you can think about other stuff, you can read and you can kinda maybe get a tiny bit of exposure to stuff but all of the sudden you're at the end and now you got to start all over again in something. But you haven't even had a chance to try anything. (Ted)

However, it was not just the older generation who actively tried out new roles while playing football. As noted above, many younger men got involved in business ventures or

academic pursuits while playing football. These were often small projects, such as writing a “training camp diary” for the newspaper (Will) or operating a kiosk at the airport (Cameron), but they gave retirees a valuable sense of what life would be like without football. Of course, this is also a function of career length. Players who were in professional football for greater periods of time had more time to accrue cultural capital through experimenting with identities and careers outside of football. They also had more time to build up both social and celebrity capital, two helpful factors in simply opening the doors of opportunity.

The process of seeking alternative roles appears on the surface to be a highly rational process. It involved weighing costs and benefits of potential new roles and stacking those against the current role one occupies. While this appears to be a highly individualized process of free will and personal choice, we cannot ignore the role that larger social structure plays in shaping these decisions. Players’ hunt for alternative roles was driven by a dual push-pull experience of frustration with their current situation and excitement or intrigue about the future. The pull of something new was most often felt by those with higher levels of social and cultural capital. Social capital opened the door to new opportunities outside of sport while cultural capital provided the skills and knowledge necessary to capitalize on those opportunities.

In addition to considering the role of capital in seeking alternatives, we must also recognize that this is not an entirely individual process, despite the way players may frame it. Players are always taking in the feedback of significant others, sometimes directly, but more often in passive ways. For instance, evaluating reference groups and one’s position within them is a way of receiving feedback indirectly. And these

experiences are also shaped by capital. As mentioned above, one must have the social and cultural capital necessary to find and fit into a new role. All of these processes are rooted in a desire to make the “correct” choice for one’s future. For all professional football players, the decision to leave football is often a difficult one because of the high status, prestige, and pay that comes along with this role. However, for those with more resources, tangible or otherwise, this decision is made easier.

### *Turning Points: Career Ends*

There are a rare few who choose to walk away from football with good health and offers on the table. It is more often the case that players get “fired” and choose not to pursue other options, thereby allowing themselves some agency or choice in how their professional career ends. Others get injured and choose to go through rehabilitation or not. Still others, those with the least amount of choice in their exit from professional football, are forced out through injury or a complete lack of options for extending their careers, either in the NFL or other professional leagues. These are the moments that Fuchs Ebaugh terms *turning points*.

According to Fuchs Ebaugh (1988), a turning point is an “event that mobilizes and focuses awareness that old lines of action are complete, have failed, have been disrupted, or are no longer personally satisfying” (123). Players’ interpretations of these moments are largely dependent on their orientation toward the football player identity. Early exiters, the players who disidentified with football before their playing careers were actually over, exhibited the highest degree of choice in exiting football. This is not surprising given the high levels of capital they possess. Being part of well-connected

social networks, having the symbolic and cultural capital that comes along with a college degree, and for some, having the additional bonus of coming from White middle class families, provided these men with a variety of options outside of sport. Engrossed players, on the other hand, were much more limited in their choices and thus more likely to remain committed to the athlete identity. Thus, the experience of being cut from a team, for example, may be a turning point for an early exit, someone who has another career to fall back on. For an engrossed player, this same experience may be interpreted as simply a bump on the road of a continuing football career

Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) details five types of turning points that lead to the ultimate decision to exit a role: specific events, the “last straw”, time-related factors, excuses, and either/or choices. Professional football retirees demonstrate each of these types of turning points in their various modes of exit. It’s important to note, however, that all of Fuchs Ebaugh’s turning points imply some degree of choice or voluntary exit. Because many professional football players do not leave voluntarily, we must add to Fuchs Ebaugh’s list another type of turning point that does not involve choice, namely *rejection*. In the section that follows, I examine each of these types of turning points and the way they are understood by different types of role exiters.

### Specific Events

Some turning points are predicated on specific events that may or may not be directly related to the exiting process. Many of these events are seemingly insignificant but take on symbolic meaning that highlights or exacerbates the tensions that may already be brewing. Some specific events may be drastic enough that they alone are the impetus for role exit. Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) gives the example of infidelity in a marriage,

particularly catching someone in the act, as a significant enough event to jump-start the process of role exit. However, most of the specific events that act as turning points are just a representation of underlying dissatisfaction.

The specific events that shaped professional football players' role exits were often ones that were representative not of dissatisfaction necessarily, but of physical decline. These were events that brought into sharp focus the fact that their careers were drawing to a close. For many athletes, this event was an injury. These injuries were different from career ending ones, because there was at least a possibility of a player coming back. Many athletes, however, viewed these moments as symbolic of their steady downward progression. Martin's experience with injury demonstrates the connection of capital and identity in interpreting turning points:

I broke my back my third year in the league. I played with that continuing on. I was hobbling more and more. I played for two years like that. And, so that was becoming a factor in training camp. And I realized my sixth year that this was it. This was my last year. I couldn't go through another training camp because of the excruciating pain in my back. (Martin)

Martin's back injury and subsequent pain acted as a turning point for him. However, instead of accepting his physical limitations and walking away, he spent his last year in the league playing like a "mad man" and further injuring himself:

I was like, "OK, this is it, your last year. I'm going to go balls out. I'm going to make the Pro Bowl. I'm going to do the very best I can so that I can leave knowing that I gave it my very best shot." And so I did, and started flailing myself around like a mad man, and my knee gave out. My left knee gave out. (Martin)

Martin, an explorer who was living with enormous pain, had not yet disidentified from football, even after he set an end date for himself. Part of this may be explained by his lack of material resources. Martin came from a working class background. He was also

taken advantage of by a financial advisor who lost a lot of his money. Even more importantly, for Martin, was the pursuit and projection of hegemonic masculinity. He traded in the gender capital he had earned through the years (playing through pain, being mentally tough, controlling situations) for the symbolic capital of being seen as a legitimate and authoritative man. This exchange came at a cost, though, as Martin eventually injured himself further and was forced out of football.

Arnold, also an explorer, had a similar experience with physical decline and injury. After being released from one team, Arnold was contacted by another to come in for a tryout. He was all set to go when an old injury flared up out of nowhere. Arnold was unable to try out and the team moved on without him. Arnold interpreted this whole episode as a sign that he should stop searching for a new team:

They made an appointment for me to come down and go through the physical and have a tryout and everything like that. Well, about two weeks before I was to go, for some reason, I hadn't been doing much at all but my knee started just really hurting me. It hurt me so bad to where I could barely walk. So I called and I said, "Hey, I can't come." I don't know what I said, why I said I couldn't come, but I didn't want to tell them my knee was hurting. So they said, "OK, we'll reschedule your visit down." So then my knee, it stopped hurting. And when I called back to reschedule, they said, they decided to pass, they were just going to go a different route or whatever. And then, after that nail was put in the coffin, so to speak, my knee stopped hurting. It was like, it was a sign that my time was up, to me at least. Because there was no reason for my knee to be hurting, I had done nothing ... It was time to move on. (Arnold)

Arnold interpreted his injury as a sign that his career was over, unlike Martin who saw his as a reason to play even harder. Events like these, injuries and releases where players may still have options to go through rehabilitation or get picked up by another team, were generally the culmination of a substantial period of decline. Many retirees said that they saw the end coming and moments like this allowed them to walk away on their own terms, rather than being forced out. Having this agency was extremely important for the

mental health and wellbeing of retirees, something I will explore at greater length in the chapter that follows.

### The Last Straw

The “last straw”, similar to specific events, is a moment in which the actor realizes that the role they are currently occupying must be exited. Unlike some specific events, however, these are moments that follow “a long process of doubting and evaluating alternatives” (Fuchs Ebaugh 1988: 128). These “last straw” events are ones in which the actor can finally “take a firm stand and announce an exit” (128).

In my sample, the thing that differentiated last straw turning points from the injuries or releases described above is the emotional build-up. Whereas the specific injuries or releases might be part of a progression of decline, last-straw turning points were based on a rapid accumulation of dissatisfaction. One example is from an older retiree, Bill, who during his playing days in the 1960s and 70s was very politically active in radical protest groups. In Bill’s last season, he went through a strike, suffered an injury, and eventually, after receiving a few warnings about his political activity, was benched. This was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back:

Near the end of the season, I think we only had probably 3 or 4 games left, they benched me. And, that really, that was just very wounding to me, because I think you go into situations when you're playing and particularly at that level, you know, it's kind of a meritocracy. The best players, you know, got to play. And, when you're the best player and you're not playing and the guy they put in hurts your defense, hurt our team, you know, all the winning things, it's bullshit on some level ... Our last game, [teammate] and I ... we both agreed this was it for us. Football was over for all those reasons. The political reasons and the rest of it.  
(Bill)

The politics of the NFL were so disillusioning to Bill that he decided to exit his role as professional football player. When coaches and owners went against what Bill believed

to be the most basic principles of sport – meritocracy on the field, fairness, playing to win – just to punish him for his ideological beliefs, he realized that he no longer wanted to be a part of the team or the league. He had put up with having his political views silenced, with injury, with differences of opinions, but for him, being benched was the last straw. For Bill, a retiree with large stores of cultural and gender capital (college degree plus some years of post-bachelors education, a physically strong and able body) and a multi-faceted identity (political activist, husband, student), leaving football was a viable option. For others with less resources, the experience of being benched for disciplinary or political reasons may not have been a last straw or reason to leave football.

### Time-Related Factors

Turning points that hinge on time-related factors might be related to actors' age or position in the lifecycle or may relate to the timing of the role being exited or entered. For professional football retirees, many time-related turning points were due to aging and the body's decline compared to newer, fresher, and younger players. This was an especially prevalent turning point in the role exit of players who had long careers in professional football. Ted, who played nine years, said the following about choosing to retire:

You watch the film and when you start missing plays that two years before you were making, you say to yourself, "My legs aren't there or the game's getting faster and I'm not ... " Or you've got injuries and things that are dinged up or something. And if you're just being realistic about it, you just, you say, "How much longer do I want to play not at the level that you'd like to be playing at?"  
(Ted)

Michael, who played for seven years, also describes his advancing age as his cue to get out of football:

I wasn't the same athlete, didn't move as quickly as I did when I was younger and I knew it. I mean that little extra step just wasn't there and I just couldn't figure it out. Mentally I was still there, you know, I was still the same athlete I was, but I

wasn't coming back from injuries, little nagging injuries. I didn't bounce back as quickly as I used to. They said it happens as you get older and I used to hear these guys at [team name], they used to say that. Man, they were like “Most of the time you get injured at a game, by Wednesday you're okay. You're back to normal. You're moving and you don't have any residual effects of the injuries. But once you play a certain number of years, those injuries, those nagging injuries that used to be over by Wednesday, they're lasting until Saturday or to next Sunday and you go through a whole season with just never being really healthy.” So that was starting to happen to me, because as a running back I took a pounding. (Michael)

This critical self-reflection about aging was echoed by many retirees. They explain their exit from professional football not as the result of some specific event, but rather as a natural part of the life cycle.

### Excuses

A turning point that “provided ... justification for the need to leave a given role” (Fuchs Ebaugh 1988: 130) acts as an excuse to help people leave a role that they may have already been doubting. This may be especially applicable to individuals who may be stigmatized, or who may face negative social responses, for leaving a role. Fuchs Ebaugh gives the example of a surgeon who receives a diagnosis of arthritis. Even though the arthritis does not really affect the day-to-day tasks of his job, he uses it as a way to leave a role that is unsatisfying. Because the pay and prestige associated with his surgeon role are high, he knows that friends and colleagues may not understand his desire to leave. The medical diagnosis is a perfect way out for him.

For football players, the “excuses” turning point worked in a slightly different manner. Because most players did not want to leave, a few identified key moments where they were forced out through no fault of their own. The excuse then acted not as a way out of an undesirable role, but as a way of explaining being pushed out of a role one desired to keep. Percy, a retiree who had a tumultuous career, played on various teams in

multiple professional leagues over a six-year period. Percy's career was unstable from the beginning, but rather than admitting that he simply didn't have the skill or physical ability to remain in football, he used the excuse of league bankruptcy as a reason for getting out of football.

R: The league [World Football League] went bankrupt on us. We sued the National League for violating anti-trust agreements. Then they sorta threw a pie in our face because all the veterans came to the World Football League to get it going. Then they went belly-up on us because they couldn't get the backing from the business communities, you know, advertisements and stuff. So, the court ruled that the National League violated the anti-trust. And they awarded us one dollar...

I: Did you think you were gonna try and go back to the NFL at any point?

R: Well, no, after that sorta blunder it was time to look, you know, find a new dream, create a new dream for yourself. (Percy)

Percy frames the end of his football career more as the result of the failed World Football League than any personal failures on his part. It is clear, however, from his history of being cut, released, and traded around between teams in the NFL, the Canadian Football League (CFL), and the World Football League that his role as football player was never particularly stable. The league's failure thus served as a possible excuse for Percy to construct himself as voluntarily leaving football. Using these external turning points as excuses for leaving football is a way for players to save face or maintain their symbolic capital as legitimate and valued social actors.

### Either/Or Choices

These turning points are moments when an actor is faced with either exiting a particular role or losing his or her mental and/or physical well-being, relationship with a loved one, or something else of high value. This is the type of turning point that Fuchs Ebaugh describes for alcoholics who decide to get sober or people who are so unhappy in their marriages that they are becoming mentally unstable.

For professional football players many of these either/or choices revolve around both physical health and family relationships. One common sentiment was the realization that continuing to play football would damage their bodies to the point where they would not longer get to be active fathers. Of course, this realization was more visceral for those who players who already had children, making their decision to exit football less complicated. For these men, having another socially valued and acceptable masculine role to transition into after football provided support for disidentifying with and exiting football. Both of the players below largely based their decisions about retirement on this either/or turning point:

You got a family, your priorities start changing a lot. You have kids. You start worrying about them. A lot of people do. It's not any different than me, to start thinking about what you're doing. You gotta be a dad and you don't want to be a handicapped dad. (Roger)

When I did get cut, I took trips, you know, to get tryouts with other teams and I remember going to the [NFL team] and the doctor... said something to me.... He goes, "What do you want to do when you get finished?" I said, "Well, do the dad thing and play catch with my boys." ... He goes, "I want to make a suggestion. Looking at your left knee, you have the knee of a 55-year-old." ... And I was only 29, 30. And he goes, "I really suggest that you consider, if you're ready, move on with your life, because, if you don't, when you turn 40, you won't be able to play catch with your boys." And that hit me for some reason. (Louis)

While the above turning points demonstrate the importance for some retirees of enacting a father role after football, another type of either/or moment occurred when considering post-football career options. Ralph, an engrossed retiree who really didn't want to leave football, finally began to face reality after multiple cuts and career extensions. Following his final release, he started a small business. The next season, his former team called him and wanted him to come back to training camp. This is how he describes his either/or turning point:

I had started some business stuff here. And just off the ground. Ground floor. But, I had put some time in for it and I was beginning to see some benefit from it. I mean, I was, new business was struggling and all that and they're going to pay me pretty good money to come up there ... It was, I really needed to go back [to professional football] and either I was going to lose everything I started or stay ... But I told them, "I have to have a guarantee. I have to have a guarantee. And, they said, "We can't do that." And, I said, "Oh God." Because it was that grown-up decision time ... And I understood why they did that back then but I said, and I didn't know what to do. It was the love of my life. But I just I, you gotta be a grown-up about this. You're gonna have to walk away and one thing about it was is you got to walk away on your own terms. (Ralph)

This was a difficult decision for Ralph, pitting something he really loved against some security for his future. In the end, this was the moment in which Ralph decided to exit the role of professional football player and move into his new role and new career.

### Rejections

In addition to Fuchs Ebaugh's five types of turning points, I have added a sixth, *rejections*, that takes into account the involuntary nature of many role exits. Rejections are moments when individuals realize that they must exit a role and move on, whether they desire to or not. Generally, this type of role exit comes with an institutional or interactional push from without. In other words, the moment of role exit is not necessarily decided by the role exiter himself, but by someone or something external to the individual. For football players, these moments of rejection may be a result of declining skill, lack of usefulness to a team, or career-ending injury. The majority of the retirees I talked with had some degree of choice about leaving football, even if their bodies were pushing them towards retirement; however, there were a few who got cut and couldn't find another team to sign with. All of these men were engrossed players, their identities very much tied up with their role as football players. For these men, the turning point in

their exit from professional football was not elective. Kevin, describes his ouster from professional football below:

R: They had the rosters down to 34-man rosters and I was basically a backup and they just felt like I was expendable, like some of us were. I felt like I could still play but I needed ... I wasn't gonna get many offers to get back in the NFL so I just said, "Okay. I'm retired."

I: Yeah. So was it hard to make that decision?

R: Um. Yes and no. It was one of those things where nobody was calling. (Kevin)

While Kevin initially frames this as a personal decision to retire, he follows that up by saying, "nobody was calling", implying that his "decision" may have been different if he had had any other options. More common amongst the rejection turning points were career-ending injuries, injuries that players were never able to fully recover from. This was the experience of Chris:

I: That second time you hurt your knee, do you think you pretty much knew at that point, "This is the end of my football career"?

R: When I reinjured it, the reality went through my mind. Even before I went to the outside doctor, I thought this might be it. Although I was still going to work as hard as I could to try to get back. But, I did get invited to a couple teams to come workout. And I had decent workouts to the point where they were wanting to give me a physical. And then I'd have that physical. Next thing you know, "Uh, OK. Well, we'll be in touch." But, they wouldn't tell you, "Oh, you failed that physical." (Chris)

Chris wished to keep playing, even felt like his performances at try-outs were satisfactory. However, as soon as team doctors realized the extent of his knee damage, no team would sign him. Though this rejection is not necessarily based on skill-level or ability, it is still a turning point that forces one's hand, rather than allows for a decision to be made.

The early exiters, explorers, and engrossed players tended to interpret their experiences leading up to role exit differently based on how much they self-identified with the role of football players and what kinds of capital they had accrued before and

during their football careers. Early exiters were much more likely to leave football of their own accord, whereas the engrossed players were more likely to be forced out through rejections.

## **Summary**

Though all professional football players must eventually exit that role, this process is highly variable and shaped largely by two intertwined factors: capital and identity. Players come into and leave football with varying levels of economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital. These resources play an important role in the way players think about themselves and their relationship with football. Players with higher caches of capital (early exiters, and to a lesser extent, explorers) have more resources at their disposal and thus more options for life after football. These players are more likely to disidentify with the athlete identity while still maintaining a professional football career. They are able to begin planning for the future, creating new reference groups, and start rehearsing for new roles because they have amassed skills and social connections that allow them to do so. These players have more agency over their exit from football because they interpret specific events or moments, such as injury or being cut, as turning points. These turning points are moments where they can take control over their career path, giving them a sense of power and maintaining their masculine identity.

Engrossed players, on the other hand, remain primarily identified with football until the very moment when they must exit their role. They tend to have shorter careers, giving them less time to develop social networks and cultural capital necessary for post-sport career development. They are less likely to have college degrees, a powerful form

of institutionalized cultural capital in the working world. They bring less capital into their football careers, more often than not coming from poor and working class backgrounds. Finally, they are less likely to have wives and children and thus do not have as many opportunities for alternative roles. Because these men are so engrossed in their football careers, they often do not reach career-ending turning points until they are out of options. In other words, they have much less agency in their exit from football and are more likely to be forced out through injury or rejection. This lack of control over one's personal and professional path is a difficult blow to the self-esteem and masculine identity of many retirees. As I will explore in my final substantive chapter, the timing of disidentification from football is a crucial factor in players' wellbeing in life after football.

## CHAPTER V

### LIFE IN THE VACUUM

The process of role exit, though variable for each individual, is shaped in large part by structural inequalities and the accumulation of capital. Those with the highest levels of capital, and thus the highest degree of agency in deciding when to leave, are more likely to disidentify with football before they actually disengage. This psychological detachment from the football identity opens these players up to a new role and allows them to begin accumulating new capital for life outside of sport. This is not to say, however, that role exit is easy for them. The majority of players go through what Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) calls *the vacuum*, a near universal aspect of role exit.

At the end of the transition period, when officially exiting the role of professional football player (either by force or by choice), the vast majority of retirees go through a liminal period where the “taken-for-granted anchors of social and self-identity are suspended for the individual, leaving him ... feeling rootless and anxious” (Fuchs Ebaugh 1988: 145). This experience of anomie is a result of living through an in-between moment, where the current expectations of both the old and the new roles are unclear. The vacuum stage of role exit gradually dissipates as an actor becomes more firmly ingrained in a new role. It is clear, then, that early exiters, those who disidentified with football and began preparing for a new role before they exited football, have a head start on getting out of the vacuum stage as compared to their engrossed peers who remained foreclosed on the athlete identity.

In this chapter, I examine how players experience the vacuum, focusing on the ways that players navigate both identification by others and self-identification in this

liminal, in-between life stage. I pay particular attention at the end of the chapter to the issue of depression. Depression was more acutely experienced by the engrossed players, those who foreclosed on an athlete identity and made no preparations for life after sport. These men had less capital both before and during football, and consequently, less choice about when and how they exited the football role. While going through the vacuum period is a nearly universal experience, the way retirees cope with this transition varies by their position in the status hierarchy and their options for developing new identities.

### **Living in the Vacuum**

The vacuum period immediately following role exit is fraught with issues of identity and belonging. Nearly all role exiters go through some stage of confusion and aimlessness. This was no different for professional football retirees. Even the early exiters, those who disidentified with football before actually leaving their roles as football players, reported feelings of being lost and unsure of both present and future.

Bart, who was leaving football to begin a career in education, said the following:

I think I felt a sense of loss, the sense of, however difficult and physically painful at times, I did something that was meaningful and that not too many people have the opportunity to do and I'm not going to be doing that again. (Bart)

For Bart, there existed a sense of loss, but he was firm in the understanding that this part of his life was over. Having this sense of a closed door (“I’m not going to be doing that again”) made the vacuum stage less ominous and confusing.

Of course, for the engrossed players, the sense of identity confusion and anomie was more intense. Both Percy and Ralph were engrossed players; neither had prepared for

the end of their football careers and both were pushed out without much choice. Their statements about their experience in the vacuum are quite profound:

You're in limbo. You're actually in spiritual and emotional and psychological limbo. And drifting around ... That was my identity, so when that was gone, I didn't know who I was and so I floundered around. (Percy)

And, here I am. You're done and you did it ... And that, for me, was the "Oh my God!" moment. I was lost. I truly was lost. I look back now and I think I went through some depression with it. Didn't think so at the time. I was just pissed off. I was just pissed off at everybody. (Ralph)

Both of these men express not just a sense of nostalgic loss of a beloved pastime (as expressed by Bart), but a feeling of *actually* being lost, of not knowing what to do or where to turn when their professional football careers ended. This is reflective of the class background of these men. For Bart, who came into football with greater social and cultural capital than Percy or Ralph, football was never his primary source of identity. He was able to be more detached from football upon exiting because this was not an identity he had foreclosed on. Bart, coming from a White middle class background, was one of a few players who mentioned that he didn't *need* football to go to college. College was part of his plan all along and his family actually paid his tuition during his first year as a walk-on at a private university. Both Percy and Ralph, on the other hand, came from working class families who viewed football (or athletics, more generally) as the ticket to social mobility. These class differences shaped the degree of athlete identity foreclosure individual players experienced, and consequently, the difficulty they had navigating the vacuum of role exit.

As professional football players leave this role and become retirees, they must figure out how to reconcile their past identities, ones that many were very attached to, with their new roles moving forward. This creates tension both from within and from

without. In the section that follows, I will describe the social tensions and tensions within individuals' self-concepts that make the creation of an ex-role so difficult.

### *Social Tensions*

Professional football players have a very public social identity. As discussed in previous chapters, the celebrity capital that comes along with a high status role has both positive and negative consequences. When a person is leaving this type of high profile role, they must deal with being constantly reminded by the public of who they used to be. In order to fully become an ex, actors must convince others to treat them as such. This is difficult enough with family, friends, and acquaintances. Getting the general public to forget one's public persona is nearly impossible (and as I will discuss later, not necessarily desirable either). Stryker (1980) argues that a person's sense of self is not merely a personal choice or internal process, but that it is largely social. Identity commitment and salience is shaped by both interactional and affective ties with others. In other words, we become most attached to the identities that connect us to other people. The interactional ties attached to the role of professional football player are many. Not only are players connected to a team and a league, but they are also connected, albeit tenuously, to a legion of fans who know them solely as a football player. It is these very ties that make the commitment to an athlete identity so strong for many men. Regardless of how retirees actually feel about this identity, it is such a huge part of their interactions with others that it ultimately shapes how they see themselves.

Football retirees' visibility comes from various sources. Some are well known in their communities for their football endeavors, particularly if they reside in the town

where they played high school, college, or professional football. Others are picked out by their size or physical appearance:

People, when they find that out about me [that he played professional football], they feel I can relate easier. They find out that I do. Alright, I mean, I don't come tootin' my horn about my past. Most of them end up finding out. Yeah. Because I'm a big man. And I got a booming voice. (Percy)

So, I don't talk about it, like, when I meet people that never comes up for me. Nah, that I even played football. People see me a lot and assume, "Did you used to play football?" or "Do you play football?" Because maybe my stature or my size. And, I go, "No, I don't play." Or maybe I'll say, "I used to." But, it's not a topic of conversation that I bring up. (Chris)

For men who are recognized as former athletes, these interactions with strangers may highlight the tensions that exist between their past role as football players and their current role as an ex. Chris responds to questions about his role as a football player with some caution. His denial of having a current career in football is accurate, but also clearly a deflection from actually having to engage with a stranger about playing professional football. There are a variety of reasons why retirees may not want to reveal their newly formed ex-role. As noted in earlier chapters, football players are often stereotyped as "dumb jocks". If players are attempting to move on and be taken seriously in careers outside of sport, they may wish to avoid this label. Further, as I will discuss below, the exit from professional football is often negatively stigmatized.

Football retirees must contend with not only the public, but also with family and friends. Because the exit from professional football is accompanied by a drop in economic and social status, it is viewed by many as an "undesirable exit" and comes with a particular social stigma that affects how others perceive them. One element of this stigma is failure. Even though every professional football player must one day retire, there still lingers a cloud of negative judgment around the exit from football. For these

players, it was not just the sheer number of interactional ties that shaped their commitment to the athlete identity, but also affective ties, those that carried some emotional meaning. While the sensation of being judged or stigmatized by fans was difficult for many, it was even harder to feel this judgment coming from loved ones.

Retirees talked about feeling as though they had let family and friends down by exiting their roles as professional football players. David, an engrossed player who was cut during training camp of his first season in the NFL, shares his feeling of shame about leaving football:

You're disappointed it's over and then you got to face everybody, too, and tell them what happened ... I would say it was hardest to come back, because when I came back I went to [town where he played college football] because we were living there at the time. So it was hard to see old teammates and coaches and, you know, stuff like that. Because you're gone and then, one day you're there. So like, "Hey, what's going on?" "I got cut." That was kind of hard. (David)

David's concerns about what valued others would think about his exit from the high status world of professional football actually materialized for other retirees. Russ, who left football to sell insurance, talks about his teammates' reactions to his off-season internship preparing him for life after football:

Some guys would poke a little fun at me about it because I'd get done with the off-season workout and throw a tie on. And I was selling \$200 life insurance policies and stuff like that. (Russ)

For both David and Russ, it was not simply being seen by others as a football player that made their transition out of this role difficult, but that people they cared about saw them in a different, and potentially less positive, light. In other words, the affective ties they had to football made it difficult to exit this role.

Other retirees shared that their wives were unhappy with their decisions to leave football. Louis and Roger, two retirees who left football with injuries and very little choice in their role exit, describe their wives' reactions to their decision to exit football:

I think at the time, my wife took it harder than I did. Because she didn't have the pain of her knee every night. She didn't have to go through rehab or be walking up the steps with one leg. And so I think, at the time, she probably took it harder than I did. It was kind of like more of a relief to me. (Roger)

When she met me, I was this star quarterback. She only knew me as a star quarterback. She didn't know me prior to that ... It was a real curve ball for her. It was tough. It was really tough and I don't think that she had the most confidence in my abilities to do whatever ... She comes from a broken home. Her dad's a jackass. And the dynamics between her and him not giving her the needed psychological sustenance, you know? And so, in my quest to go from football to real life, to try to bridge there, to get into and be successful, I was doing several different things and I was kinda like trying lots of things out. What she saw was how her dad was when he was a jackass to the family years ago. (Louis)

The stigma attached to leaving, or rather being pushed out of, football did not just shape relationships with friends and strangers, but even retirees' most intimate partnerships.

These affective ties connected retirees not only to a football identity, but to a masculine one as well. As Louis outlines in his description of his wife's reaction to his retirement, the role of football player was about more than sport. It also represented his role as provider, as "man of the house." When he exited this role, he lost the gender capital associated with both physical domination and financial stability.

Financial success was a huge part of the social identity imagined for professional football players. Retirees reported that many people expected them to be rich because they once played professional football, exacerbating the stigmatization of their exit from football. Russ describes this expectation:

I think one of the things that bothered me were other people's expectations of you with regards to what they thought you should be doing. "You got money. You ought to just retire and go off and do this." ... I think a lot of guys have a tough

time. They feel like they've gotta keep a certain image up or a certain whatever it is up because I think other people put that on them sometimes and they gotta live up to that. (Russ)

Russ's quote highlights the high expectations that people have for football retirees, a standard that many cannot live up to. It is worth noting that Russ was an early exiter, having started a career in insurance sales while playing professional football. For him, and other early exiters, the opportunities to remain financially stable after sport are more readily available than for explorers and engrossed players. In short, Russ is amongst the group who may have it easiest in this regard and still he feels the pressure to be more financially successful. The idea that all football players make millions of dollars and can kick back for the rest of their lives is a dangerous myth. It serves to not only put undue pressure on retired players to maintain a standard of living that may be out of their reach, but it also seems to have made the public rather indifferent to exiters' concerns about life after the game.

A number of players illustrated the consequences of the "rich football player" myth. Both Louis and Bryan talked in detail about the financial issues they faced upon leaving football and how their public identities as professional football retirees shaped the way others' understood their money troubles. After retirement, Louis had some failed investments that put him and his family into some financial trouble. When they returned to his college so he could be inducted into the local Hall of Fame, they were forced to stay in his sister's apartment because they could not afford to get a hotel room. While Louis was happy to be celebrated for his accomplishments, his wife was quite embarrassed at their loss of social status:

I got up and we were getting ready to go to the ceremony and I went in and my wife is in there. She's crying and angry. And she goes, "Aren't you embarrassed?" I said, "What do you mean?"... And right there, I realized how different we were and how differently we view things. She said, "I'm embarrassed. We had to stay at your sister's apartment, and our boys, and then we go and act as if nothing's wrong" (Louis)

Clearly, Louis's wife understands the expectations for her husband's finances as a former professional football player. She'd even internalized them to the point where she was not just angry with him or embarrassed for him, but also for herself. This was a threat to her identity as well.

Bryan had a similar experience with family internalizing the expectations for great wealth. After football, Bryan partnered with a family member in starting a construction company. Though he didn't have any experience in this business, he felt like he was in good hands with his partner. Unfortunately, his partner shared the same high expectations for Bryan's wealth that the rest of the general public believed. While building a house for Bryan, he allowed the project to balloon out of control. Bryan said the following:

He's such a perfectionist and he spent, that house would have ended up costing us probably 400 thousand. The house is at 1 million...So, he's looking at us like money grows on trees...I don't know if he took advantage of me, because he's so naïve. But other people took advantage of him, saying, "It's going to cost this much", knowing that he was building a house for [Bryan], who has all this money. "He's a pro football player." (Bryan)

These expectations from others continued to haunt Bryan. When the construction business floundered, he considered the possibility of filing for bankruptcy. He discusses this moment at length, focusing on the difficulties of putting aside his pride and seeking help:

A couple of times we had to go visit attorneys, like if we were going to file bankruptcy. And I walked into that office and the guy knows who you are. “Oh you’re [Bryan], the football player. You’re about to file bankruptcy?” ... So now you’re going, “Well, what does he think about me?” I’m a guy who’s out there spending money like crazy? I’m the guy that’s not responsible? I’m the guy that ignored all the warnings? ... I didn’t do that. That wasn’t me! (Bryan)

Bryan’s experience demonstrates the tensions between social identity and self-identity.

The way Brian imagined that other people saw him was *not* how he saw himself. As I will discuss later in this chapter, however, others’ expectations for Bryan did eventually merge into his own self-concept, causing him serious issues with anxiety.

The myriad interactional and affective ties connected to a football player identity make that identity more salient for individuals and thus, more difficult to abandon. The vacuum stage is a period of intense, but subtle, negotiations between retirees and others who refuse to see them as such. These social tensions magnify and complicate individuals’ internal tensions as they also negotiate a new identity within themselves.

### *Internal Tensions*

Managing the social expectations associated with one’s former role can be difficult for many retirees as they transition out of that role. However, internal identity conflicts may be even more difficult to maneuver as a person exits a role that was significant to his or her overall self-concept. The role of professional football player is a important one for all of these men, but varying levels of capital also shape identity commitment and ability to change.

As demonstrated in consideration of social identity, interactional and affective ties are important for understanding the identity commitment of professional football players. These ties do not just shape how they are seen by others, but also how they see

themselves. For many men, they have been playing football since they were young, for some, over half their lives. Russ, a retiree in his early 40s, calculated that he played on organized football teams for 26 years. Dan, an older retiree, figured out that he had been a football player for 15 years. At each step in their respective football journeys, they forged important ties that continue to connect them to the role of football player. Ralph, an engrossed player who grew up in a small town in the Southwest, describes the community's commitment to high school football:

In a small community, the people who, the town watching the varsity work out and all that. They're watching you and in this little town they know that [Ralph] is coming. He's coming up. "Wow! We can't wait. Watch for him." It's very interesting in this small little fish bowl how that is because everyone is so rabid about it. (Ralph)

For many of these retirees, their long time commitment to football created many ties, not just with coaches and teammates, but also with the public. Engrossed players relied on these ties more exclusively than both the explorers and early exiters because engrossed players brought less social capital into football with them. Football was, thus, a primary source of developing community ties and deep social networks. As these players moved into the highest levels of sport, they inevitably gained more notoriety and celebrity. This visibility also increased the number of interactional ties to the athlete identity, reinforcing their self-identity as athletes.

Adler and Adler (1989) argue that out of these interactions with the public grows the "gloried self" which they characterize as greedy, "seeking to ascend in importance and to cast aside other self-dimensions as it grows" (300). The gloried self is intoxicating and provides many symbolic rewards in the form of attention, respect and hero worship. This is what gives the "gloried self" such power; if it wasn't so intrinsically satisfying, it

would not maintain its place in the hierarchy of identities (Snyder 1985). It is no wonder that other identities are “cast aside” when we consider the affective ties that are connected to the gloried self.

Arnold, after his career in professional football, returned to his college to finish his degree and supplemented his income by acting as a Resident Advisor in the athlete dorm. Here he demonstrates the role that affective ties play in maintaining the gloried self:

Being around the guys, having the guys look up to you, ask you questions about professional football, what was it like... And there was a certain degree and amount of respect that went along with that, and the fact that, here I am, a professional athlete that played seven years, had monetary resources, but I'm going back to school, living in the dorm. (Arnold)

Arnold's statement clearly illustrates the emotional significance of the ties to professional football. He feels respected and heard based on what he can offer from his former role. However, this statement also illustrates the emotional importance that Arnold has assigned to his new role as a continuing student. He wants to be a role model to young athletes not just because he played professional football, but also because he is dedicated to completing his education and to mentorship. In short, Arnold has not foreclosed on the athlete identity and is open to new identity developments, keeping the gloried self at least somewhat in check.

Bart, a retiree who always placed his role as student higher than athlete in his identity hierarchy, demonstrates here that even if being a football player wasn't the most important role in his life, it came with its own kind of affective rewards:

College football was kind of a child's fantasy come true, a fairy tale come true. It was enormously important to me. My sense of achievement and satisfaction was enormous. As you know with sports, it's much more concrete, immediate, and

public than doing well as a student. (Bart)

Bart's quote highlights a couple of points about affective commitment here. First, his point that football success was more public than educational success demonstrates the link between interactional and affective ties. In other words, his role as football player, because it was a more public identity, created a greater number of *interactional* ties than his role as a student. But, it was not just the number of ties, it was also that there was something inherently satisfying to Bart about being *publicly* recognized for his successes, deepening his *affective* ties to the role. The number and emotional significance of his ties to a student identity could not compare.

Additionally, Bart's statement that this was a "child's fantasy come true" is especially relevant to understanding the internal tensions of role exit. Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) argues that when "an individual is attracted to a professional role at an early age and plans to enter a particular career for an extended period of time prior to beginning the training process...high expectations are formed and one becomes very idealistic concerning the role" (176). Many football retirees dreamed of making it to the professional ranks when they were children. Ralph describes his childhood dream of playing professional football:

So, [high school football] is a big community thing. So, when you're a little boy, you go to the varsity football games and "Wow!" Those guys, to you, are almost God-like. And so I always wanted to be, that was a big deal with me ... I was watching the [NFL team] because that's what you do in [home state], you watch the [NFL team], and I saw [NFL player]. It was Thanksgiving evening. They were playing at night and I saw him catch all these touchdown passes and all that. I was very little, very little and I was, "Wow!" The lights were on. They were in this stadium. It was all that and I was like, "Wow. This is just what I want to do." I was probably; I can barely remember it I was so young so and I said, "Oh man, I want to do that." And then I found out you get paid for it, not that that mattered at the time, but that was just what I wanted to do. (Ralph)

For Ralph, playing professional football was a dream he had since he was almost too young to remember. He grew up admiring both professional players and the older boys in his town. To him, they were all examples of what he knew he wanted to do someday.

Another retiree, Roger, who came to football a little later than Ralph, also knew at a young age (junior high) that he wanted to play professional football. And, Roger not only dreamed about it, he prepared for it:

I think it was my move from [West Coast state] to [Southwest state], saying, “I’m gonna be a professional athlete.” And then everything after that I kinda worked to become that. It’s one of those things where I made myself build my body up. I would go run on the highway while other guys were out at parties. You know, I always was doing something to become an athlete. You know, granted anybody can get injured or any, sometimes people are just not talented to do it. But, I always felt I was talented enough to do it. It just worked out that way. (Roger)

Roger’s story is a classic example of identity foreclosure. He identified himself as a football player before he had time to fully explore other passions or interests, and then dedicated himself fully to achieving this goal. This long-term commitment to a particular identity, the time and emotional energy invested, creates an affective bond to the role of football player that is difficult to let go of when football is over. Both Roger and Ralph were engrossed players, interactionally and affectively committed to their identities as professional football players to the deficit of other possible identities.

For many professional football retirees, the football identity became the most salient of their identities early in life. Many retirees described how school and other extracurricular activities took a backseat to their identities as athletes:

I was in drama a little bit after school. It didn’t last long because I was so, I got into sports that were so time-consuming. But I was a little bit into the drama world for a little while, which was fun. I was in a couple of plays and stuff that we did when I was younger... And so I always kinda had a passion to do that but again since I was playing sports, I was so busy with sports. Sports kept me very busy which was a good thing. It kept me off the streets. But I was so involved in

sports, I didn't have time to do anything. I mean, I was going from one sport to another constantly. If I wasn't doing sports I was doing homework. Back and forth. (Bryan)

My father was ... a missionary Baptist and so he when he would go on his mission trips, he would invite me to go along with him ... I went until I was 12, 13. And then I got older. I started getting into football. I couldn't go because we were having training camp during the summers and stuff. (Michael)

I was an average student, simply because I was so tuned in [to football]. That's no excuse but that is the truth. I mean, when I was in class, I'm always doing plays. I mean, I was obsessed with it ... I was in the weight room but I wasn't going crazy there. Looking back, I was throwing the ball literally six, seven hours a day. Literally. I was crazy. (Oscar)

Some of these men overcame early athlete identity foreclosure, eventually coming to terms with the idea that a football identity was by definition temporary. The consequences of athletic identity foreclosure in adulthood, however, were more serious. Percy, an engrossed player, talks here about how his identity as a football player trumped his role as husband and father:

It takes a toll on your family. Your family becomes secondary because you be chasing your dream ... Family takes a back burner. So, that's part of the neglect that ends up taking place.... Yeah, so I wasn't focused on a family. You know, it was just something you did. And I didn't look at the importance and necessities that are involved with raising a family. Having a wife and children. And you're operating out of your self-centered, selfish self. You're not thinking about anybody else ... I wasn't available. I wasn't available there for [my wife] emotionally, physically, financially. (Percy)

The football identity was so central to Percy's life that he neglected everything else in pursuit of his football dreams. For Percy, football became more than a career; it took over his entire identity.

When particular identities are invoked frequently enough, they may become "ossified," or durable over time. We may "*become* the person whom we have enacted" (Blumstein 2001: 298). We can see this in Percy's case and in the lives of some other

retirees. In fact, Percy says quite simply: “I didn’t know who I was. I was football.” Other retirees express this “ossified” identity by discussing the ways that they continued to view themselves as football players in their lives after football. Here Ralph talks about being a football player in the business world. One thing he highlights here is how the rhythms of his new life mirrored those of his life as a professional football player: work and make some money for a few months (in-season) and then go and “play”, or vacation, for a few months (off-season):

The interesting thing about starting this business and doing what I was doing is, in a different way, it enabled me to be a football player still. The mentality and the lifestyle, because it was just me at first and I would go out and I'd sell a job and I'd go do it. I'd get paid. I'd make this money. And then I'd go play. I'd go to the Caribbean again. I was still a football player in my mind. "It's the off-season I can still go." I'd go and I'd sell a job and I'd install it and I'd do it and I'd make this money and I'd go do something else. And then I needed another job so I'd go out, sell another one, get some money and I'd go play again. And so it's interesting that I still got to be that football player in a way. (Ralph)

As has been described above, the ossification of football identity had many negative consequences for retirees. For many of the engrossed players, losing the role of professional football player also meant a loss of self for example. However, we can see from Ralph’s statement above that some retirees were able to maintain this identity in life after football and still have positive experiences with creating an ex-role. I will discuss this at greater length in the chapter that follows.

The variety of ties that connected retirees to the role of professional football player not only affected their interactions with others, but also their internal self-concepts. The gloried self, while generally destructive to alternative identity development, provides many symbolic benefits that reinforce athletes’ commitment to that identity. For some, this commitment led to identity foreclosure in youth. For others,

this foreclosure extended to their life during and after football, making the vacuum experience especially confusing. In the section that follows, I will explore the consequences of identity foreclosure, ossification, and transition on retirees' mental health.

### **Disidentification and Depression**

While living in the vacuum, the experience of depression was quite common for professional football retirees. However, it was most prevalent amongst retirees in the engrossed group, the players who did not disidentify with football prior to role exit. This group had lower stores of various types of capital and the least amount of agency surrounding their exit from football. In this section, I will focus on the psychological tensions that result when players exit their role as football players while still being very much attached to the identity that corresponded to that role.

Retirees' experiences of depression were not uniform, even within the engrossed group. There was considerable variation in duration and severity of depression. One retiree, Percy, reported struggling with depression, along with alcohol and drug addiction, for ten years after his retirement from football. Another, Martin, was basically bedridden with crippling depression for about 8 months. Others said it was a passing phase, lasting only a few weeks or months following retirement or being cut from a team. Roger argued that it was simply part of any major life transition:

Anytime that you've done, if there's something you've done all your life and then you stop doing it, I think there's going to be a time of depression. You might not even know it's depression. But there's definitely going to be a time of transition.  
(Roger)

Roger's point that people may not even know they are experiencing depression is a telling one, especially for this particular population. While it tended to be members of the engrossed group who reported feeling depressed in life after football, it's certainly possible that retirees as a whole underreported their experiences with depression. This may be a lack of recognition; it may also be indicative of the success that early exiters and explorers had in life after football. Engrossed players, compared to their peers, were more likely to have working class or lower middle class jobs (i.e. social worker, registered nurse, assistant pastor) upon exiting football. For these men, whose post-football careers never came close to living up to the prestige and salary of professional football, it may have been easier to identify and recall the difficulties they had with role exit. For players who eventually moved on to prestigious and successful careers outside of football, the experience of depression may not hold as much meaning for them. In other words, the recollection of depression may vary by one's position in the social hierarchy.

Depression, for many retirees, was a result of being unable to enact the role expectations of a football player in life after sport. For retirees who still identified with that role, it is easy to see how the gap between expectation and reality could lead to feelings of loss, disappointment, bitterness, anger, and eventually, depression. The expectation of being powerful and in control was one that led to a lot of grief for retirees. Losing this power and control was not just a loss of the football identity; it also constituted a loss of gender capital. The same traits that men had internalized as part of their identity as football players are the idealized qualities of hegemonic masculinity.

Thus, the role exit from football for those with little capital or preparation for life after sport was a dual loss: of both a career and gender capital.

Related to this loss of gender capital is anxiety about two distinctly masculine concerns: the ability to financially provide for one's family and the ability to control one's body. This is not to say that women do not care about being providers or having bodily integrity, but rather that these concerns are directly related to the values of independence, domination and control, all hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity. Retirees expressed their depression and financial anxieties as a fear of not being able to take care of their families. Larry expressed both fear and bitterness about the way his career ended when he said the following:

It really wasn't depression issues about the money, it was (pause). Well, I take it back. It was about "Why did I make \$100,000 last year and now I'm making \$12,000?" But, because I knew I was going to marry my wife, it was "How do I long-term take care of her given that I'm not going to get diddly-squat from the NFL?" That was more the issue. (Larry)

Because Larry was an engrossed player, he did not have a career waiting for him upon his exit from football. After being unceremoniously ousted from professional football following a career-ending injury, he was anxious about adapting to a drastically lowered income and what the long-term consequences of that huge step down the pay scale would mean for him *as a provider*. It was not merely the loss of income that troubled Larry, but how that loss of income would shape his relationship with his wife.

Bryan, who was eventually able to adapt his football identity into a career operating sports camps, initially shared Larry's fears about providing for his family. Before Bryan found his calling as a sport camp director, he worked with a family member at a construction company they started. Bryan, an explorer, had no experience with

construction and began this career as a silent partner, providing the financial backing while he was still playing professional football. This was the only occupation or job outside of sport that Bryan ever held. When he retired from football and went to work for the construction company full-time, he realized how little he knew about the business he had pumped so much money into. Though Bryan had a back-up career for after football, it was not a back-up identity. His lack of expertise or interest in the construction field (or anything outside of sport) and the business's lack of success sent Bryan into a spiral of depression and anxiety. He began to avoid work:

I put my heart in and I worked on the business too, trying to make it. And it was always a battle. I'd get up and go to work and try to do it. Five days a week. Getting up, going over there. As time started to go on and things [weren't] where I want it to be, what happened was, I'd get up and go, "You know what? I'm not going into the office." I'd go to the gym instead. (Bryan)

When the business eventually failed, Bryan began having panic attacks:

I hated going to work. I couldn't stand it. But I didn't, I didn't go into depression. I panicked. I was panicking. My heart a couple times, I'm driving down the freeway, I'm going, "What's wrong with my heart?" I go into the doctor, she goes "You got anxiety." And I went in, got tested and all that. Like, "Dang!" (Bryan)

When I asked Bryan what he was panicked about, he said the following:

Panic about taking care of my family. Panicking about not having the funds to make sure my family, my kids don't know the difference of how they're living today ... the embarrassment of people knowing that I didn't make it or what have you. It was just take care of my family. I didn't want my kids to have to say, "We can't send you to this private school because we can't afford it. So we gotta move to another school." I wasn't gonna report that we had to sell our home because we can't afford our home. We gotta live in this little bitty home. I panicked because I didn't want my kids to see change. That's where I panic. I didn't want my kids to see me sitting in on the couch going, "What's going on?" You know, looking at bills. Me and my wife, we're getting these calls from these creditors, from the business, "You owe us." And our hearts are just, and we look at each other going, like, okay, panic and then also, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do? I gotta do something about this." (Bryan)

Though Bryan didn't identify his struggles as depression, it was clear that his mental health status upon leaving football and attempting to negotiate a new role as a businessman was less than ideal. The tensions that he experienced between his past, present, and future identities are palpable. His disillusionment with his new career, combined with his crippling fears about the future, led to feelings of shame and embarrassment, as well as physical consequences in the form of panic attacks. After making a good living playing professional football, the feeling of financial insecurity was both foreign and scary for Bryan.

Another adjustment that football retirees had to make was in regards to their bodies. For years, these men had been in peak physical condition. Bodies were the primary tools of the trade – not just for enacting the role of football player, but also for performing manhood acts that affirmed their position in the gender hierarchy. For those who suffered major injuries (and even for those experiencing the multiplicative effects of many minor injuries), the lingering effects left some retirees feeling that their bodies, which they had always had such precise control over, had betrayed them. For both Ralph and Martin, being uncomfortable in their own bodies was a major part of their experience of depression:

Like I said, that was a lost feeling ... I was so miserable inside my own body because I was just unhappy. I was lost. I was unhappy. I was lost, didn't know what to do. And my body was betraying me, you know, which 'cause I beat it to death! I had already betrayed it and it's paying me back. So it's just, that was it. That's the biggest thing I tell you. The defining moment is, "What do you want to do with the rest of your life?" I've already done it. (Ralph)

And then I collapsed, and I was totally depressed. I'd lost my will to live. My back was killing me. I was a mess. And I got cancer. Testicular cancer. I wanted to die. Part of me wanted to die. And so, I ended up losing everything. The marriage fell apart. I lost the boat. I lost the houses. (Martin)

For both of these men, the body's collapse was only one part of the identity tensions they experienced upon leaving football. This loss of bodily control and mastery, though, was symbolic of loss of control in general and loss of masculinity, more specifically. I will discuss retirees' experiences of embodiment at greater length in a later section

Loss was another common theme marking retirees' experiences of depression. This included not just a loss of power and control but also a loss of friends, fans, and physical outlet. A number of men used the term "void" when talking about the space that football once took up in their lives, demonstrating the power of the interactional ties that bound retirees to their identities as football players. For some, this void was the loss of competition, something that many retirees mentioned as being hard to replicate in life outside of football:

I dealt with the depression part. I think most of that is just feeling the void of those competitive juices that you had. It's no longer there, so where's the outlet?  
(Cameron)

For others, it was the loss of adoration and public recognition. Percy describes this below:

It was a big void. The crowd, you could still hear them in the echoes of your own fanatical mind. It's gone. The crowd is gone. And that's how you thrived. That's what your jones was off of, was all about, you know, your catharsis. Anyhow, it's gone. So, here you are with this empty, hollow sound. And you gotta fill it with something. So the drugs, the alcohol, you start abusing these things and life falls. Life takes a negative spiral. And then it's hard getting back off that old merry-go-round. That old destructive merry-go-round. (Percy)

For Percy, the solution to filling the void was drugs and alcohol. For others, it was work.

For others still, it was family. This void was especially painful for the engrossed players who had given the football identity such salience in their internalized self-concept.

A symptom of the loss experienced by football retirees was an obsessive looking back, wondering what they could have done differently to make their football careers last

longer or bear more fruit. This constant question of what might have been is illustrative of the psychological tensions between past, present, and future. Retirees who spent all their time looking back became stuck, unable to move forward. David demonstrates great self-awareness when he recognizes how damaging asking “what if?” can be:

I can't say I swung into any deep depressions. There would be moments of disappointment. I thought of what could have been if, you know, this would have been different, that would have been different. But you know, the what-ifs and the could-haves are the cancer of life, so you don't want to dwell on that ... You always wonder, you know, if I would have had a good senior year, if I would this or that. But you know, you could waste your life away doing that, so I - for a while there it was hard, but life goes on. (David)

Looking back was much more common amongst engrossed players because they didn't have something immediately to look forward to. The vacuum consumed them as they attempted to connect past to present.

While much of the depression that came with leaving football was a result of *not* meeting the expectations retirees had for themselves as professional football players (and ultimately, as men), Martin argues that his depression was actually a result of internalizing and enacting these norms *too* well. He explains that the violent, negative self-talk he learned through a lifetime of playing football and being socialized as a man was hurting his mental health:

And I was, like, not happy, because I was denying my spirit. I saw that to survive I needed to really own my own story and really look closely at who I was and how I was treating other people and how I was treating myself, how I would talk to myself. What I saw was that the violence of football that I had learned to motivate myself, that “You're never good enough. Come on, work harder. No pain, no gain.” That was how I was still talking to myself. And I was exhausted. I was exhausted, and I was never good enough. I was telling myself every morning, I was not good enough. “I'm not working fast enough. I'm not doing things beautifully enough. I'm not enough.” And so I was like, “Wow, let's check that out.” Yeah. It saved my life. You know? Otherwise I would have, I seriously considered suicide. You know, I went to see the doctors and said, “Look, I'm

considering suicide. I need help. Give me drugs." It didn't help. (Martin)

Martin's story represents the extreme end of the depression spectrum, as well as a unique perspective on the root of depression as it relates to identity. Martin believed that it was *not* his inability to enact the role of football player in his new life that caused him pain, but rather the over-internalization of norms he learned in football. Even in Martin's case, however, we can view depression as a disconnect between past and present identities and roles. For Martin and the others, the experience of maintaining a football identity after exiting the football role was a source of much pain.

### **Summary**

All retirees reported some level of disorientation following their exit from professional football. This disorientation came from making sense of their new position in society while interacting with others and within themselves. A common experience for retirees arose from the celebrity capital that all professional football players accumulate. Many retirees talked about how they were recognized as (or assumed to be) football players and thus, had to deal with others' role expectations of them –whether family and friends or complete strangers. For many, the most difficult part of these interactions was coming face-to-face with their own loss of status. Retiring from professional football meant not only giving up the economic capital that came along with a salary, but also the prestige and legitimacy afforded to professional athletes.

In addition to working through others' expectations, retirees also had to deal with their own internal self-concepts. For many players, the football identity was a prominent one. Engrossed players, in particular, were faced with a difficult psychological transition

as they tended to have the strongest interactional and affective ties to the football identity. Because football had been their primary avenue for social mobility and remained their primary source of identity, these men had invested a great deal of time and emotional energy in their roles as football players and had spent less time making these connections in other fields. This was not merely a matter of individual choice, but a result of limited resources and opportunities to explore outside of football.

For many retirees, the consequence of this difficult internal shift was a period of depression upon retirement. For engrossed players, especially those who had foreclosed on an athlete identity, the experience of depression was most prevalent. This resulted not only from the loss of a sense of self, but also in response to a loss of gender capital. As these men, once both physically dominant and in control of themselves and others, found themselves in a position without control, anxieties about their careers, their finances, and their bodies all rose to the surface. Everything they had internalized about what it meant to be a man was threatened during this period of anomie and identity confusion. The vacuum was a terrifying place for many men. Some didn't come out of it for decades while others moved through rather quickly. In the chapter that follows, I examine retirees' experiences after the vacuum, as they begin to reestablish a sense of self within the ex-role.

## CHAPTER VI

### LIFE AFTER FOOTBALL

For many retirees, the role residual from their days of playing football caused quite a bit of pain, doubt, and anxiety about the future. However, once players had moved through the vacuum stage and embraced their lives outside of sport, this “hangover identity” was used to create a new identity: the ex-football player. For many, the ex-role functioned as a source of empowerment, pride, and social mobility. Some men capitalized on the unique identity of being a *former* professional football player, bringing the capital they had accrued during their playing days to a life outside of sport.

Retirees who identified as former football players fall into what Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) calls an ex-role, where the new identity “incorporates vestiges and residuals of the previous role” (4). This ex-role is distinct from those who have never played football and also from those who continue to identify as football players. It takes into account the previous role, while moving on to something new. All of the men I spoke with ultimately created an ex-role. For some, it took years; for others, hardly any time at all. However, even those who were most committed to the athlete identity eventually began to see themselves as exes.

In this chapter, I focus on the “hangover identity” that professional football retirees bring with them from their previous role as professional football players. I examine how retirees utilized this identity as they navigate new social fields. Many retirees were able to draw upon the ex-role as a means of creating or increasing various forms of capital. However, they did this in distinct ways. Players in the engrossed group were more likely to use the ex-role in more strategic or direct ways, while the early

exiters drew on the ex-role more subtly. In other words, the retirees who did not disidentify with football during their careers were also more likely to reference these careers in life after sport. Even though all the players I interviewed eventually moved beyond their foreclosed identities as athletes, this identity still remained very salient for them.

In addition to considering how the ex-role is beneficial for many retirees, I also consider the difficulties of actually embodying this role. Nearly all of my respondents dealt with pain on a daily basis as a result of their roles as ex-football players. Finally, I will consider the ways in which the ex-role coincides with, supports, or challenges other important identities.

### **Overt Ex-Role Deployment**

Some retirees used their role as ex-football players in very strategic ways, highlighting their former identities through overt references to football. These retirees tended to be those who had the highest level of commitment to the athlete identity, especially those who had developed an athletic identity at the expense of any other identity development. In highlighting their past as professional football players, these men used the resources they had, mainly capital accrued *during* football, to generate new stores of capital in their lives after sport. Because these retirees were less likely to have access to valued forms of social, cultural, and symbolic capital outside of sport, they were more apt to use those material and symbolic resources gained through an athletic career.

The most obvious example of this was retirees who translated their celebrity capital directly into economic gain by attending autograph shows, public speaking engagements, and writing books about their experiences:

[Midwestern city] is just a big sports town, and there's absolutely nothing like that down here in [Southern city]. I've been up there a couple of times this year. The twenty-year reunion [of their Super Bowl victory], I was probably up there eight or nine times just for autograph shows. I made enough money ... to buy a really nice bike when I got done. (Allen)

They had this guy come to speak, man and he was the worst. I mean, it was random. It was some sorry jokes and I thought, "And you don't even have much of a message." But because he was the name, they paid him \$10,000 to come and speak for 20 minutes and I thought, "I could do that!" I could give that speech ten times better than him! But anyway, I do that occasionally, to help supplement my income. And I go right along with it. They want me to come tell football stories or whatever, I got a bunch of them to tell and I have a fun time doing it. (Michael)

These men were able to translate their celebrity capital from football directly into moneymaking ventures. While none of these men supported themselves solely on the income generated from direct sale of the ex-role, it did provide some economic capital. Perhaps more importantly, participating in these events and being publicly recognized filled the void of public adoration that many retirees missed. Retirees who were able to let go of the expectations of the former role and embrace the ex-role could use these moments for both psychological sustenance and economic gain.

It was not just small-potatoes side jobs where retirees were able to deploy the former football player identity. Many retirees actively used their ex-role in building careers after sport. Name recognition and important social networks provided a vehicle for retirees in both getting into and furthering careers. It was not celebrity capital alone that kick-started retirees' careers; they were also able to draw on important social capital

gained directly through playing football. Here both Frank and Kevin share how old teammates and coaches helped them to forge new career paths:

I got fired [from coaching]. So my transition was three years after I finished playing. So one of the coaches on the staff liked me. He had a friend that was president of a division of a public health company out of [Southern city]. Went down and interviewed with them and they offered me a position to help manage a company-owned dealer. (Frank)

I: How did you get the job in sales? Was it someone you knew or how did that ...?

R: Yeah. It was a friend that I knew when I was playing ball and he just said, "You do a good job with that, so I'm sure you can come work with me." (Kevin)

Social capital, particularly bridging capital, is increasingly important for individuals with low levels of cultural or symbolic capital. For these men, the networks associated with their past identity as football player were instrumental in facilitating social mobility and economic security.

While social capital played a big role in helping players get started with a new career, celebrity capital and cultural capital often provided an extra boost. Many retirees talk about the ways that the celebrity capital attached to their ex-role helped to “fast-forward” their new careers or to get their “foot in the door” with new clients or customers. Some retirees were able to rely on name recognition alone, while others turned to objectified cultural capital, or valued cultural goods. Both Allen and Nolan marked their identities as former football players more overtly, using Super Bowl rings and football memorabilia to highlight the ex-role. They relied on these cultural goods to mark them as valuable or worthy:

I: Do you feel like your career as a professional football player opened doors for you after football?

R: Yeah. Yeah, without a doubt. I mean, to be honest, the rings help. When I go to interviews, go through the interview process to getting jobs, I'm always wearing them. Particularly here in [Southern city], I mean having the [city's]

fans, it doesn't hurt. (Allen)

I saw first-hand the power of the Super Bowl rings during my interview with Allen. Allen and I met at a restaurant for the interview. He was wearing two Super Bowl rings, which were very large and jewel-encrusted. Midway through our interview, our server did away with pleasantries and blurted out, “Everyone wants to know who you are and who you played for.” Apparently, for about an hour, the restaurant staff had been abuzz with the news that a professional football player was there and were all trying to figure out who he was. Allen very graciously explained who he was and even let our server try on one of the rings. Both celebrity and objectified cultural capital are at work here. Allen’s celebrity is not based individual recognition or notoriety, but is attached to the cultural goods he lays claim to.

Nolan, who worked in commercial real estate, also marked his former football player identity with objectified cultural capital, hanging old jerseys and magazine clippings on the walls of his office. Nolan argued that the cultural goods linking him to an ex-role created opportunities by starting conversations:

I: Do you feel like your football career did sorta open doors at times?

R: Oh yeah, of course it does. I mean, like I got stuff on the wall. I got stuff over here and of course, that opens doors. And you can just talk about football. It's an easy conversation. It's a great icebreaker. (Nolan)

For these men, signifying football status through imagery such as championship rings and photos hung on office walls was part of the cultural capital necessary for cashing in on celebrity capital. In the words of Louis, it would have been “stupid” not to do this:

I: Did they [clients] know that you were a former quarterback?

R: Oh, they all knew that, yeah. Because we marketed that sometimes. To open doors, you know? And I know how to utilize that. I don't prostitute it, but I don't run away from it. I've gotta make it pay and monetize this somehow. If I don't, I'm

stupid. (Louis)

This overt marking of a football ex-role through the use of objectified cultural capital was a way for celebrity capital to be activated and for players to be seen as worthy job candidates or business operators.

For most retirees, the identity of former football player played some role in transitioning into a successful career after football. However, most did not rely on this ex-role alone in forging a new path. The players who were early exiters and explorers, those who began the process of disidentification with football during their professional careers, were often busily working away on creating new identities. For these men in particular, it was clear that the ex-role was only part of their success in life after football. They worked hard to cultivate skills and gain expertise in something outside of sport and developed these new identities alongside of the former football player identity. For example, Will's career as a journalist was initially based directly on his identity of football player.

However, as he grew and developed, this identity took on a life of its own:

I think that being a [professional football player] put my journalism career on steroids. I think that this is the path that I was going to take anyway. I love doing it, but I was writing a column for the [local newspaper] at age 23. Without the NFL, maybe I would have been doing that at 33, or 43. But because of the NFL, I'm doing it at 23. At 24, I'm hosting two TV shows for [TV channel], you know, I had that opportunity because of the [professional football team]. And, you know, there's nothing that I've done so far that I would say couldn't have happened without my NFL career, but it certainly gave more opportunities to do more things and faster opportunities than I would have had otherwise. (Will)

It's like anything that will open a door for you. It will open a door for you, but it won't keep you there. OK? Absolutely, I think that football is something that America loves. And has it opened doors for me? Absolutely, it has opened doors for me. But if I fit the stereotype of the typical jock, I wouldn't be where I am today. (Arnold)

Both Will and Arnold acknowledge the role the football played in the formation of post-football careers. However, they also subtly identify themselves as something more than former football players. Will mentions twice in this quote that he knew he would have a career in journalism, regardless of whether or not he played football. Arnold points out that he is not a stereotypical jock, illustrating the point that he did not rely solely on football to achieve career success in life after sport.

In my conversations with both Will and Arnold, they expressed a desire to be seen as something more than just an athlete. That comes across subtly in the above quotes, but was expressed more directly at different points in the interview. A handful of other retirees also both subtly and directly expressed this wish. What was interesting about this group was that it was made up of predominately African American retirees and was stated most directly by those with advanced degrees.

These retirees talked about being “pigeon-holed” in their lives after football, with co-workers and bosses in new careers believing that their only expertise was in the realm of sport. Will told me about wanting to move from writing about football into writing about local governance. When he approached the bosses about making this change, “They were like, ‘Ooooh, no, I don’t think so. This is how people identify you.’” (Will) He went on to talk about the ways he tried to distance himself from football and football players:

I think that I take a lot of pride in being smart. And you know, like, I hate to admit it to myself sometimes, but I'm egotistical. Like, that I want to prove that I'm smart all the time, you know, in different situations. And so, I think that was a big part of not wanting to be identified as a football player. Like, I'm not one of them, you know. That's not who I am. (Will)

While Will worked to create a metaphorical distance from football (and other football players), another retiree, Michael, discussed creating a literal distance from football by taking time away from sport in order to establish credibility in a different realm:

I wanted to get so far away from football when I first left the game. I didn't watch any football. I didn't want to be around it... And people just never understood that. I hated it. And so, I got away from it. And tried to re-invent some things in my life... I think I just wanted to establish credibility as being a professional outside of what I spent 22 years doing. That's a long time, 22 years of playing football and being a certain way and then being seen by other people as that. (Michael)

Arnold, who was close to finishing a doctoral program at the time of our interview, said the following:

Football, for me, was never the end-all, be-all ... Another reason why I wanted to ... go back to grad school was I didn't ever want to walk into a job interview and someone see me as only a football player. OK? When they looked at my resume and they saw that I played football, but I had an engineering degree, had a master's degree, and was pursuing a Ph.D., they didn't know how to approach me. Because it was, you know, that wasn't your typical professional football athlete's resume. (Arnold)

The retirees who spoke most directly about their desire to be seen as three-dimensional human beings are the same ones who were doubly affected by the “dumb jock” stereotype in high school and college, being both Black and athletes. Their clearly articulated desire to be “more than a football player” speaks to the self-awareness they had about the stereotypes associated with their race and the motivation to disprove them. Further, these men had marketable skills and intelligence that extended beyond football. It is only natural that they would want to be recognized for that. The question, then, is why weren't intelligent and highly skilled White men also clamoring to be seen as something more than a football player? This stems from the privilege that White men experience of not being flattened into two-dimensional caricatures. Even those White

players saddled with the “dumb jock” label could hide or deny this part of their identity if necessary. White men don’t have to worry about being seen as more than a football player in the same way that their peers of color do.

The relationship of these highly educated Black men to the ex-role they occupy as former football players speaks to, but does not necessarily confirm, Steele and Aronson’s (1995) stereotype threat theory. This theory posits that knowing the stereotypes about one’s group increases pressure to disprove these stereotypes. This additional pressure, in turn, works *against* the goal of disproving stereotypes and negatively affects performance. In other words, if a Black student knows that she is seen as less intelligent, the added pressure of proving this stereotype wrong may actually lead to lower test scores. Eventually, in order to avoid this undue pressure, individuals may simply disidentify with the stereotyped identity. For example, Black students may cease to think of themselves as academically oriented and focus on developing other parts of their self-concept. Parts of this theory certainly ring true in the case of professional football retirees; however, instead of rejecting the identity negatively affected by stereotypes (journalist, engineer, scholar, etc.) these men chose to instead reject the socially expected identity (athlete). Rather than internalizing the stereotypes about their abilities, they have externalized them. In other words, they have anticipated that others will evaluate them based on stereotypes surrounding Black athletes and done their best to minimize the impact of these stereotypes by disassociating with them.

These men stand as an interesting juxtaposition to those who strategically play up their identities as former football players. The ability to be seen as both a former jock and as a professional outside of sport is a *privilege* not afforded to men with low levels of

symbolic capital. In fact, many of the retirees who chose to highlight their ex-role were able to use this to enhance their new professional identities, rather than detract from them, as many Black retirees feared would happen. The ability to overtly play up the identity of former football player as a way of generating business or opening doors was not reserved for White players alone, but may have been psychologically easier for them to do and was a path to accruing more capital.

The overt deployment of a football player ex-role was not exclusively reserved for engrossed players, but was certainly utilized more often by those who were more committed to the athlete identity and had fewer alternative forms of capital. For the men who were most attached to the role of football player during their playing days, we see a continuation of this identity commitment in the ways that they conceptualized and enacted their ex-roles. Those who had more capital and spent more time developing identities outside of sport were able to use their ex-roles in less direct ways.

### **Indirect Ex-Role Functions**

While some men overtly deployed a former football identity, others enacted this ex-role more indirectly without calling specific attention to their previous roles. One area where the ex-role was especially salient was for retirees who pursued post-football careers in sport. These men were able to translate the cultural capital they gained from professional football into careers in coaching, sports media, athletic administration, and even sport-related reality television. Rather than drawing on celebrity capital or cultural goods, these men translated the specialized skills and institutional knowledge (or embodied cultural capital) into new careers in sport.

Oscar was a player who wore many hats. At the end of his professional football career, he was simultaneously playing, coaching, and overseeing the Canadian Football League. Oscar was able to use that experience and the networks he created through football to get into coaching full-time when he retired from playing football:

I knew wanted to get into coaching and do stuff. So, I thought the more I get out there, the more I meet people, networking, networking, networking, I've done a great job of networking in [Eastern Canadian city]. I've done a great job in [Midwestern city]. I know all the coaches up in Canada because I ran the Canadian draft. So, when we do the draft all the coaches are there so I've met them all. (Oscar)

Other retirees went into broadcasting after their playing days were over. Chris dabbled in both television and radio, arguing that had he not had the experience of being a former football player, he would have never gotten these positions:

One of the things that I did for several years, I did a postgame television show for the [university in the Northwest] ... and I did, I had an opportunity to do some radio talk for a few years. This was on the side of what I did primarily. But, obviously, had I not been me, I would have never had those opportunities. (Chris)

This was not Chris's passion, nor his primary career. But, because of his cultural capital, he was afforded the opportunity to try out a new role. In neither of the examples described above did the retiree have to go out of his way to mark himself as an ex. For both of them, the continuation of a sports career, though in a new form, was a natural outgrowth of their identities as former football players. In addition to post-football careers in coaching and media, I also interviewed four retirees who had at one time in their post-football lives worked in athletic administration, two who had operated sports camps, one who had worked as chaplain for a college football team, one who had owned and operated a sporting goods store, and another who had created a reality television show about football. All of these jobs were facilitated by, though not wholly dependent

upon, retirees' identities as former football players and the cultural capital they generated therein.

Michael, mentioned previously as one of the Black retirees who wished to be seen as more than an athlete, eventually settled into a career as a university athletic director. After taking some time away from football, he eventually realized that his ex-role put him in a unique and advantageous position in the world of sports:

I started seeing that other people looked at me for all the experience I had at football and saw me as the expert of football...Because a lot of people put me in that role, that's how I've accepted it. I've sort of embraced it. It is what it is. And, I think I've done enough in my career out of football to feel confident that I'm not just a former athlete. (Michael)

Again, rather than focus on the ex-role as a primary part of his identity, Michael used his expertise, as well as others' perceptions of him, to create a new identity.

The cultural capital that retirees brought to careers after sport was not just specialized skills and insider knowledge about the inner workings of the institution. Many men talked about the values and traits they learned and cultivated during careers in professional football and how they were able to translate these into success in new careers. One of the most important traits mentioned by retirees was competitive drive. Many mentioned that this was one thing they missed greatly about football, but were able to incorporate into careers outside of sport:

I think competition, that's what drives me. You know, when we took [small business owned with a partner] from one level to the next level, I made off with millions. When we first started, it was like a joke. Then when we sold it, when he sold it, we competed. We out-competed other companies and so that's what really drives me is the competition of business. That's where I get to legally exercise those, that competitive spirit. And then in marketing, get creative. And on the football field, you gotta get creative to get the ball into the end zone. There's no difference. (Louis)

Raising money is all about relationships, but there's a sense at the end of the day that we can tally up if you won or lost. You know what I mean? And at the end of the year, believe me, they tally up whether you won or lost! To figure out if they're gonna keep you. If you're not raising money, you're not doing much as fundraiser. So, I think that competitiveness is something. (Chris)

Both Louis and Chris were able to apply aspects of role residual from their former football player identities in a way that did not just integrate new and old identities but actually enhanced their new identities in the business world.

Teamwork, leadership, and self-motivation were other important values that retirees called upon to create a positive work environment in life after football:

I don't miss the fans. I don't miss the glory. I don't miss anything other than I miss my friends. I miss the camaraderie of, you know, it's just those are your boys, you know? That's your squad right there and you just go to battle with those guys. You love 'em. You grow to love. You win or lose and it creates a bond that's hard to duplicate out here in life. Knowing that somebody's got your back and you've got their back. You go, you win and lose together as I said. You take heat together. You celebrate together. Out here in regular life, you just, in the athletic department, you got people who never played on team sports before. They don't know how to be a team player so everybody's grabbing for their own, doing what's good for them and that's really frustrating and so I always said that if I became the head of a department somewhere that I would try to do my very best to create a team atmosphere where we would weed out those individuals who don't understand how to be a team player. And then teach those people who are willing to become and learn how to be a team, to have programs in place that teach them teamwork. (Michael)

Middle linebacker's like a quarterback. You gotta be the guy. If you're not the guy, it shows. You gotta be that guy. It's the same thing today. In this company, I gotta be the guy. I am the guy. You know? I'm the figurehead, but I'm the dominant person in the company and I have an effect on everything, just like I did out there. And when I finally got my head right about this business that I told you, I'm a planner. I'm going to attack it this way. I'm going to do this. My goal, it's the same thing as I was when I was a linebacker. I'm going to go out and I'm going to kick everybody's ass in my way. I'm going to take no prisoners and all that. In our niche, I became the largest in the country ... I slayed 'em out there because I was meticulous. I planned. I worked very hard. I out-worked everybody and all that and that transformed into it. (Ralph)

All of these men took something that they enjoyed from their lives in professional football and brought it with them to create higher levels of satisfaction and success in their lives outside of football. Ted, a commercial real estate developer, summed up this re-creation of the positive aspects of football by describing how, in his new life, he experienced many of the positive aspects that came along with football without many of the less desirable features:

I would say, to me, the best things that happen when you're in the NFL are the feelings of accomplishment, of doing your job well, and being part of a winning experience. And having the organization win. So that didn't happen every Sunday, you know? So some of it was good. Some of it wasn't good. And so, I think if you miss anything, in terms of what I missed, was being part of that kind of a winning environment from time to time that really felt good and felt like you were you could make things happen and you were making things happen and you were succeeding at it. But, eventually, I mean it didn't take long for me to get to the point where I'd rather be competing for a \$10 or \$20 million job and being successful in putting together a game plan that got that job and winning and getting on the speaker phone with everybody else in the offices and saying "Yeah, we got it! Come on up. Let's have a beer." Winning and that sense of accomplishment and you turn around and you're not picking up the paper every day and having to read about whether or not you got a job or didn't get a job. You know whether or not you won. But you're not having to put up with all of the negative press that goes along with not being successful. (Ted)

Ted's description of life after football highlights many of the values of the ex-role, put to good use in a new role: executing as a team, competition, sense of accomplishment. All of these values are part of the embodied cultural capital that players gain from a lifetime of football socialization.

A final way in which retirees were able to translate the "hangover identity" from professional football into building new identities was through high status networks and connections generated before and during a career in professional football. These networks, born of high levels of capital, worked to reproduce and increase capital. A number of retirees talked about friends who helped them start, or brought them into,

businesses. Some of these friends were made through football and others came from simply being part of the top of the social hierarchy. Though riches and status of professional football were often fleeting, some retirees were able to use their short time at the top of the social ladder to develop important business relationships.

Frank, a retiree who had just gotten laid off from a job in corporate sales at the time of our interview, planned on using old football networks to find a new job:

Just today I wrote a letter in the mail to a guy who used to own the [professional team Frank played for] ... We had a very good relationship when I worked at [a local bank] ... had his office one floor up. We got to know each other. See him about once every ten years and he invested in something I got involved with and he made some money on it so I'm writing him a letter. (Frank)

Frank's identity as former football player allowed him to call upon high status friends, made through football, in a time of crisis. However, it's worth noting here that this relationship, while born of football, was really nurtured through careers and business outside of sport.

Another retiree, Pete, who co-owned a fast food franchise after football and had been ripped off by a business partner, recalled the process of getting a loan for his new business, a sporting goods store that he owned and managed for the majority of his post football life. Because of his previous bad investment, he had trouble securing funding for the sporting goods store. He was able to call on wealthy friends he knew from the country club he joined during his professional football career:

By that time our [restaurant] had, we had closed that or sold it at a loss. Went to a banker, and he said, "You were involved in the [restaurant], weren't you?" And I said, "Yeah, kind of, yeah. I was an investor." He said, "I don't have any interest." It was just like that. I was very depressed that day. I talked to one of my friends. And he said, "Let me talk to another guy," and in about two hours, I had three guys take money out of their, or pledge money to a bank, of \$25,000 each so that I could do the bid. Because I had enough money to put my money in, and of course with their money, I could win the bid. One of the guys said – I

played racquetball with him all the time, and he said, “I expect to get paid back. But if I don't, don't worry about it.” So that's the kind of friends I have. (Pete)

Both Frank and Pete were part of high status, capital rich networks as an indirect result of their professional football careers. Neither one of them had to play up their ex-football role in order to tap into that source of capital. For the majority of the professional football retirees that I interviewed, the fact of being part of a high status network, both during and after football, were extremely beneficial in helping players either extend or transition out of their football careers.

Early exiters and explorers, because of their higher levels of capital and more diverse set of identities, were able to cash in on the role of ex-football player in indirect ways that did not necessarily mark them as former athletes. These men took the skills, traits, and tastes that they had accrued both before and during football and translated this cultural capital into a variety of careers, both in and outside of sport. They were also able to tap into powerful social networks that were often indirectly affiliated with football as a means of gaining or maintaining employment. Overall, these men were more likely than engrossed players to secure middle class jobs (small business owners, managerial and sales positions, financial advisors, etc) by deploying their ex-role more broadly.

### **Embodying the Ex-Role**

Becoming an ex is not merely a psychological process. A huge part of the experience of retirement from football is also physical. While the ex-role can provide professional football retirees with many economic and symbolic benefits, there is also a downside to this role – namely, pain. Retirees bring all the injuries, pains, and bodily discomfort of their playing days with them into their new lives as exes. The physical

“hangover” of a football identity affected almost every retiree I interviewed, regardless of class, race, or identity commitment. All of the men, with very few exceptions, admitted, either directly or indirectly, that they experience nagging physical pain in their everyday lives. Discussions of this pain, however, were very complicated. Many retirees denied experiencing pain, even as they listed their various aches and pains. Others deflected the source of their pain away from football, blaming their age or other activities. Some compared themselves favorably with other professional football retirees as a way of minimizing pain. Finally, many retirees normalized their pain by explaining that it was simply part of the life they chose; a life that many had no regrets about.

While conversations about the actual sensation of pain were difficult, retirees were generally much more clear about the effects that pain had in their lives after football. Many retirees talked about the ways that pain restricted various aspects of the life, including leisure, family life and work. According to the norms of hegemonic masculinity, men are supposed to be dominant and in control. While most retirees can no longer accomplish these goals through physical mastery, many have other options for occupying masculine roles such as “breadwinner” or “patriarch”. For those retirees who are most severely debilitated by previous injuries or lingering pain, however, even these avenues of enacting a masculine identity may be blocked, or at least less accessible. Thus a loss of gender capital – a process that begins, ironically, through the performance of manhood acts on the football field – continues in life outside of football, even as men attempt to preserve it through their orientation to pain.

## *Denying Pain*

Pain, for professional football retirees, often existed in a contradictory space where retirees simultaneously experienced and denied pain. As mentioned above, the loss of gender capital that came along with physical decline meant that men had to find new ways to preserve this form of capital. A stoic attitude toward pain was one means of maintaining a masculine identity and position in the gender hierarchy. Many retirees responded in the negative to my direct question of whether or not they currently experienced pain. However, as the conversations progressed, most would go on to tell me about the various parts of their body that did, in fact, hurt. Nolan's statement below is an example of this contradiction happening in the space of mere seconds:

No, I'm not in pain. I've been pretty fortunate, I think. See, that's the thing about it, pain is a very difficult thing to talk about to football players. Because you go to the doctor, [s/he] says "Well, where does it hurt?" You're just like "Well, I don't know. What do you mean by hurt? What do you mean by pain? Pain that I can't deal with?" Do I have pain? Yeah, I have pain everyday. But, I don't really think about it as, because I know my knee bothers me. It bothers me all the time. But, it's not like to a point where I need to get an artificial knee or something like that. And I can still play basketball and go snowboarding. (Nolan)

Nolan first denies his pain, then acknowledges that his knee "bothers" him "all the time", and finally, minimizes that pain by mentioning all the activities he can still do, all in the span of just a few sentences.

This "disrespected pain," or everyday pain that is treated as "no big deal," is a great illustration of the complicated relationship retirees have with their bodies (Young 2005). Nolan is absolutely correct when he states that, "Pain is a very difficult thing to talk about to football players." Because they have been trained since youth (as both football players and men) to ignore, repress, and hide the experience of pain, it makes perfect sense that it would be difficult to not only admit experiencing pain, but also to

reflect thoughtfully upon that experience. Further, it may go beyond whether or not men have the ability to discuss pain to whether or not they *choose* to. Admitting pain is essentially admitting weakness, something their bodies are already beginning to show.

### *Deflecting Pain*

The most common tactic retirees used to minimize their experience of pain was to deflect attention from football as the source of their discomfort. Many retirees blamed any physical limitations or bodily distress on their age, often comparing themselves to peers who didn't play professional football:

I have friends that never played a down of football and who go out there and hurt ... Most 55-year-old men aren't all that healthy now anyway for whatever reasons. (Frank)

There are times when [my knees] hurt more than others. But shit, a 50 year old guy, he's going to get up the same way I get up. A lot of it comes from being old. You know, we get older. It's the ones who don't do anything, atrophy sets in. And that's the problem. (Roger)

While both of these statements may be true, that other, non-football playing men of a similar age could have the same ailments, it is still worth noting that this was a very frequently employed discursive tool in making sense of pain.

Retirees also used age to explain the possible long-term effects of concussions. Concussions went largely ignored and untreated in the NFL until the mid-2000s. Many of the retirees I interviewed don't know if or when or how many concussions they had because there was simply no institutional protocol for dealing with them. A number of retirees described experiencing memory lapses but not really knowing whether to attribute them to age or traumatic brain injury:

My memory is, I don't know, I got this thing from the NFL of what is and what isn't [normal]. If you misplaced something, and you can't find your car keys, or something like that, it says that's normal. But, if you find them in the refrigerator, that's not normal. So, I think that I'm alright. But, I had a gal who came over and did a thing for a nursing home and [she] listed ten words, and you're supposed to repeat them back. And, I'll be damned, I could only remember about three of the ten. That was in the space of about 5 minutes. So, it made me think that maybe I do have a little something, you know. At 72 everybody does. (Pete)

Pete, the oldest retiree in my sample, seems to be leaning toward the idea that his memory was affected by football, until his last sentence, when he states that all people of his age have a weakened memory.

In addition to comparing themselves to others in their age cohort, retirees also used comparisons to other professional football retirees as a way to minimize their own physical limitations. Louis described both physical and mental issues that he faced upon retirement from football. This is what he said when I asked him about how football injuries affect his life today:

My shoulders, I have separated both shoulders. I've had, I think, 10 operations. Neck. I'd say I'm hovering at 70%, you know, as far as health is concerned. I'm not like a lot of my counterparts. I'm fortunate in that regard. I've have concussions, having played pro football. I think that's had an effect on some things. Fogginess I think I experience. (Louis)

Louis's comment is interesting because sandwiched in between descriptions of his own injuries, surgeries, and pain, he mentions that he's fortunate compared to his counterparts. While Louis is, indeed, "fortunate" in comparison to some retirees with far more extensive injuries, this strategy of imagining that there is someone worse off than him, allows Louis to minimize his own pain, a discursive move employed by many of the retirees I interviewed

Bryan was one of only two retirees that explicitly told me that they did not experience any pain in their day-to-day lives. His response to my question about the effects of football on his body today illustrates both the denial and deflection of pain:

I'm pain-free. I'm sore probably because I'm running around with my camps, my kids. I'm sore because of playing with my youngest one. I still pick her up all the time. But, from football itself, there's not one injury that I have. I had a cracked elbow. I had a bad neck, not a bad neck, a stinger, but it turned out to be a pretty bad injury on my neck ... There's nothing on my body that's from football that I feel today. Not one thing. And like I say, I'm fortunate but ... if I have injury, if I have pain now it's getting older. (Bryan)

Bryan's statement here, much like Nolan's above, begins with a complete denial of pain, follows that up with an acknowledgement of pain, and finally, in this case, ends with a deflection of pain. According to Bryan, the soreness he experienced was not from football, but from playing with his kids, running his sports camps, and simply "getting older". However, in the same breath, he also acknowledges injuries caused by football.

Along with age, retirees blamed their pain, discomfort, and bodily decline on a number of sources independent from football. We see in Bryan's quote above that other, non-football activities might be blamed for pain: playing with kids, work-related activities, and playing other sports. Larry, a retiree whose body was so beaten up that he could no longer work, had a very complicated understanding of the role that football played in creating his disability. The following is a lengthy excerpt from our conversation about how pain affected his day-to-day life:

R: My situation, it's terrible. But, I cannot really look back. My family had a history of arthritis. So, I can't say that that all came from football ...

I: Do you hurt every day?

R: Had I not played football, I don't know that I wouldn't still have the same problems ... having the crushed vertebra. I would assume that's from football but why did it take this long to manifest? So I can't attribute that to football ...

I: Is it your back? Is that the main thing that doesn't allow you to work? What is your day-to-day experience?

R: No, it's not the back. I have neuropathy, and I've had two surgeries on my feet before that. They call it "UN," "unexplained neuropathy." Something like 70 or 80 percent of the people that get it are diabetic. I am not diabetic. So where it came from, I don't know.

I: Do you think it's related to football?

R: Well, if you'd asked me that question six weeks ago, I'd have said, "Absolutely not." Now, I'm a little more wary of saying that because my podiatrist, my orthopedic surgeons, I have three of those, they're saying that the two are intertwined and maybe if you didn't have the crushed vertebra, you wouldn't have had the neuropathy. My podiatrist says, "Well, if you didn't have the neuropathy maybe your back wouldn't be bothering you so much." But can I assign the fact that I played football to those? No. I really can't.

I: So, is it painful? Are you in pain?

R: Now, it's just my back. The knee and well, I mean the feet. You'd have to look up neuropathy. Neuropathy basically means you can't feel your feet. I couldn't tell you if I have socks and shoes on right now. But that has nothing to do with anything that happened in football. Maybe it did, but 30 years later, it's hard to believe. I mean, the arthritis, absolutely. I've got it in my hands, my feet, my legs, my spine, my neck. I've got it everywhere. That does probably have something to do with football but I can't attribute it entirely to that. (Larry)

In this conversation, Larry is very reluctant to attribute his pain and discomfort to football. He doesn't completely deny that role that football may have played in his current health issues, but he does have many alternative explanations. He writes off arthritis as being part of his family's history. He dismisses his crushed vertebrae because they didn't cause him problems for many years. His neuropathy is a total mystery. Larry, like many other players, deflects attention away from football as the cause of his chronic pain or ongoing health problems.

This raises questions about *why* retirees were so reluctant to blame football for their ongoing experience of pain. First of all, it means admitting pain, something that many retirees are loathe to do. More importantly, however, is the relationship between football and masculinity. If the traits that define football are challenged as destructive, that means that masculinity, by extension, must also come into question. Admitting that

these two identities, both primary elements of many retirees' self-concepts, come with such negative consequences means re-evaluating the self as a whole.

### *Normalizing Pain*

In addition to denying and deflecting pain, retirees also minimized experiences of pain by normalizing it, or describing it as an inevitable outcome of having a professional football career. Unlike the strategies described above, these retirees do acknowledge feeling pain and are willing to locate its source in their football pasts. They minimize their discomfort, however, by shrugging it off casually and without emotion:

Shoot. Broken fingers. Broken ribs. Separated shoulders. Damaged knees. A torn groin muscle, which is calcified now and can't move laterally. But, you just, it's a part of the game, man. (Michael)

You know, sure, I get banged up. But, you know, that's going to happen. (Dan)

For these men, and others who echoed their sentiments, the experience of injury and pain in professional football (and in life afterwards) was so normalized that it wasn't something to be discussed. It simply was.

This attitude of inevitability of pain and injury was also reflected in retirees' defense of their choice to play professional football, a brutal and damaging game. Many said they knew what they were getting into with this career and had no regrets about their lives as professional athletes. We can see a little bit of this in the above excerpt from my conversation with Larry, when he says, "I cannot really look back." Many others stated their lack of regrets more directly, arguing that playing a game they loved was a "tradeoff" for a life of pain (Louis) and that given the opportunity, they would return to the game in an instant.

I asked one retiree, Roger, if hearing about recent research on the prevalence of traumatic brain injury in retired football players worried him. He responded thusly:

I think it bothers you. But, it's also one of those things, once you get to a certain age, and your kids get through high school, and they're going to go to college, I think "I feel like shit, but I did what I wanted to do." I was a gladiator, and that's what we did. No one could have told me not to do that. If someone would have said, "You get one more concussion, you're going to die in 10 years. It's going to speed up your death," would I have played? Yes. That's what I loved to do. So no, I wouldn't have done anything different. I would have hid it, hidden it from people. Shit, one time I remember walking off the field sideways. I actually remember that a couple of times, and not letting the doctor at the time, he didn't see it. So, I sat down and then ran back out on the next down (Roger)

Roger employs a couple of different tactics for minimizing pain here. He starts by correlating "feel[ing] like shit" with his age, but goes on to acknowledge that he was injured by playing football. He recounts a time (or number of times) when he likely sustained a concussion and immediately returned to play, but argues that he "was a gladiator" and that's just what gladiators do. Rogers's scoffing at death here is the epitome of hegemonic masculinity. He fears nothing, including an early death.

Ralph, who retired at age thirty, said he was an "old man at 29. My body was a wreck." Despite this conception of himself, he also expressed a lack of regret at his choice to play professional football. When asked if his "wreck[ed]" body was part of his decision to retire from football, he said the following:

No. No, it wasn't. I'm crazy. People ask me. I sat on a plane with a guy yesterday and he said, "Would you do it again?" ... So we got to talking, he said "Would you do it again?" I said "Tomorrow. I'd suit up tomorrow." (Ralph)

Ralph went on to describe the seventeen surgeries he had in the twenty years following his professional football career. When asked if they were all related to past football injuries, he said, "Oh, 100 percent." Ralph did not deny the pain and bodily distress he went through during and after football. Instead, he defended this pain as part of doing

something he loved and emphasized his masculine identity by calling himself “crazy”, referring to his reckless disregard for his own health.

Each of these tactics for minimizing pain – denial, deflection, and normalization – worked to restore retirees’ gender capital in the face of bodily challenges. Denial of pain is really just a denial of weakness. By saying that they did not feel pain, retirees were showing that they were strong, tough, and resilient. Likewise, acknowledging pain, but brushing it off as simply another mundane part of life, was a way of demonstrating control over one’s mind, even if the body was not cooperating. This minimization and denial of pain in life after football demonstrates a continued alienation of retirees from their bodies, ways of thinking and being that are learned and carried over from their playing days.

### **Alternative Masculinities<sup>9</sup>**

While retirees’ gender capital was declining due to simultaneous deterioration of the physical abilities, they worked to maintain what gender capital they could through their handling of pain. Despite retirees’ ways of speaking about pain, it was clear that their lives were affected by this bodily discomfort. In fact, as retirees attempted to create new masculine identities in their lives after football, their bodies continued to interfere. Leisure activities, and the pursuit of a physically fit lifestyle, was something that many retirees discussed as being obstructed by pain and injury. The most commonly constrained activities were running, playing basketball, and working out in general:

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<sup>9</sup> I use the phrase “alternative masculinities” to refer to the way retirees alter their performances of masculinity when the athletic, physically dominating style of football masculinity becomes unavailable to them. This is not a reference to forms of masculinity that challenge hegemonic norms.

I can't do what sometimes I what I would like to do ... I lost weight when I retired and I always felt like I could lose more, but I can't run. Running's too much pounding on me. My joints feel okay sometimes but if I start running or play basketball with my son, my knees swell up. I get up every morning and I get on the elliptical and I do some things. I move around and I do some things, but your back hurts. When you sit on your butt now, if it's too long, you gotta get up and move around. Your knees hurt. You have aches and pains. (Russ)

I like to play basketball but I haven't played in years. I still can play golf. I just don't have the desire to do any of the many running things that I like to do, sprinting, I would say, because it hurts ... I try to do cardio because my doctor tells me to do cardio ... I try to do that, and that's just to keep my heart rate up. And that's not because of injuries. Injuries hurt even worse when I'm doing that. But he's just like, "If you wanna live, you gotta keep a healthy heart" so I gotta do those things to try to keep a healthy heart. (Cameron)

It has stopped me - I used to, I was lifting weights. You know, I stayed in shape pretty consistently after I left the NFL. I was riding my bike a lot, going to the gym, lifting weights. And up until like five years ago, I probably, I weighed about 230 pounds five years ago. Now I weigh 265, 270, mostly because I've stopped working out, because the pain in my shoulder when I lift weights just ... [he fades out] And it's funny, I've had X-rays and MRIs, and it's not like there's a mess in there or anything. It's just - I don't know what it is, but I get weakness and soreness very quickly when I, especially my right shoulder and my neck. It's lame ... I think, as I've gotten out of shape - I've never been out of shape before in my life, so this is a novel experience ... I think that I just haven't reacted to it that well. I've just kind of been like, "Nah, I don't like going to work out when I'm not in shape," so I don't work out. Then I go to work out again, "I don't like it when I'm not in shape," so I don't work out. (Will)

These comments highlight the ways that leisure activities may be restricted by pain caused by football, but they also demonstrate the importance of and obstacles to health and physical fitness for many professional football retirees. The quotes above illustrate the frustration that many athletes feel in trying to maintain a healthy body while living with pain. Being physically fit, or at the very least physically healthy, is certainly a value that is tied up with the norms and expectations of hegemonic masculinity. For retirees who were once at the pinnacle of physical fitness, strength, and bodily control, the experience of not being able to even maintain a healthy weight or be physically active in

some ways is not only disappointing but could also be interpreted as a threat to a gender capital.

Interestingly, the connection between leisure and health was made primarily by working class retirees and retirees of color. While many middle class retirees talked about how their bodies impeded their ability to run, play squash, or work out in life after football, these statements were not accompanied by lamentations regarding physical health. For men with less capital and thus, less access to socially valuable positions of control and domination – for instance, having success in the corporate world – the body becomes the most important site for enacting masculinity (Connell 1995). Further, being physically fit may be more important for those with less economic resources as a way of preventing more serious health issues that would require costly medical attention. While most retirees are willing to admit that they cannot perform masculinity the way they once did on the football field, they would be happy to at least maintain a working, healthy, active body.

In addition to discussing the ways in which leisure is restricted due to pain and injury, retirees also detail restrictions to work and family life – two areas that, again, could be useful sites for creating and/or maintaining gender capital. As with leisure restrictions, it was primarily White working class retirees and retirees of color who experienced obstacles to work or family due to their experiences of pain and injury. Only one White middle class retiree discussed ways that his injuries hampered his family life. He talked about being in too much pain to go on walks with his wife:

I've had two knee replacements, so I've had both of them replaced in the last 2, 3 years. So I did one three years ago and one two years ago. And that's the best thing I ever did. But I was, I had kind of a bone on bone situation. Lots of arthritis that had built up. So, it was painful to walk around the golf course or go for a

walk with my wife. There are things like that that show up and but I, the knee replacements went great and I'm so glad I did it. I wish I'd done it five years ago. (Ted)

Ted's situation is interesting because while his injuries did, at one time, limit his recreation and the way he spent time with family, he was able to have two knee replacements that corrected this problem. Of course, not all retirees are able to afford elective surgeries that may ease their pain and allow them to live their lives to the fullest.

For working class retirees and retirees of color, the primary limitation to family life was playing sports with their children:

I try to stay active as much as I can so I can be somewhat active with my kids, you know. But again, as far as my son and basketball, I can't go out and show a lot of things I want to show him and get him to do a lot of things, I can't go out there and do it because I, physically I can't do it. So yeah. That's a little bit disappointing, but not totally disappointing. (Arnold)

I couldn't even go out and play football with my kid when he was this tall or soccer or whatever. I couldn't do it. Couldn't do it. (Ralph)

While the ability to play sports with their children may seem like a trivial issue, for men whose entire young lives were centered around sport, being able to share this with their kids was an integral part of fatherhood. Not only was this obstacle intrinsically frustrating, but being prohibited from doing such activities with children also had the potential to lessen their gender capital, in that they could not demonstrate an idealized masculinity to their children or other fathers. In other words, they held themselves accountable for the manhood acts they were unable to perform.

Finally, there were the few retirees whose work lives were dramatically impacted by the presence of pain. Larry, as mentioned above, was permanently disabled due to "unexplained neuropathy", a condition that he was quite reluctant to attribute to football. Dan, another retiree who deflected much of his pain away from football, was also limited

by his injuries and pain. He talks below about how having multiple back surgeries affected his job:

So within thirty days, I would be back at work. In fact, one time, I had the back surgery done, I actually got on a plane and flew to [City 1] and rented a car and did my business in [City 1] and then drove over to [City 2] and [City 3]. That's 400 miles, one way, and back with the bandage still on my back, sitting in a Firebird for basically 800-mile round trip by myself ... With my job, it was, to a large extent, was traveling. So, I'm either in a plane or I'm in a car and those kinds of things. Driving for long distances causes me some problems, but if I stop, maybe at a rest stop, get out and walk around the car a little bit. (Dan)

Dan mentioned later in the conversation that he was fortunate to have a job that was not too physically demanding, but still describes some of the consequences of traveling and taking time off for work. He was lucky to have an employer who would let him leave for thirty days at a time in order to recover from the multiple surgeries that he had undergone in his life after football.

Retirees in my sample were fortunate to have their work lives, and thus identities as providers, minimally impacted by their pain and injuries. Larry was the only one who was physically unable to work. Others, like Dan, talked about how work was still possible, but that it could exacerbate their pain. Others still mentioned how the tasks of their jobs had to be changed or adjusted to correspond with their bodily limitations. Chris, for example, mentions not being able to golf with clients any more. Ralph talks about having to hand off the more physical tasks of his job to his employees, a privilege he enjoyed as the owner of a small business. For retirees with less flexible and/or more physical jobs, the consequences of residual football pain could be threatening to men's status as breadwinner, and thus to their status as men.

While retirees have many options for restoring gender capital in life after sports, these roads are often blocked by uncooperative bodies. Being physically fit, active fathers

and breadwinners are roles that provide men with a measure of gendered legitimacy. Their bodies, destroyed by the performance of masculinity during football, often stifle these alternative masculinities, leaving retirees searching for new ways to embody the ex-role.

## **Summary**

The role residuals remaining from a career in professional football were extremely painful for many men, leading to identity confusion, depression, and for one retiree, even suicidal thoughts. However, for many others, this “hangover identity” proved extremely beneficial. Some retirees used the football ex-role in very overt and strategic ways, capitalizing on their fame or their association with a professional team to make money or open career doors. For others, the identity of former football player worked more indirectly as players were able to use their cultural and social capital to nurture and develop new identities. These different styles for deploying the ex-role were shaped largely by capital. Those with fewer resources and more identification with the football role were more likely to mark themselves overtly as ex-football players. For players with larger stores of capital, who were able to disidentify with football, the ex-role was deployed more broadly.

For all players, however, embodying the ex-role was a struggle. The pain and bodily deterioration carried over from a career of professional football was threatening to retirees’ gender capital. They attempted to regain this capital by minimizing, denying, and normalizing pain. In short, retirees largely ignored pain in an attempt to deflect any evaluations of them as weak, both physically and emotionally. This pain, however, could

not be completely denied, as it interfered with the re-creation of a masculine identity as physically fit and active, as engaged fathers, and as family breadwinners. While the ex-role created many opportunities for gaining economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, it simultaneously threatened gender capital.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Football is America's most popular sport. Fans, players, and coaches alike relish in the big hits and the feats of strength performed by the modern day gladiators on the gridiron. Until very recently, however, no one seemed to care much about what became of these gladiators once their time on the field was through. The so-called "concussion crisis" has begun to draw attention to the plight of professional football retirees, especially as retirees are beginning to advocate for themselves en masse. In the last five years, we have seen numerous lawsuits filed by retirees against both the NFL and the NFLPA, their complaints ranging from inadequate pensions to exploitation of their bodies. The early deaths of many NFL heroes, some from suicide, others from causes related to poverty and addiction, has also acted as a wake-up call to the dangers of our beloved gladiator sport. The slowly growing spotlight on NFL retirees is certainly a positive development, but what this attention misses is the stories of everyday players and how they rebuild their lives after football. While not all retirees develop crippling addictions or suicidal behavior, they all must negotiate a major identity transition that affects both mental and physical health.

According to many widely cited statistics, professional football retirees are more likely than their male peers to commit suicide (Bruni 2012), to develop dementia (Kelland 2013; Lehman et al 2012), to declare bankruptcy (Torre 2009) and to develop addictions to narcotic painkillers (Easterbrook 2014). Additionally, up to 20% of retirees are clinically depressed and the average life expectancy of NFL retirees is less than 60 years old (Campbell 2011). Certainly some of this can be explained by the prevalence of

traumatic brain injury, but there is also social psychological transformation that takes place as players exit long held, much cherished, and widely coveted roles. Retirees, many of whom have been football players since they were young boys, are not just contending not just with physical injury, but also with the emotional, social, and individual turmoil of becoming someone new. Additionally, retirees are coming from a variety of racial and class backgrounds and occupy very different positions in the social hierarchy. The various forms of capital that retirees possess shapes both the process of role exit and retirees' lives after sport.

The goal of this study was to better understand the social psychological process of role exit that professional football players go through upon their retirement from sport and how that process is connected to larger social inequalities. The aim was to consider a facet of the retirement process that had been largely ignored up to this point. In doing so, I do not dismiss retirees' struggles with health or wealth, but rather connect these troubles to both macro level inequalities and micro level identity changes by honing in on the transition process itself.

### **Micro: Interactional Processes**

Professional football players begin constructing their identities as such at a young age. For some, this is the only career they have ever wanted. Others were rewarded for taking on the role of football player with acceptance from family and peers, accolades from the community, and sexual attention from women. For some men, especially racial minorities and those from working class and poor backgrounds, the role of athlete has been constructed as one of the only viable options for upward mobility. The various perks

of this role, combined with limited access to other roles, creates the conditions wherein the athlete identity becomes many players' master status. As their commitment to this role grows and becomes more salient in their day-to-day lives, it begins to shape behaviors, self-identity and identification by others making it ever more resistant to change. For those at the extreme end of identity commitment, identity foreclosure precludes any other identity development and complicates the process of role exit. Professional football players, then, face difficult transitions when they must give up their identities as athletes.

Role exit is the process whereby individuals *disengage* with the norms and behaviors associated with an important role and also, *disidentify* with that role as a central part of their self-concept. Following a liminal, transitional period, or what Fuchs Ebaugh calls *the vacuum* (1988), individuals establish the ex-role, a new identity that retains some features or considerations of the previous role. Fuchs Ebaugh argues that this is a very basic social process, especially in the modern world where people are more frequently changing family structures, careers, and even their genders. Thus, we can use this theory to understand all kinds of different exits.

The role exit from professional football is no exception. It follows generally the same pattern that Fuchs Ebaugh outlines in her book: players experience *first doubts*; they begin to *seek alternatives*; they experience specific *turning points*; and eventually go on to create an *ex-role* (1988). Though this process is not entirely linear for each individual, examining football life histories shows that these are, indeed, the steps that most retirees take in leaving football. This population is distinct from many other role exiters, however, in two important dimensions: celebrity and choice.

The high-status and amplified visibility of professional football players sets them apart from many other role exiters. These players are well known, either individually or as part of a NFL team, meaning that their role exit, and subsequent identity transformation, becomes more of a public process. It's true that there is no role exit that is an exclusively individual experience, for each role we occupy comes with a distinct "role set", or group of people who we interact with based on that role. Even the most common, everyday roles –wife, woman, doctor – are relational. If a woman exits the role of wife, for example, this is experienced not just by her, but also her husband, perhaps their children, maybe their extended family and friends. For a professional football player, however, part of his role set is "fans", which is essentially a large group of strangers. Thus, while all role exits are shared to some degree, this particular one involves negotiating a new identity with not just a small group of loved ones, but with the public more generally. This celebrity status increases the social tensions of identity change as retirees must not only readjust their own self-image, but also manage others' expectations for them.

The other important dimension that we must consider when thinking about professional football players is how much choice they have in whether or not to exit their roles, and how much that choice is constrained by limited alternatives. For most professional athletes, the choice to retire is never completely voluntary. They may be forced out by injury or declining skill due to an aging body. Others are pushed out through trades, lack of playing time, or unsigned contracts. Even for those who explicitly make the decision to leave football on their own accord, there is often a sense of underlying inevitability. All of these choices are shaped by capital. For a player with the

cultural and social capital necessary to dive into alternative career, being cut from a team might be all it takes to exit football. Another player, with less capital, may not feel like retirement after a cut is viable option. Capital, as well as position in the racial and gender hierarchy, do not merely shape an individual's options or choices, but also their sense of self. For example, a player may be able to financially afford retirement from football. However, if this player has foreclosed on the athlete identity, he may not be able to psychologically afford to leave the sport, feeling ill-equipped for any other profession or identity. For those who struggle with creating new identities after sport, this can have a negative impact on their stores of various types of capital, perhaps most obviously on economic capital. Thus, we can see the cyclical relationship between capital accumulation and identity development.

The choice to leave football is in many ways shaped by the processes of disengagement and disidentification. While Fuchs Ebaugh argues that “disengagement leads to disidentification” (1988: 4), I found that the relationship between these two processes is more complicated than that. Many football players, recognizing the impermanence of their roles as professional athletes, began to think of themselves as something besides a football player long before they actually disengaged with the football lifestyle. These tend to be the players with larger stores of capital and more diverse identity hierarchies. These players began resocializing for an ex-role while simultaneously enacting all the behaviors of their current role. These disidentified players had more agency when it came to choosing to end their football careers, because they had already begun to move on towards becoming an ex. In other words, they were less psychologically attached to football because they had already let it go, in a sense.

I have categorized my respondents into three distinct categories, based on their process of disidentification with football at the end of their careers. Those who created new identities for themselves while playing football, specifically new professional or career identities, were the *early exiters*. These players all had college degrees and the vast majority were married with children. These two factors alone set them up for having many identity options in life after football – they had education or a skill set to fall back on in the labor market and they had families to throw themselves into as well. We can think of both of these attributes, potential for success on the job market and fatherhood, as forms of gender capital. Even more importantly, they are forms of gender capital that do not require a high functioning, extremely strong body. The roles of breadwinner and father are socially acceptable ways to enact masculinity, helping early exiters to maintain gender capital and accrue other forms of capital in life after football. The *explorers*, who prepared for life after football in more covert and less intentional ways – furthering education or reining in spending – did not set themselves up in quite the same way as the early exiters, but at least took some steps to begin to think of themselves as something besides a football player. Many did not begin this exploration until late in their career, when they could see the writing on the wall.

The final group of role exiters in my sample was the *engrossed*. These players had foreclosed on the athlete identity and were focused solely on their lives and careers as professional football players. Engrossed players did not really take any steps, neither career nor psychological, to prepare for a life after football. These men stood in stark contrast demographically to the early exiters and explorers. The vast majority of men in this group came from poor and working class backgrounds. Only half had college degrees

and only a quarter had children during their playing days. In comparison to their early exiter counterparts, these men had fewer bases on which to build an identity when they retired from professional football. For them, the transition process was harder. Engrossed players were the most likely to struggle with depression in life after football, and, though only two players in my sample reported having issues with drug and alcohol addiction, they were both in this group.

By looking at the transition process, focusing specifically on the disengagement and disidentification of professional football players, we can see that those whose football identities are less salient, who have ceased to see themselves as solely football players, have more opportunities for creating ex-roles in their lives after football. The social psychological process of disidentification is extremely important in determining how professional football players leave the game – whether they have any degree of choice or not – and this choice, in turn, shapes their ability to cope once they are forced to disengage with the role. And, of course, this process of disengagement cannot be understood without consideration of individuals' positions in the hierarchies of power and privilege.

### **Macro: Structural Inequalities**

As mentioned above, in describing the various types of role exiters, issues of social structure and inequality have an effect on the disidentification process from professional football, as well as the agency players have in deciding when their professional football careers will be over. Role exit maybe a universal process, but it is experienced differently according to one's social class, race, and gender position. The

accumulation of capital – economic and otherwise – plays a role on both sides of the role exit transition.

### *During Football*

Playing professional football is a source of many types of capital. High salaries generate economic capital. High status and visibility creates opportunities for social, symbolic, and celebrity capital (which can, in turn, increase economic wealth). Players forge bonds and build network ties with other players, coaches, and even owners that can be fruitful in maintaining a position within professional football, but also in building an identity in post-athletic lives. Sport also acts as an important socializing agent, teaching players the valued cultural traits of self-discipline and self-control. Learning these lessons is a way to accrue cultural capital, a symbolic resource that can help one climb the social ladder. Football, in particular, is an important source of gender capital. Traits such as physical domination, toughness, and mastery over self and others are an inherent part of the game, and simultaneously, valued aspects of masculinity. Men learn, through the sport of football, how to “properly” be a man in contemporary U.S. society. This is invaluable in not only maintaining a football career, but also a masculine identity.

While its relatively easy to see the ways that professional football players *gain* various forms of capital through their athletic careers, what remains hidden is capital they *bring* with them to football. Though many like to imagine sport as the great equalizer, the reality is that players, even though they share some measure of wealth and status, are often stratified by their race and social class of origin. One example of the role that symbolic capital plays within football is the image of the athlete as a “dumb jock.” While

many retirees, of all races and class backgrounds, discuss the experience of being seen as a “dumb jock” by peers and teachers, Black athletes, in particular, struggled with how much of this was due to their role as football players and how much could be attributed to stereotypes about their race. Because of their skin color, Black athletes were automatically assumed to be less intelligent and thus less legitimate as students. Thus, even if they gained the same important knowledge required to accrue cultural capital as their White peers, they did not have the symbolic capital to be taken seriously as capable, intelligent students.

Differing levels of social capital amongst professional football players also shaped their football lives. Those who were able to go to “powerhouse” schools with successful football teams – most often schools with a lot of economic resources – were more likely to be seen by college recruiters and professional scouts, opening up networks for moving up the football hierarchy. Further, once inside the ranks of professional football, a large part of staying on a team, or being picked up by a new team, is having some form of informal sponsorship from a coach, general manager, or owner. When the vast majority of front office executives and coaches are middle class White men, there is a good chance that they will sponsor those who are more like themselves, creating wider and deeper social networks for these players (Day and McDonald 2010). This increased social capital for White, middle class players means more opportunities both within professional football, and in life after football.

Also hidden in plain sight are the costs of capital – in particular, costs of celebrity and gender capital. The general public tends to think of this population as exceedingly privileged and thus, misses the downsides of certain forms of capital. Both the celebrity

and gender capital that men have accrued during their football careers require a certain type of public performance to maintain. Players know the expectations of the role, anticipate others' reactions to their performances, and feel pressured to maintain these standards. They both hold themselves accountable and are held accountable by actual and imagined others for behaving appropriately. The constant surveillance (or even the sensation of being evaluated) by fans, teammates, coaches and even family takes a toll on men's physical and mental health. Alternatively being worshiped and hated by fans is a dehumanizing experience for athletes, alienating them from others and from their bodies. This alienation from the body is further perpetuated by the "manhood acts" that players perform on the field. In order to cash in on gender capital, men must demonstrate their physicality and learn to play through pain, treating their bodies as instruments to be used and controlled. The long-term effects of treating oneself, and being treated by others, as less than human can be devastating for some players.

The varying levels and types of capital that football players bring to, develop, and spend during their professional careers is important because this capital shapes the role exit process. And, the role exit process, in turn, shapes what life is like for players once they are out of sport. Players who come into football with more economic and symbolic resources also leave football that way. They have more options for identity development, and subsequently, more options for career and social opportunities. In other words, capital begets capital. I will explore this further in the section that follows.

### *After Football*

As mentioned above, capital plays a role on both sides of the role exit process. On the other side of a professional football career, capital plays an important role in how players deal with the loss and reconstruction of identity. The engrossed players, those largely working class, non-college-degreed players who did not disidentify from football before they were (mostly) forced to disengage, were more likely to experience depression and to have less economic success in their lives after football. A major source of this depression was a continued identification with football without the means to engage with it. In other words, men who had foreclosed on the athlete identity, and thought of themselves as having all the traits that went along with that identity – power, control, domination – were in for a painful reality check when they realized that they had no place or resources with which to enact that identity anymore.

Two areas where men struggled the most upon leaving football were in financially providing for their families and controlling their own bodies. With their bodies worn down by performing hegemonic masculinity, these men experienced a significant loss of gender capital. This loss was compounded by a simultaneous loss of economic, social, and symbolic capital upon leaving football. Retirees, in an exercise of their remaining gender capital, dealt with pain by minimizing it. This included denying, deflecting, and normalizing their everyday experience of pain. This continued alienation from the body even after an athletic career could be interpreted as a way of maintaining some modicum of control over one's life and demonstrating the masculine values of toughness and stoicism.

Capital and status also affected the professional lives of retirees. Many retirees effectively created an ex-role by bringing aspects of their football careers into their new identities. Most could cash in on celebrity capital in some form, even if they were not individually well known. Some retirees displayed jerseys or wore their Superbowl rings to signal to others their ex-status. While most retirees could cash in on celebrity capital, not everyone had access to the same amount of social or cultural capital. For instance, retirees without college degrees, or institutionalized cultural capital, did not have the same options as those who had graduated. Retirees with higher levels of social capital were able to cash in on these network connections in order to secure jobs or increase business at their existing jobs. In an interesting intersection of different forms of capital, some of the Black retirees (low symbolic capital) with high levels of education (high cultural capital) felt like they did not have the option of using their social or celebrity capital to get ahead in life after football for fear of being seen as a “dumb jock”.

Loss of gender capital also proved to be an obstacle for many men in professional and family life after sport. Though talking about the sensation or experience of pain was difficult for retirees, these same men were readily able to describe the consequences of this pain in their daily lives. Many lamented the loss of physical fitness, which contributed to low self-esteem and a continued threat to hegemonic masculinity. Further, this loss of bodily control and mastery affected their relationships with family, especially children. The expected behavioral norms of being a father included, for many of these men, being able to play sports with their children. This was simply not an option for some and was limited for others. While the men in my sample were fortunate in this regard, there are also men whose job options, and thus ability to play the role of breadwinner, are

constrained by an ailing body. Through the spending of gender capital during football (i.e. playing while hurt, treating the body as an instrument), these men are robbed of gender capital to use later in life.

### **Implications and Future Research**

Professional football retirees share the experience of being highly privileged, well loved, and physically dominant for at least part of their lives. However, once the athlete role is exited, most experience a sharp drop in status that can be truly devastating for many. My particular sample is not representative of this population as a whole, but rather a “best case scenario”. The men I talked to had longer professional careers and were better off financially and educationally than retirees as a whole. Still, within this group was considerable strife and struggle upon exiting football. Nearly all the men in my sample dealt with chronic pain and injury and about half suffered from depression for at least some period of time following retirement. If this is a group with access to many resources and relatively high levels of capital, what happens to the physical and mental health of those in more marginalized positions in the power hierarchy?

My research suggests that the process of role exit is fraught with difficulties, both structural and psychological. The NFL, as well as player and retiree advocacy groups, must consider not only the physical and financial well-being of the men they represent, but also their identity development as they transition out of football. While the NFL currently has programs designed to help current and former players explore new careers, these workshops and internships should be more fully integrated into their lives as NFL players, perhaps even mandatory. Further, the opportunities for internships or off-season

jobs tend to be in business and media. Opportunities for career development should extend beyond fields that rely on the retirees' role as an ex-football player. Players need more time and support in exploring identity options outside of sport. Given the high incidence of depression and chronic pain amongst retirees, the NFL must also continue to work toward developing a more comprehensive healthcare plan for all retirees (not just those with a minimum number of seasons played).

One of the most significant academic contributions of this work, and a jumping off point for future research, is the consideration of gender capital and embodiment. The irony of hegemonic masculinity is that those who do it “best” are the ones who end up in the worst shape. Destroying the body, a key resource for accruing and spending gender capital, prevents men from enacting a wide variety of socially valued masculine roles, not just the role of athlete. Men with disabled bodies, and thus depleted gender capital, face obstacles to dominance not just on the athletic field, but within many public spheres – workplace, family, education, and possibly even religious institutions. This raises a question about disabled masculinities more generally. Gerschick and Miller (1994), in their study of disabled men, outline three responses to the threatened gender identity experienced by men who are physically unable to embody hegemonic masculinity. Some men respond by practicing a kind of hypermasculinity, overcompensating for their bodily inability to reach hegemonic standards. Others attempt to redefine masculinity, staying within the bounds of hegemony but reaching for more attainable goals. Finally, some men reject hegemonic masculinity all together and attempt to create a new gender order. What kind of gender capital would these practices generate? Would threatened femininity elicit the same types of responses from disabled women? There are many directions that

investigation into gender capital could take. It is a useful concept for understanding the types of gender performances that are valued in this society and how these performances are rewarded with increased economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital.

## **Summary**

As the popularity of football continues to grow, and the salaries for professional players continues to skyrocket, consideration must be given to the toll that this sport takes on the bodies and minds of its survivors. The increased attention to the plight of professional football retirees, driven largely by activism from the retirees themselves, has begun to make the general public aware of the health and financial issues of retirees today. My research suggests that while both of these things are worthy of attention, the focus cannot be on concussions and pensions alone. In order to fully understand and appreciate the transformation that retirees go through upon leaving football, we must also consider the role that larger social hierarchies of race, class and gender play in these men's lives. Because they were all rich and successful for a short period of time does not make them immune to the status inequalities or racial discrimination that plague their peers outside of sport. Additionally, we must consider the expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity. Making the game "safer" with rule changes and better helmets does nothing to challenge the masculine culture in which football squarely resides. Until we critically examine the expectations, stereotypes, and inequalities associated with stratified systems that exist outside of sport, we can never fully understand the retirement experiences of professional football players.

APPENDIX

RETIREE INFORMATION

NAME	AGE RANGE	RACE	CLASS	EXIT TYPE
Percy	60	Black	Working	Engrossed
Bill	60	White	Poor	Explorer
Frank	50	White	Middle	Explorer
Allen	50	White	Working	Engrossed
Michael	50	Black	Lower-Middle	Explorer
Cameron	30	Black	Lower-Middle	Early Exiter
Ralph	50	White	Working	Engrossed
Arnold	40	Black	Middle	Explorer
Nolan	50	White	Middle	Early Exiter
Bryan	40	Black	Lower-Middle	Explorer
Oscar	60	White	Poor	Early Exiter
Thomas	50	White	Middle	Explorer
Bart	60	White	Middle	Early Exiter
Roger	40	Black	Poor/Working	Engrossed
Will	40	Black	Working	Early Exiter
Dan	60	White	Working	Engrossed
Larry	50	White	Working	Engrossed
David	40	White	Working	Engrossed
Lee	60	White	Working	***
Pete	70	White	Middle	Early Exiter
Calvin	30	Pacific Islander	Working	Explorer
Russ	40	White	Working	Early Exiter
Ted	60	White	Middle	Early Exiter
Louis	50	Pacific Islander	Working	Explorer
Chris	40	Black	Working	Explorer
Colin	30	White	Working	***
Kevin	50	White	Middle	Engrossed
Martin	40	White	Working	Explorer

\*\*\* Not enough information

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