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The Perception of Balance in Elite Athletes' Lives

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**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of the University of Ottawa
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sport Studies**

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This thesis is dedicated to my friend, Jonathan Hart, who gave more in his 28 years of life than many can hope to achieve in a normal lifetime.

Thank you for living every moment to the fullest.

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The following quote exemplifies every person mentioned above:

“No one ever attains eminent success by simply doing what is required of him; it is the amount and excellence of what is over and above the required that determines the greatness of ultimate distinction.”

- Charles Kendall Adams

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Abstract

Although the essential physical (Hollander, Meyers, & LeUnes, 1995; Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997) and mental (Bloom, 1985; Kreiner-Phillips & Orlick, 1993; Orlick & Partington, 1988) requirements of an elite athlete have been recognized as a necessity for excellence in sport, minimal research has examined the lives of these athletes as a whole and their perception of balance or imbalance in their life. The present study, therefore, set out to explore elite athletes' perceptions of balance in their lives. In depth, semi-structured interviews and modified self-reported diaries (Kramp, 1994) were conducted with 10 elite athletes (5 currently competing and 5 retired athletes). Inductive analysis of interview transcripts revealed that half of these athletes (2 current and 3 retired) defined balance primarily as having a vision or goal and striving towards it, while the other half (3 current and 2 retired) defined balance as respecting the different parts of their lives. Balance in these athletes' lives was perceived to fluctuate in cycles as it shifted in accordance with their needs and wants for that time in their life. In addition to highlighting the necessity of being true to themselves, important prerequisites for achieving balance in their lives were identified by all ten athletes. They stated that one must: (1) make a conscious decision to have balance; (2) have strong self discipline; (3) enjoy what you are doing; (4) have a supportive network; (5) have leisure time; and (6) be in the moment. Both the similarities and unique differences in the athletes' perspectives on balance were explored. Results from this study can be used to further advance the area of research that focuses on understanding balance in elite performers' lives.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Much of the psychologically based research with high performance athletes has focused on the mental factors associated with excellence (Botterill, 1996, Kreiner-Phillips & Orlick, 1993; Orlick, 1996; Orlick & Partington, 1988). Researchers have also examined components such as time demands and practice requirements for expert performance in the domains of music, arts, sports and sciences (Bloom, 1985; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). However, few studies have adapted a holistic approach when examining the lives of elite athletes and their perceptions of balance or imbalance in their lives.

Orlick (1998) has advocated the importance of maintaining a sense of balance and perspective in sport and life. Through his work with thousands of athletes, he has come to recognize the role that balance can play in high-level performers' careers. Orlick (1998) has defined balance as "finding beauty, passion and meaning in the different loves of your life, and living those loves - every day. Balance is respecting your needs for achievement and relaxation, work and play, giving and receiving, intimacy and personal space" (p.xiii).

Although Orlick's vision of balance is of interest, to our knowledge, there is no empirical research that has investigated elite athletes' perceptions of balance in their lives. This study looked at elite athletes' perspectives holistically, primarily their views on balance. Do elite athletes feel that they have or do not have balance in their lives? How do they define balance? How do they view the quality of their lives? Do elite athletes perceive that in order for them to become eminent, they must make sacrifices at the expense of other significant factors in their

life? Given the scarcity of research on elite performers perspectives' on balance in life, much can be gained by exploring this uncharted domain.

Over time, it is expected that the theoretical and practical contributions of studies of this nature will be meaningful and will fill many existing gaps in the literature regarding the role of balance in exceptional performers' lives.

The present research is a beginning in the quest to explore this important issue of balance. Ten elite athletes' engaged in in-depth interviews to explore their perceptions of balance. More specifically, the following areas were examined: (a) the athletes' definitions of balance; (b) their perceptions of balance in their lives; (c) their views on prerequisites for achieving and maintaining balance in their lives; (d) their perceptions of excellence; (e) their views on quality of life; and (f) recommendations for other athletes striving for balance during their competitive years.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

In light of the fact that elite athletes' perceptions of balance in their lives have never been empirically investigated, the direction of the literature review had no prescribed formula. As a result, the strategies for an exploratory study suggested by Creswell (1994) were adopted. Since the participants' perceptions on specific pre-established questions were the principle focus in this study, the literature review was used simply as a framework based on the available research. Here then is an overview of the available research. So far, researchers studying elite athletes have limited their investigations on certain components of an athlete's life without examining their lives holistically or their perceptions of balance in their lives. After reviewing the literature that focused on the elements that appeared to influence balance in the lives of elite athletes, some common areas were cited. The following factors were cited in the literature and will be discussed in the succeeding order: excessive time, burnout in elite athletes and direction of the present research.

Time

Elite Athletes

It is crucial to respect the countless hours of practice that elite athletes must invest into their sport in order to reach the elite level. Chase and Simon (1973) first introduced the 10-year rule as a prerequisite for expertise in the domain of chess. Ericsson (1996) added further insight by showing that an additional 10,000 hours of practise produces eminence in performance level. Therefore, elite athletes have typically spent at least 10 years or 10,000 hours practising before reaching the elite level (Bloom, 1995). Although the amount of time required for becoming an

elite athlete has been examined, little research has explored how elite athletes see the distribution of their time in regard to the balance in their life. One domain, the business world, has examined balance, in terms of time management.

Business Literature

During the past two decades, the business literature has addressed the issue of balance primarily with time management. Since Drucker (1966) first popularized the concept of time management, the idea has been widely accepted as contributing to personal effectiveness. Supporting studies have shown that employees who are good at managing their time are generally more successful than those who are poor at doing so (Evans & Bartolome, 1981; Kotter, 1982; MacKenzie, 1990; Orpen, 1993). Across business fields, time management programs have been widely available and attended by many employees in the hopes of improving efficiency in the workplace (Lakein, 1991). According to Lakein's (1973) description of time management, individuals first determine their needs, then rank them in terms of importance, while wasting no time on the unimportant things. Specific actions toward this ranking involve setting primary work related goals and prioritizing the tasks necessary to accomplish them (Lee & Kanungo, 1984; Macan, 1994). Consequently, the participants' time management efficiency was directed at better achievement for on-site work and not necessarily for the individuals' lives as a whole. Unfortunately though, when individuals had excessive requirements placed on their time, the potential for overload increased.

Research examining time-demanding occupations indicated that many people involved in this type of work had an overload of time demands placed upon them. Studies have shown that several upper management positions require individuals to work more than 60 hours over a six

day work week and irregular hours, with endless requests placed on their time (Evans & Bartolome, 1981; Gullotta & Donohue, 1981, Kotter, 1982). However, with additional demands placed on their time, the possibility of the individual experiencing burnout becomes even greater (Boswell O'Brien, 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Maslach (1982) also provided evidence consistent with these findings. In her research addressing demands placed on professionals, she found that many jobs require extensive hours of demanding tasks with little assistance. Throughout her research, she exemplified a common result of these demands - burnout. The tasks often required more energy than the workers were capable of giving, resulting in emotional and/or physical exhaustion. Some of these individuals had not developed the necessary coping skills to adequately deal with the requirements of their occupation. Sometimes, the load was simply too much, resulting in the workers becoming burned out. Often, other areas of an individual's life are also affected by the excessive hours expended in the workplace.

Not only has the literature shown the harmful effects from overload on the individual, but the problems also appear to transfer into other aspects of their life. Aldous (1969) found that occupations with irregular hours, as well as those taking a spouse away from home for days at a time placed a strain on the development of the family unit. The majority of the individuals' time was spent on the business aspect of their lives; leaving little time for non-job related activities. At many upper management levels, executives contributed more in terms of finances than time involvement to their family (Gullotta & Donohue, 1981).

Although the business literature presents a picture of the possible consequences for an individual when they are overworked, the questions of interest to this study remain unaddressed.

How did these overworked individuals perceive the balance in their life? How did they try to achieve balance in their life, or did they disregard balance all together? With these questions left unanswered, another area of the literature needed to be examined.

Student-Athletes

Some elite athletes are students during their athletic careers; this line of research was examined in hopes of acquiring further insight into the issue of balance. Perhaps a closer parallel to the current research than that of the business literature, is the research conducted with university student-athletes on the issue of time management. Although athletic participation can be a highly rewarding experience for a student-athlete, other demands associated with university life can be of concern. For example, time spent training and competing can interfere with time that should perhaps be devoted toward excelling in schoolwork (Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1996; Royal & Rossi, 1993). Some studies have shown that one of the reasons many athletes either do not graduate or cease to continue their sport is because they never learn to manage the multiple demands placed on them once they start university (Spady, 1970; Underwood, 1980).

Sabo, Melnick and Vanfossen (1989), however, obtained different results. University students involved in sports tended to receive better grades and had lower drop out rates as compared to students who were non-athletes. The students' involvement in sports was referred to as a "control mechanism" in which student-athletes knew that they could not participate in their sport if they did not do well enough in school. According to James (1995), many student-athletes believe that sports and school compliment one another. He found that student-athletes were better able to effectively manage their time when they had demands from both sport and school activities. Again, similar to the business literature, there is no mention of the students' overall

life and their perceptions of balance in their life. With the inconsistencies and focus on time and performance, the student-athletes' literature leaves the question of balance in their lives unanswered. Therefore, it is necessary to directly examine how elite athletes manage the demands in their lives.

Burnout in Elite Athletes

A final aspect that was cited in the literature as influencing elite athletes' lives was burnout. The occupational demands of athletes at the elite level are higher than those of student-athletes. In addition to the amount of hours they must physically spend in their sport, elite athletes are often faced with further challenges. They often have to deal with excessive mental preparation (Botterill, 1990; Orlick, 1992; Orlick and Partington, 1988), geographic relocation, separation from family and friends, financial difficulties, media challenges, and postponement of non-sporting plans (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993).

In high level sports, individuals who are unable to positively deal with stresses often experience difficulties or declines in performance (Cohn, 1990; Crocker, 1992; Madden, Summers & Brown, 1990). The short-and long-term effects of not being able to effectively cope with the demands of everyday life can be quite dramatic. It is apparent that athletes must develop and utilize extensive coping skills in order to manage these demands (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Smith, 1986; VanYperen, 1995). In fact, sport researchers have begun to identify the importance of athletes learning how to cope with the demands placed on them during their competitive sport years. These researchers have studied gymnasts (Krane, Greenleaf & Snow, 1997), tennis (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996), and elite middle-distance runners (Madden, Kirkby, & McDonald, 1989).

Often, if athletes are unable to adapt to imposed demands, the potential for burnout increases. In fact, stress and excessive time demands have been cited as two of the major sources of burnout for athletes (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Loehr, 1993). Burnout is defined as an emotional, psychological, and physical withdrawal from a formerly pursued and enjoyable sport as a result of excessive stress which acts on an athlete over time (Smith, 1986). Many elite athletes, such as Bjorn Borg, have dropped out of their sport at the peak of their careers, claiming they were burned out and that participation in their sport was no longer fun and rewarding (Dale & Weinberg, 1990). Successful elite athletes have shown exceptional coping techniques enabling them to decrease the effects of stress on their performance (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Madden, Summers, & Brown, 1990).

Summary

In light of the increasing physical and mental demands faced by today's elite athletes, as well as the prevailing incidences of burnout, it is important that empirical research be conducted to examine the strategies these individuals use to balance resources and demands, and their mental, physical and emotional responses involved in this process. Therefore, the central purpose of this research was to examine how elite athletes perceive the balance in their lives. A secondary objective of the current study was to assess each participant's personal definition of balance. While investigating their perceptions of balance, the opportunity was taken to also explore their related thoughts on their quality of life. This allowed insight into the athletes' satisfaction with their lives as a whole, taking into consideration all the domains of their lives (Jeffres & Dobos, 1995).

CHAPTER III

Method

Maxwell (1996) emphasized that there is no specific “cookbook” for doing qualitative research. Despite this, he did highlight four main components for conducting qualitative research that will be of great assistance in the process. A first component relates to sampling, where the times, settings and individuals must all be taken into consideration. A second main component is the relationship established between the researcher and participants. A third component pertains to data collection, that is, how the researcher will gather information. The last component involves data analysis, which will guide how the information is organized and interpreted in order to make sense of it. The processes that were employed to collect and analyze the data are described below. As the topic of balance in high-level sport has not been empirically examined before, this study was exploratory and no research hypotheses were forwarded.

Choice of Participants (Sampling)

A vital part of qualitative research involves the sampling procedures used to select participants to partake in a study. Ensuring an in-depth investigation of the research questions requires a proper selection of cases (Miles and Huberman, 1984). This strategy involves deliberately selecting participants who have first hand experience that cannot be obtained from others. Weiss (1994) described these participants as “people who are uniquely able to be informative because they are an expert in an area” (p. 17).

By the present sampling procedure we wanted to obtain in-depth perspectives from experts in a field of sport. Patton (1987) has termed this kind of participant selection as “purposeful sampling.” Purposeful sampling is the selection of information-rich cases from

which one can learn a great deal about the topic of the research. A goal of purposeful sampling is to adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population by gathering information across a range of individuals (Maxwell, 1996). In order to include as much information as possible, maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1987) was applied to the chosen participants of the current research. Specifically, the selection of elite athletes were from a number of sports, countries and both current and retired athletes in order to solicit an exploration of these elite athletes' perceptions of balance in their lives.

The participants included 10 elite athletes, more specifically, 5 currently competing and 5 retired athletes. The sample consisted of 4 females and 6 males between 23 to 38 years of age at the time of the interview. As a criterion for participant selection, the athlete had to have competed in at least one major world class competition, such as the Olympics, World Championships, or a Professional Championship. Collectively, the athletes had won 11 Olympic medals (6 gold, 4 silver and 1 bronze) and 14 world championships.

The current athletes represented the sports of ice hockey, track and field, cycling, canoeing, and rowing. The retired athletes represented the sports of swimming, canoeing/cross country skiing, bobsled, sailing/rowing, and biathlon. Furthermore, the athletes were citizens of the following three countries: Canada, the United States and Switzerland.

Individual interviews were arranged through the athletes' coaches, agents and/or personal acquaintances. The investigator informed the coaches and/or agents and each participant of the nature and purpose of the research, emphasizing that all information would be kept confidential and anonymous. After obtaining the participants' consent to take part in the interview,

arrangements were made to send them the diary forms (see Appendices A, B, C and D) and an interview was scheduled at the participants' convenience.

Relationship

Gaining Entry

Gaining entry to interview some of the best athletes in the world is usually considered an extremely challenging task (Hertz & Imber, 1995). Often the researcher must painstakingly try to find a reliable 'insider' that will ease the entry into a 'world' to which few outsiders have access. Fortunately, I was privileged in this area of research for a number of reasons. Firstly, my past involvement in sport allowed me to have contact with athletes who have performed at an elite level. Secondly, connections with the president of a Canadian sport and special event marketing company led to the access of some participants. Thirdly, my thesis supervisor knew many of these athletes and some interviews were arranged or facilitated through his contact. Lastly, contact with some athletes was obtained through my work with the Coaching Association of Canada. After gaining entry, the participants' trust still had to be earned. Building and maintaining trust is an essential component of the interviewing relationship.

Building and Maintaining Trust

One of the basic guidelines for encouraging conversational competence between the interviewer and interviewee is to create a safe and comfortable setting in which the interview is to take place. For this reason, interviews were conducted at the participants' choice of time and location, which was at their home, office or training site. The amount of time spent with each athlete ranged between 1 to 3 hours.

Since I was the primary research tool for these qualitative interviews, knowing the necessary steps to become a trustworthy data collector was vitally important. Steps to facilitate the effectiveness or successfulness of the interviews included a number of different factors. First, the same investigator who was trained in qualitative research through graduate course work and pilot interviews conducted all interviews. Understanding the importance of silence also helped to establish rapport with the participants. Encouraging them to talk through silent encouragement, such as nodding, was shown to be effective. Being aware of my body language helped me to both physically and mentally attend to their behaviours. An example of how one athlete felt sharing information with myself can be seen in the following quote from a current athlete, half an hour into the interview. When the athlete was discussing the importance and enjoyment of spending quality time with people who are fully “there” in the moment she stated, “Some people you can spend time with and it is not genuine. Others, you can really connect with because you know they are there with you, like I feel you and I connecting right now. This ‘makes’ me want to share more.”

Second, I had a solid understanding of the athletic culture. As one rarely interviewed participant commented, “You have experienced the uncomfortable zone in sport. I trust you to have a deeper appreciation for what I will be talking to you about.” If I was unsure about important details of certain participants’ backgrounds, I referred to their diary forms and/or checked with other knowledgeable sources prior to contacting them. Also, as mentioned previously, I was flexible in terms of creating the best environment in which to learn from the participants. The main purpose of the interviews was to correctly hear, understand, learn and

give voice to the participants concerning the present research topic. Throughout my interactions with the participants, I was honest, open and genuinely interested in the information they shared.

Data Collection

Diary Forms

In order to increase my understanding of the amount of time the participants invested in their sport throughout their life, three diary forms were sent to and completed by each athlete prior to conducting the interviews. Any clarification or ambiguities in the diary forms were clarified during the interview. The diary forms were utilized similar to grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) that asked participants to describe a typical day (Diary form 1) and a typical year (Diary form 2) during their most successful competitive years. The third diary form asked participants to record estimates of the amount of training they did over the span of their sporting career. Diary form 1 was adapted from Krampe's (1994) work with expert pianists (Appendix A). An adjunct form instructing participants how to code their activities for the day was also adapted from Krampe (1994) and was provided with an additional form to guide the task (Appendix B). Diary form 2 was adapted from a study conducted with Canadian National team coaches (Zitzelsberger & Orlick, 1998). This form asked participants to record their sport related activities during their most competitive year (Appendix C).

Diary form 3 was also adapted from Krampe (1994) and targeted the retrospective estimates of practice over the participants' life span. In other words, this form required participants to report the amount of time they spent training throughout their sporting career (Appendix D). For an example of a participant's completed diary forms see Appendix E.

Interviews

The interview guide (Appendix F) was developed based on input from other elite athletes in a pilot study and a renowned sport psychologist. Each participant was asked to respond to the identical set of questions from the interview guide. It included an inquiry into: (a) the athletes' definition of balance; (b) their perceptions of balance in their lives; (c) prerequisites for achieving and maintaining balance in their lives; (d) their perceptions of excellence; (e) their views on quality of life; and (e) recommendations for other athletes striving for balance during their competitive years.

The interviews incorporated three types of questions: main questions, probes, and closing questions. The *main questions* were prepared in advance to cover the most relevant topics. I began the interview with broad questions regarding the issue of balance, allowing the participants to share information they felt was most relevant. I was flexible enough to let the participants walk me through their thoughts while still keeping the main research questions in mind.

From the athletes' responses to the main questions, I used *probes* to encourage them to elaborate on any unclear answers in order to have a deeper understanding of their meaning. Probes included nodding, silence, saying "uh-huh" or asking the participants to elaborate on an answer. As previously mentioned, I found that remaining silent while showing interest through body language was a very effective probing strategy. I also jotted down key points during the interview in order to formulate relevant probes that helped obtain more information about the core matters of concern.

Furthermore, *closing questions* were used to indicate the ending of the interview. The researcher asked the participants, “Now that you know what the research is about, is there anything you feel I should have asked that you would like to talk about?” This allowed the participants to fill in any gaps they may have felt were relevant to the research. Participants were thanked for their help and sent a thank you letter the week following the interview.

Data Analysis

Lincoln & Guba (1985) ask the question: “How can I establish the degree to which findings of my inquiry stem from the characteristics of the respondents and the context and not from my personal biases, motivations, interests, and perspectives?” To ensure that the findings of this study stemmed directly from the respondents and their context, the following steps were followed. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Every participant was sent a copy of their interview transcript in order to confirm that the information accurately reflected their perceptions. In each case, they confirmed that what was recorded and transcribed was an accurate account of their personal views and experiences. This process ensured the credibility of the data before any analysis began.

Once the transcripts were returned to myself they were analyzed inductively by the groups of related questions. The objective of the analysis was to allow concepts and themes to emerge from the participants’ answers in order to build an overall framework of their perceptions of balance. The inductive analysis was initiated by coding the interview transcripts. Coding the data involved organizing the participants’ responses into relevant segments of text or meaning units with the connection to the whole being maintained (Tesch, 1990). More specifically, a meaning unit is a “segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode

or piece of information” (Tesch, 1990, p. 116). A sample of a matrix containing meaning units that reflected the participants’ perceptions of balance can be seen in Appendix G.

Common meaning units were compiled together into flexible categories that were inductively organized into common themes of a greater focus. This process, adapted from Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) constant comparative method, involved comparing and contrasting the data until a saturation point, at which no more general themes arose from the data. From these emerging themes, I then developed a framework to explore elite athletes’ perceptions of balance.

A helpful technique to ensure credibility during the data analysis was peer review. This process involved a fellow researcher, independent of the research process, who read a random selection of the meaning units and their codes to conduct a critical review of my interpretations. This validation process resulted in a list of agreed upon data themes from the interviews whereby no data themes were eliminated.

In addition, a member check was conducted to further validate my interpretations of the participants’ perceptions. Member checking is the process by which the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions are tested with the participants from whom the data was originally collected. This important step toward the establishment of credibility of the current study involved faxing each participant a final summary interpretation of their interview. Similar to the check done with the interview transcript, they confirmed that I had provided accurate interpretations of their personal views and experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1989) refer to member checking as the most important technique for establishing credibility.

CHAPTER IV

Results and Discussion

The interviews were analyzed using the previously discussed inductive content analysis methods. Specific themes are presented and discussed in conjunction with direct quotes from the interviews in order to present the participants' perspectives in their own words. The main areas that will be discussed include: (a) definition of balance; (b) perceptions of personal balance at an elite level; (c) prerequisites for achieving and maintaining balance at an elite level; (d) perceptions of excellence; (e) quality of life; (f) factors affecting balance; and (g) recommendations for achieving balance during competitive years. For each of these areas, when quotes were used, the anonymity of the athletes was maintained by using a numeric code to identify the source of the quote.

Definitions of Balance

In the present research, an attempt was made to avoid imposing a pre-established definition of balance onto the participants. It was felt that this open-ended approach would help to draw out their personal definitions and perspectives on balance in their lives. Through the interviews, it became very apparent that the issue of balance was of great concern to every athlete. Every athlete had interesting insights regarding their own personal balance and their definition of balance. The following quotes illustrate a few of the athletes' definitions of balance.

Current Athletes' Definitions of Balance

Balance is being content with yourself and not being reliant on one aspect of your life. If your sport goes down and that is all you have then you are not balanced and at the same time if a relationship is all you have and it goes down hill and you are a waste product afterwards then you are not balanced. You have to have personal goals, friendships, relationships, career objectives and other interests to have balance. Not being too dependent on one thing. (C2)

Balance is feeling that all areas in your life are in order. That you are not worrying about other things because you are so focused on something else. I think balance is like a circle where you have these periods where you are focused on one thing and you can't do anything else but then you have these periods where you are "normal" and can do other things. (C5)

I picture balance as a huge trampoline with a puddle of water in the middle of it. Around the trampolines' edge are all the areas of my life. Balance is finding an inner harmony where all areas of my life are all in synch or where the water is close to the middle where I can handle it. Inner harmony means listening to yourself, not everyone else and focusing on one thing at a time. (C1)

Retired Athletes' Definitions of Balance

Balance is having a meaningful goal or vision where to go. You are able to suffer a bit for that mission because you know you want to pursue this mission. What I am seeking brings out meaning. That brings balance automatically because you are pursuing something that has a lot of meaning and you can really push yourself because you want to and you know how to. (R3)

Balance is being able to set goals, make a plan and go through with it. Balance means being able to use logic, heart and having fun with it at the same time in order to make the right decisions. (R1)

Balance in life means not feeling like you are being pulled in any one direction. It means contentment and lack of stress. It means having to think about what you are doing. I think a lot of people that don't have balance just live their lives not thinking about it. I know I always thought about it. I saw it like a triangle of sport, school and social life where each side was important but I had to keep them separate enough to not have them override too much. (R5)

According to the Oxford dictionary (1995), balance is defined as being equilibrium, establishing equal or appropriate proportions of elements in something. It is noteworthy that this definition included the words "equal or appropriate." While many individuals might perceive balance in their lives as equal proportions of components that make it up, the athletes in the present study communicated their definitions of balance in a slightly different manner. Two main themes emerged from these ten athletes' definitions of balance. For half of these athletes, (2

current athletes and 3 retired athletes), balance was defined primarily as having a vision or goal and going after it. While the other half, (3 current athletes and 2 retired athletes), defined balance primarily as respecting the different parts of their life.

The athletes who defined balance primarily as pursuing a vision or goal emphasized that it was a “planned focus.” These athletes were focused on a certain path in their life and felt that they were balanced when they made the best decisions with those goals in mind. This included respecting their body’s need for proper recovery in order to push themselves to the limit.

The athletes who defined balance primarily as respecting the different parts of their lives accentuated the importance of not being too reliant on one aspect of their life. More specifically, they emphasized that balance centered on the need to have all areas of their life in order. These athletes felt that to be balanced they should fully respect the different aspects of their lives outside of their sport. Moreover, these athletes believed that when their life was more “well-rounded,” they had better results in their respective sports. This definition also coincides with Orlick’s (1998) meaning of balance as “finding beauty, passion and meaning in the different loves of your life, and living those loves - every day. Balance is respecting your needs for achievement and relaxation, work and play, giving and receiving, intimacy and personal space” (p.xiii).

One theme that every athlete alluded to with respect to balance in their life was the importance of being true to themselves. They felt that if they truly knew themselves, then they could achieve the desired level of balance in their lives. Specifically, this meant paying attention to their personal needs, trusting their beliefs and instincts, and not just focusing on what others were advising them to do. As one athlete expressed it, “You have to find out what works best for

you. You have to choose what information will work for you. Not someone else” (R3). Another athlete framed it as follows:

I realized that I could be the best I could be when I didn't force myself to do something I really didn't want to do. I have figured out what I enjoy, what my constraints are and how to deal with the things I can't change. I never force myself to do things, even if others say it worked for them. I know what works best for me. (C3)

One demand common to all these elite athletes was the time commitment involved in achieving their elite status in their respective sports. Their diary forms displayed significant amounts of time invested into their sport. For example, every athlete's diary form revealed an average of 4 to 8 hours a day, 6 times a week spent engaged in their sport during their most competitive season. It is interesting to note that contrary to the findings in the business literature, only one athlete made reference to 'time management' when defining balance. For example, one current athlete who typically spent 5 hours training, 5 hours in school and the remainder of her day with friends, family or doing school work, defined balance as follows; "Balance is having the training component but also quality rest and relaxation with your friends, family and yourself without feeling stressed." (C4)

The lack of reference to time from these athletes may have been due in part to the fact that they clearly understood the amount of hours required to succeed in their sport and that it undoubtedly exceeded the amount of time spent in other important areas of their lives, such as family and friends, or leisure time. It was more relevant for them to define balance in terms of quality work or play rather than quantity or number of hours invested into performing these activities. As previously mentioned, Ericsson (1996) has argued that it takes a minimum of 10,000 hours to reach the elite level in practically any performance domain. Thus, one might

expect exceptional performers to talk about balance or imbalance in terms of number of hours invested into an activity. Interestingly, this was not the case for the athletes in the current study.

Perceptions of Personal Balance

Current Athletes' Perceptions

During the interview each athlete was asked the following question; "Can you step outside of yourself for a moment and tell me, if other people were looking at your life, how do you think they would see it in terms of balance?". Every current athlete stated that if other people were looking at their lives with respect to balance, they may see it differently from themselves and would probably view it as unbalanced. According to their definitions, these athletes all felt that their life was balanced. The following quote depicts a common answer:

I think others would be appalled at the amount of training we do. They would think I was unbalanced, but in a good way. Unbalanced has such negative connotations to it, I like to say more committed or focused. People say to me, "Is there some magic pill I can take to make me get up and exercise early in the morning?" I just do it because it is fun and I like it. Exercise is good so why not take it to the extreme! How many researchers and professionals who are doing really well at something put most of their time into it? Is that deviant? You have to be almost obsessed with it. To me, I see that I have this opportunity to be the best in the world, why wouldn't I take that opportunity? It is almost like this carrot dangling there in front of me. I am in the system that gives me the tools to do it. I have this coach and amazing teammates and there is nothing else I could imagine doing. I feel pretty lucky. (C5)

This elite athlete had previously defined balance like a circle in which you have periods when you are focused on one thing and other periods when you can focus on other things. This example illustrates a general theme that emerged throughout the interviews. Balance in these athletes' lives was described as flexible and ever changing to be appropriate for the training or competitive period they were going through. Regardless of whether the athlete had defined balance as a "planned focus" or "respecting the different areas of their life," the balance in their

life seemed to shift in accordance with their priorities for that time in their life. The following quote depicts one athlete's perceptions of this "shift" in balance in their life:

I think my life is seasonally unbalanced. During the main competitive season, it is unbalanced. It puts a strain on my relationship. In the winter, I think it is balanced. I know I have to make a big effort to try to keep my relationship and not be totally dependent on my racing. Other people looking at my life would not think my life was balanced because my sport is a complete passion for me. (C2)

This "shift" in balance in their lives was expressed as the appropriate thing to do in order to make sacrifices or invest more time into their sport for a certain period of time at the expense of other important aspects of their lives. There also appears to be an inherent working component to achieve and maintain balance. Balance in life does not seem to be handed to them on a silver platter. Athletes must be ready to work to achieve their desired level of balance and to deal with the "shifts" associated with this process.

Retired Athletes' Perceptions

During their most competitive sporting years, three retired elite athletes felt that their life was balanced while two felt that it wasn't. Here is an illustration of the latter case:

I was totally out of balance. I was excessive and very intense. Trained too hard and over-trained. I am an incredibly driven person, I like to work hard, and it gives me a good feeling. At that point I thought I was balanced if I ate well and had a good night's sleep and was well prepared for practice. (R4)

The following two quotes represent the retired athletes who felt their life was balanced during their competitive years.

I think my senior year in college I had the most personal balance because of the way my social life, sport and school were going. It was the year I did the best in school for some reason and I swam really well. Looking back to that year, all three of the things that I think are important meshed well together but I was able to keep them separate enough to have them not override too much. (R5)

The focus is just so different now. I had things in balance for what I wanted to achieve then, but I had one thing- my sport. My life was very simple and straightforward then. I don't think a lot of teenagers and people in their early twenties are really committed and would put that much energy into one aspect of their life or achieving at that level. Now I have so many more demands and responsibilities that I have that it is much harder to balance. (R2)

After asking this last retired athlete to elaborate on her views on balance, she reported feeling that balance in her life was a 'planned focus' during her competitive years. She explained that balancing her career and home life now is more challenging:

I think that balance goes full cycle. When I was competing it was simple. Now things are very complicated and then they will get simple again, that's the way life goes and that's the way life is supposed to go. As you get older, life gets simple again because you have fewer responsibilities and fewer things to be involved in. You are more centered on what you want to do and that's the way my life used to be when I was competing. (R2)

Prerequisites to Achieve Balance

The participants were asked if there were any prerequisites they had to respect in order to have balance in their lives. All 10 participants identified the following six main prerequisites. They must: (1) make a conscious decision to have balance; (2) have strong self discipline; (3) enjoy what they are doing; (4) have a supportive network; (5) have leisure time; and (6) be in the moment. These common prerequisites for balance were forthcoming regardless of the athletes' sport or career endeavours.

1. Conscious Decision

Every athlete felt that in order to have the balance they wanted in their life, it had to be a conscious decision. When they were discussing this prerequisite for balance, three of the five athletes who had previously defined balance as "respecting the different areas of their life," made reference to their teammates. These athletes talked about their teammates who did not have balance because they felt that their sport should be their only focus. One athlete explained it this

way: "I can think of other athletes on my team that didn't put too much emphasis on the other areas of their life; school and social life. Sport was their only priority. They didn't appear to get as far in the areas outside of their sport though" (R5). Another athlete described her decision to have a balanced life as follows:

Our head coach has always told us that if you are only training then it is not good for your mental health. It won't improve your paddling and it won't improve you as a person, that is a real key thing. In the past, I have always been over consumed with training because it is such a big part of my life, I'd always be thinking about it and I'd weigh myself down. Now I make sure I have enough time off when I need it and go relax and do things like normal people do. It is what I want too, not just him telling us. I find I need that, to get away from it and take a break. (C4)

It was important for these athletes to initiate their own attempts to maintain balance.

Although sometimes feedback from a coach was well received and very appreciated.

2. Self-discipline

Although advice from others may have been well received, it was evident that these athletes were very driven individuals who did not need to be told what was the best path for them to take in their life. As one athlete said, "If I am unbalanced in one area of my life, it breeds laziness in the other areas too" (R1). Every athlete said their self-discipline was a key factor in allowing them to feel balanced in their lives. One athlete further explained:

Self-discipline is important, spending your time wisely. As an athlete, I think people probably don't understand your schedule. It looks as though you have all day to do 2 hours of training. When you really have two hours of maintenance, two hours of sponsorship, you have to have proper rest time, therapy and time for sports massage. Time management is really important. You do have a lot more flexibility in your schedule but you have to be more disciplined because you have all day. It is super easy to procrastinate and leave everything until the end of the day and then your productivity goes way down. It's discipline to do things when they are supposed to be done and spend an appropriate amount of time on them instead of just starting one thing and then starting something else and not really finishing any of them when they should get done. (C2)

3. *Enjoyment*

Competing at an elite level required much effort and discipline, yet it was never perceived as negative or painstaking. All athletes loved overcoming the challenges of extending themselves. In fact, to simply say that these athletes enjoyed their sport is an understatement. Every athlete emphasized how much they had to enjoy what they were doing in order to give and receive as much as they did in their sport. It was obvious that being an elite athlete was not simply viewed as a job or challenge, but as a 'complete passion' with a tremendous amount of satisfaction derived from their participation in their pursuits.

You can't get that much sense of pride or enjoyment from the potential jobs that I was looking at from cycling. There was absolutely no way I could get that sort of reward from another job. Basically I was going to switch jobs for money and that is not a priority in my life. So, it didn't make any sense. As I already said, my sport is a complete passion for me. (C2)

I always thought I would grow up with my friends, play hockey until it was over, then go to university and get a real job. I just took everything one day at a time. This amazing job just kind of fell into my lap. And maybe that way was better for me; I just loved the sport. You look at some guys, their expectations are to do this everyday, and make the NHL. Their parents put a lot of pressure on them and they are burnt out by the time they are 16 or 17, when I was playing for fun. (C3)

The fact that every athlete in this study strongly emphasized the enjoyment they received from their sport might be seen as a contradiction to Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer's (1993) theory regarding deliberate practice. These authors stated that deliberate practice is effortful and not inherently motivating or enjoyable. That was not the message conveyed from these ten athletes. They all stressed the enjoyment they attained from their involvement in sport. This contradiction with Ericsson et al. (1993) may be due to the fact that the athletes were describing their perceptions of balance in their lives during their most competitive years and not specifically on their thoughts of deliberate practice. Although as one athlete had said in response to a

question about how they dealt with challenges in their life, “You have to focus on what is good and ignore the other things. You have to shift your attention towards what you like.” This may have been a similar approach to the extensive amount of training they expended in their sport.

4. Supportive Network

All athletes discussed the importance of having an understanding and supportive network of people around them as an essential component of personal balance. It is interesting to note that four of the ten athletes had a partner who was also competing at an elite level. These four athletes said it helped having someone close to them who was living the same experiences as them. These “coupled” athletes emphasized the necessity of working at their relationships and making a point of focusing their discussions on issues outside of their sport when they were together.

The following quotes reflect the athletes’ comments about seeking the support of significant others whom they could trust completely:

My family was always really supportive, helpful and generous. I couldn't have asked for more from them. I never perceived any pressure on me to do something different. My boyfriend was also totally supportive and understanding because he too was pursuing a sporting career. It helped having people around you who really knew what you were going through. (R2)

You need a network of trusted people around you. A network that really protects you, because if you are facing difficult situations then you can be harmed by so many of them. I had a network of coaches and my wife surrounding me. (R3)

Two athletes mentioned a different choice regarding a relationship during their most competitive years. These two athletes, one from the group that had defined balance as a “planned focus” and the other from the group that defined it as “respecting the different areas of their life,” chose not to pursue a personal relationship during their most competitive years. They felt very

content with their choices and stated that when they were able to devote the necessary amount of time to a serious relationship, they would. Their reasons were as follows:

I have always had good relationships around me. The one thing I did consciously decide to do in the last four years of my career was not to seek a relationship. I dated a lot but I didn't want the time commitments and emotional commitment of a relationship to interfere with anything. That wasn't a big deal for me. (R5)

In contrast to the two athletes mentioned above, the other eight athletes made reference to their relationships when they discussed the balance in their lives. These athletes felt that having a relationship during their competitive years improved their balance, regardless of their definition of balance. They admitted that their relationships were a time commitment but in the same breath, it was time well invested.

One athlete shared a powerful story surrounding the birth of his first child. The impact of this event on his feelings and performance was expressed in the following quote:

My daughter was born three weeks early on the first week of the World Championships. She was born 3 hours from the World Championships location. I knew that it would be possible to go there by car. I left home on the Sunday evening to the training camp and Monday morning my wife called to say the baby was coming. I talked to the doctor and he said if I wanted to be with her for the birth I should really hurry up. I took a car and drove back. I told the coach I would be back for training tomorrow or the day after. I made it in time and was there with my wife when my daughter came to earth and that was an experience that you should not miss as a man. Your wife can't miss it but as a couple you should do that together. I think the birth of the child was an experience that made me forget that all the competitions were there, it was a much more important thing. I stayed there with the baby in our arms until late in the night and then drove back. I had slept for 3 hours and then began the training runs. A lot of things were happening in myself, really unexplainable. I had the best race. I had a focus on my baby the whole week and then it slowly came back to sport but was not too strong of a focus on it, but I had an incredible competition. The focus was just there again. It was so easy, the feeling was so clear, the perception was there and I knew if I could stay there for the whole competition, then it would be hard for others to have the same results. And we did just that and won the World Championships. It was not the result but the feeling of the race that all the things came together. It was just like a nuclear reaction between the whole team. It was like an incredible mission. I believe the birth set things in perspective. I knew that when it was

over, when I went home, there was a little baby and my wife waiting for me. They will be there whether I am successful or if I am not. (R3)

This story fits under the umbrella of a supportive network due to the circumstances surrounding this incident. This athlete was involved in a team sport where they had been training together for years. His teammates knew it was not possible to win the World Championships without him present at the competition. On the other hand, his teammates viewed the birth of his child as something that could be done without him present at the delivery. Luckily, as he explained in the story, the baby was born prior to the competition but this incident made him deeply reflect on the importance of his family. He later stated that the birth of their child was one of the most joyful experiences he had experienced in his life. He felt that it enforced his belief in the importance of not only having a supportive network, but also nurturing that connection with his family.

5. Leisure

During the interview, the athletes were asked what they did outside of their sport for a lift. Every athlete stressed the necessity of leisure time away from their sport. Although they invested countless hours into training and competing, they also engaged in enjoyable activities outside of their sport. An example of a common reply is illustrated below:

I make sure I still go out with my friends or boyfriend and just relax. They are really good at not talking about paddling when we are together. They need a break too because they are so into school or work. My parents are really good too because they don't always ask how my workouts are going which is good because I like to just leave it at the club. (C4)

It is interesting to note that one activity in which every athlete engaged in during their competitive years was reading. As one athlete put it, "reading is portable and you can do it for a long time or two minutes. You can step into another world with it" (R4). They talked of always

wanting to learn new things from the books they read. Their eagerness to draw out lessons was remarkable:

If you want to compete well, you are forced to do something new because other people will find out too. If you want to stay there at the top you always have to be ahead of what you can do to improve, so you have learn and try out new things. You are a researcher yourself; you are a life researcher. (R3)

When discussing leisure, six of the athletes shared their experiences with nature, which brought a sense of balance to their lives. One athlete said; “I like to walk through the woods, just alone, no other things except nature. That is where you experience life. I really like just taking it in” (R1). Nature can be a source of energy and inspiration. It is not surprising that all the athletes said they enjoyed just relaxing on a beach in their time off.

6. Being in the Moment

Every athlete emphasized the importance of living their life “in the moment” in order to feel balanced. They talked about the necessity of being totally involved in what they are doing. This meant being both physically and mentally “there” when they were engaged in any activity. Consequently, all athletes discussed how they worked at keeping their sport life separate from the rest of their life:

I have this huge filing cabinet in my head in which, if I am at practice, I file issues from my school or social life away until later. The same goes for away from my sport. I don't carry issues over into the other parts of my life. I have to be totally involved in what I am doing. I try to be “there” with the highest possible intensity. (C1)

Perceptions of Excellence

The athletes were asked if they felt it was possible to have excellence in their sport and in their life. Interestingly, all of them felt it was possible. Excellence in sport was referred to as a measurable concept that was achieved if they had attained their sport-specific goals. These goals

included a number of different successes, such as making a final at a World Championship, winning an Olympic medal or improving their personal best. Excellence in life was perceived to be more of a nebulous concept without clearly measurable or visible criteria for success. The athletes generally spoke of excellence in life with reference to personal development and making a positive contribution in other people's lives. They expressed the possibility of having excellence in life and excellence in sport through devotion and commitment to the things that were important to them. The following two quotes illustrate two athletes' beliefs:

I do think it is possible. You have to be aware of what it takes to get where you want to go. Our coach encourages us to do lots of things. He is quite proud of how educated his team is. My rowing partner is in medical school, and another is doing her MBA. I remember before our Olympic final, our coach told us that he really cared about us all as people and really enjoyed working with us. He said, "if you go out and have your own best race, I will be really proud of you." The whole cloud of pressure lifted and everyone sat up and went "Ah, this is great, let's go race. We are so ready for this and we're going to do great." I think rowers are older and everyone is really well educated. Again, we have different projects outside of rowing but when it comes down to it, you really have to focus on your race or on your thesis defence and it might be necessary to put the other interests aside temporarily. But that is okay. (C5)

Sport is just a pursuit, so if you want excellence in sport you must know the rules that really play out. For society, it is a nature game, so if you understand nature, if you are natural yourself, I think you can better understand other people and society. They are both about adapting as quickly as humans can in order to excel in whatever path they choose. (R3)

Athletes in this study saw themselves as human beings first, with their athletic career only providing another facet to their identity. As one athlete framed it; "I don't think my sport involvement was the most important thing in the world. It is not going to contribute to world peace or the cure for cancer. But if you are good person, a valuable contributor to your family or society then you are developing as a whole person." (R2)

Quality of Life

In addition to examining the athletes' perceptions of balance and excellence, the opportunity to explore their views on quality of life was taken. A common theme emerged among the current athletes' views on this topic. When asked to share the time they had experienced the highest quality of life, the five athletes currently competing felt that they were experiencing it at the present time. They had a general sense of fulfilment and were able to focus on one thing really significant in their life, their sport. The following quote, illustrates their views:

When I am focused on just doing one thing, I feel very fulfilled. When you are at the World Championships and it is the week before you are going to compete, you are starting to taper, you feel very strong, excited and ready. You feel like everything you have done is worthwhile. You feel very powerful and it is pure quality. (C1)

Exploring whether or not the athletes thought their quality of life had changed over the years led to another common theme. They all discussed transitions in their life with respect to changes in their quality of life. For one athlete, an important change occurred during their first years at the highest competitive level:

In 1995, my quality of life was down because I was down about myself. It was my first year senior. I was like a little fish in a big pond because all of a sudden you are with the best in the world and the speed of racing is a lot faster. It was a mental thing to get over. As a junior, I was used to being out front so I wasn't used to being stuck in the wash or to be behind. It always takes about 3 years for the transition to get into the senior ranks. Now I am where I want to be and feeling that sense of accomplishment really feels good. (C4)

The retired athletes' views on quality of life resembled those of athletes still involved in their sport. Three of the retired athletes felt that they experienced the highest quality of life during their competitive years. The other two felt that it was an ongoing process in which life was at a peak when they were where they wanted to be.

Similar to the current athletes, those retired from their sport reported shifts in their quality of life as they faced transitions. All but one retired athlete found the transition into retirement fairly smooth. They had planned for their retirement and adapted to it by applying the lessons they had learned through sport. This planning process has been reported in the literature as one of the best coping strategies for easier transition into retirement (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Orlick, 1990). A clear example regarding this transition into retirement follows:

I made the transition into retirement fairly smoothly because I planned, and the majority of my peers did too. It's the ones who didn't plan or didn't make their goals who had more difficulty. But I think regardless of whether you're successful in sport or tend to be a high achiever... and some are only high achievers in sport... there are some people who don't carry the lessons over into their next life. (R2)

Factors Affecting Balance

In addition to the prerequisites that the athletes felt influenced their balance, there were five additional factors that affected the balance in their lives. These included and will be discussed in the following order; burnout, the media, their coach, travel, and injury.

Burnout

With the excessive amounts of training and stress that these athletes endure over their sporting career, it was not surprising that burnout was a recurring theme. Eight of the athletes spoke of the importance of preventing burnout in order to maintain balance in their lives. It is interesting to note that the two individuals who felt they were burned out during their athletic career were the two retired participants who said they did not have balance in their lives during their most competitive years. Powerful lessons regarding burnout are expressed in the following quotations:

After winning at the Olympics, I had no energy. I was near burnout and I knew when I went on, it was always stepping between burnout and recovery. I knew I could not go on

like that. That is where balance comes in for me. High competitive life demands a lot of balance. You have to look for your balance after the competitions by stepping out for one or two days. Then you can step back and go on with that kind of focus. You need a lot of energy so you must have quality recovery. (R3)

This past year has been my best yet. I really think that my silver at Worlds was accomplished because I have learned how to be tuned into how I am feeling on the water. I took the time off when I was tired. I now know how to judge fatigue versus being a wimp. I have learned how to prevent over-training and burnout. That was hard for me to do in the past because I would train through everything making it worse. Now I can really recover well but I have to pay attention to how my body feels. (C4)

One of the athletes who experienced burnout during her most competitive years expressed her work ethic as follows:

I was obsessed. I would train to the point where I would taste blood in my mouth. I would be exhausted and keep training. It was bad. It got worse and worse. After that I said to myself that I would listen to my instincts and stop when my body told me to. (R4)

According to the athletes, the greatest way to prevent burnout for them was to listen to how their body felt. Taking time off for proper recovery was the main point they suggested to prevent this phenomenon from occurring. In fact, one National Hockey League player perceived injury as an opportunity for rest:

Injuries could affect your balance if you let it. I suppose once you've been injured a few times you realize it's part of the game. There aren't too many days in a season when you feel just absolutely fantastic. It's a physical game. You take all the injuries in stride and you realize that with the rehab they do now, with the doctors they have at the level of the NHL that 99% of the injuries, anyway that I've seen in hockey, you can come back and play. The way I like to look at it is, when I get injured, I think of it as a rest. The season is so long, it takes so much out of your body, and it is so hard on you. I pretty much convince myself "okay it's a rest and take some time off." Some guys don't look at it like that but it's better than sitting in the stands or sitting in the corner and being pissed off all the time. (C3)

Additionally, seven of the athletes mentioned the importance of eating well and nine mentioned having the proper amount of quality sleep in order to be able to expend the amount of energy required to consistently perform at a high level. These preventative steps for burnout have

previously been examined and confirmed in the literature (Crocker, 1992; Dale & Weinberg, 1990; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Loehr, 1993).

Media

As their career in sport improved, six athletes mentioned that media attention grew along with it. These athletes stressed the importance of having a plan to deal with these external factors in order to maintain balance in their life during this stressful period. Prior to the Olympics or World Championships, each athlete discussed the necessity of “cutting off the media” four to five weeks prior to their event. They emphasized the point of not letting the media bother them. An example of how one Olympic medallist dealt with this is illustrated below:

We had all these processes in place and strategies for dealing with the media and I sat down with my parents and talked to them about what my expectations of them were. It's a good thing to do, it just seems a bit odd but that's helpful for them too because it is so painful for a parent to have to watch their child have to go through that anxiety. It is a very difficult time, and my parents just wanted to take it away so that I wouldn't have to deal with it but I had to take control over the situation. I told them I wanted them to have a nice time, visit and sightsee, “just let me know where you are so if I want to see you I can find you.” (R2)

The Coach

Emerging from the open-ended questions, five of the athletes mentioned their coach. They felt that their coach helped them to lead a balanced life while they were competing by encouraging them to pursue other activities outside of their sport. One of the athletes who talked adamantly about the necessity of a coach's encouragement revealed:

We were in this city the other week and I talked to some athletes who were on another National team. They have to be at their training center now so they can't go to school because they have to train full time for the World Championships next year. Their training center is this compound 40 miles out of town and they aren't allowed to have guests stay over. They have to be out by 10 p.m. even if they are married. They have all these horrible conditions and rules and as a result by the time they get to the Olympics

they are burnt out, they don't want to see another one. They ended up being 4th at the Olympics and they were World Champions the year before, so they were the favourite to win but they were self-destructive. I asked them why they went to that awful camp and they said if the coach invites you and you don't go, then it is very hard to make the team again. Whereas our coach is very good at finding people across the country who are strong and do well and then he has this huge list where he sends out letters and makes himself available to people. If they want to tryout for the team they can contact him. He talks with everyone to see what is best for them. This non-militant style helped us win the Olympic medal I am sure." (C5)

Travel

A common demand of elite athletes involves being away from home for extensive periods of time (Gould, Jackson & Finch, 1993; Krane, Greenleaf & Snow, 1997). Five of the athletes discussed the effects of travelling on the balance in their lives and reported that it was not affected by the amount of travelling they did. They enriched their travel experiences by immersing themselves in the culture of the different places they had the opportunity to visit around the world. However, two of the current athletes revealed that travelling did affect the balance in their lives by putting a strain on their personal relationships:

It's tough being away from home so much. If you go on a 15-16 day road trip, you miss your family. Basically you both know what you're getting into when you get married. It lasts for such a short period of time that you just basically have to keep saying that "one day we'll be home together all the time so maybe we should just enjoy this." I have always said that I can't wait until it's over to go to the Price Club and just fill up with groceries. You get to the point with the travel and possibilities of trade that you're scared to go shopping. Being situated is a nice thing. It's nice at that part of the year when you're home for a couple weeks. But, at the same time, it is fun to travel. (C3)

Recommendations for Others

One of the main purposes of this study was to develop a clearer understanding of balance in elite athletes' lives. The findings may be of value to help developing athletes who are seeking to lead a more balanced life during and after their athletic pursuits. To assist in this objective, participants were asked if they had any advice to offer other athletes to help them reach the elite

level and still maintain balance in their life. Some of their advice is reflected in the following quotes:

You can't forfeit everything else. Don't look at friendships, relationships and family as a burden to your sport. You will not realize how important those things are until your sport falls apart, which it will do at some point. Sport is great when it is going well but it can also be extremely depressing when it comes down. That is when you realize that you need balance and other people in your life; sport isn't everything. (C2)

They should take summers off, stay away from the game. I hate it when I see parents put their kids in six hockey schools over the summer. Otherwise, come September, they won't even want to play. You have to remember to let them have fun. (C3)

Winning and losing doesn't matter that much. The results of your races aren't nearly as important as the way your sport makes you feel. Never let go of that feeling. And keep a balance with the rest of your life, sport, school and social. (R1)

If you love your sport, then do it! Go crazy with it but remember that you've got lots of other things to explore too, keep plugging away at education. It is almost like starting a new relationship that you are so engrossed in it you forget everything else. That is okay for a while but if you take it to the extreme, you could lose your job, friends, everything. Especially with sport, very bad things can happen if you train too much. Besides failing school, you can get injured and seriously hurt yourself. You have to know how to listen to your body so you know when to take a break. (C5)

It's more difficult to have balance in your life than to not have balance. Make sure you stay connected with your family and friends and don't go off in your own world and stay in your own world. It's much more difficult, but it's more important. If you don't have those other supports and if you build your career or life on a very narrow base of focus, then you might make it to the top, but if anything happens on the way it could crash. So, if you have that strong base of support, other parts of your life, so that you're developing as a person, then you're going to have the ability to cope with the challenges and the setbacks that we are bound to face and all need to be able to cope with. (R2)

All the athletes felt that in order to reach the elite level and still maintain balance in their lives, there were a number of key factors that needed to be taken into consideration. These included the following: putting energy into areas outside of your sport, keeping in touch with your friends and family, enjoying what you are doing and taking time off from your sport.

Summary & Conclusion

In interpreting the findings generated from this study, it is important to consider the methodological limitations of the design employed. Although this sample included some of the best athletes in the world, it is unrealistic to generalize sweeping conclusions from only ten participants. Furthermore, despite the acquisition of the participants' diary forms as an additional source of information regarding their career, these individuals were only available for a limited amount of time, so the opportunity to probe into all the issues further was not always possible.

The use of a qualitative approach to investigate elite athletes' perceptions of balance provided an opportunity to explore and describe this phenomenon from the athletes' own perspectives. As a result of this research design used, substantial insights and lessons were shared by each athlete. Employing an open-ended method to investigate elite athletes' perceptions of balance resulted in various descriptions of balance. Half of the athletes defined balance primarily as having a goal, pursuing it, and making decisions with that goal in mind. This view was somewhat like an obsessive positive passion, where they felt it was life enhancing to receive so much joy from one domain of their life. The other half of the athletes defined balance as enjoying and respecting the different major parts of their life (e.g. sport, family, and leisure) and not being too reliant on one component for a sense of worth.

An important theme that emerged through the interviews was the variations in the athletes' personal balance at different periods in their life. The balance in their life shifted in accordance with their priorities for that time. The key to respecting their own balance was twofold. First, the athletes stressed the importance of having rest and recovery time away from their sport in order to perform consistently at a high level. Second, they accentuated the need to

be true to themselves, by knowing themselves and trusting their beliefs and instincts, in order to achieve their desired level of balance in their lives.

For these elite athletes, maintaining balance in their lives while striving for a desired high level goal was felt to be possible but very challenging to achieve. All ten athletes identified a number of prerequisites they felt were necessary in order to have balance in their life. The most commonly cited prerequisites were that an athlete must: (1) make a conscious decision to have balance; (2) have strong self discipline; (3) enjoy what they are doing; (4) have a supportive network; (5) have leisure time; and (6) be in the moment.

The potential theoretical and practical contributions of this study are an important beginning due to the gaps existing in the literature regarding the role of balance in elite athletes' lives. The findings that emerged from this study could be used as a first step in developing a theoretical model in which to guide further research on this topic. On a more practical note, it would be valuable to encourage athletes, coaches, sport psychologists and parents to discuss their own issues of balance as well as those of elite performers. The goal would be to jointly construct the best possible environment in which a person could pursue their desired level of excellence in sport or another domain while maintaining an overall sense of worth and balance in their lives.

In conclusion, it is hoped that as a result of this preliminary step to understanding balance in elite athletes' lives, future studies will follow. A valuable line of future research for this issue could be to explore the perceptions of balance from many more performers in different domains, and to perhaps also include the views of spouses, parents, sport psychologists, coaches and teachers.

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Appendix A
Diary Form 1

TYPICAL DAY DURING MOST COMPETITIVE SEASON

TIME	CODE NUMBER & TIME
0:00-0:30 am	
0:30-1:00 am	
1:00-1:30 am	
1:30-2:00 am	
2:00-2:30 am	
2:30-3:00 am	
3:00-3:30 am	
3:30-4:00 am	
4:00-4:30 am	
4:30-5:00 am	
5:00-5:30 am	
5:30-6:00 am	
6:00-6:30 am	
6:30-7:00 am	
7:00-7:30 am	
7:30-8:00 am	
8:00-8:30 am	
8:30-9:00 am	
9:00-9:30 am	
9:30-10:00 am	
10:00-10:30 am	
10:30-11:00 am	
11:00-11:30 am	
11:30-12:00 pm	

TIME	CODE NUMBER & TIME
12:00-12:30 pm	
12:30-1:00 pm	
1:00-1:30 pm	
1:30-2:00 pm	
2:00-2:30 pm	
2:30-3:00 pm	
3:00-3:30 pm	
3:30-4:00 pm	
4:00-4:30 pm	
4:30-5:00 pm	
5:00-5:30 pm	
5:30-6:00 pm	
6:00-6:30 pm	
6:30-7:00 pm	
7:00-7:30 pm	
7:30-8:00 pm	
8:00-8:30 pm	
8:30-9:00 pm	
9:00-9:30 pm	
9:30-10:00 pm	
10:00-10:30 pm	
10:30-11:00 pm	
11:00-11:30 pm	
11:30-12:00 am	

Appendix B
Instructions for Diary Forms

Instructions for Diary Forms

1) Recording of activities engaged in for a typical day during your most competitive season:

Please record all the activities you engage in during a typical day during your most competitive season on the accompanying diary forms. Code each behaviour with the numbers provided on the coding behaviour form. You can be as detailed as necessary and use the back of the sheets should you require more space. If there are some behaviours that you are unsure how to code, code them as best as you can and put a star beside them and we will clarify any questions you may have when we meet. If you perform more than one behaviour in the half hour period, code each behaviour and put the amount of time spent on that behaviour in parenthesis beside the code.

If you engage in a behaviour that appears to fit into two different categories, such as going out for dinner with friends, code both categories together. This behaviour involves eating which is coded as number 7 and leisure time with friends which is coded as 11. In this situation please code the behaviour as 7 & 11 (30 minutes).

For Example:

From 8:00 - 8:30 am I showered and walked to work. From 8:30 - 9:00 am I was at work. From 9:00 - 9:20 am I had coffee with a friend and then was back at work from 9:20 - 9:30 am. The diary would look as follows:

TIME	CODE NUMBER & TIME
8:00-8:30 am	7(10 mins) & 4 (20 mins)
8:30-9:00 am	10
9:00-9:30 am	7 & 11 (20 mins) & 10 (10 mins)

2) For the diary form of your most competitive year:

Please record the sporting activities engaged in during your most competitive year and the amount of time spent away from your home.

3) For the diary form of your sporting career over your life:

Please record the amount of time engaged in your sport over your life. Please include any significant sporting & life events you feel are important to mention.

List of Activities for Coding Behaviour

Code Number	Activity	Example
1	Training on own	Practice
2	Training with others	
3	Competitions	
4	Organization and preparation	Travel time to and from practice, competitions, school
5	Household activities	Prepare meals, dishwashing, housecleaning, repairs, washing
6	Shopping	Daily shopping (food and clothes), visits to bank, post office and other service
7	Body care and health	Washing, dressing, eating, visits to doctor, therapy, medical treatment
8	Sleeping	Night sleep, naps
9	Education	Courses, homework assignment
10	Work	Job
11	Leisure	Movies, theater, talks, reading, hobbies, girl/boyfriends, parties, TV, music, bars
12	Private/Other	Any activity that you do not wish to report or an activity that does not fit any of the listed codes

Appendix C

Diary Form 2

TYPICAL YEARLY SCHEDULE DURING MOST COMPETITIVE YEAR

MONTH	SCHEDULE
January	
February	
March	
April	
May	
June	
July	
August	
September	
October	
November	
December	

Appendix D

Diary Form 3

Appendix E
Completed Diary Forms

TYPICAL DAY DURING MOST COMPETITIVE SEASON

RETIRED ATHLETE - SWIMMING

TIME	CODE NUMBER & TIME
0:00-0:30 am	8
0:30-1:00 am	8
1:00-1:30 am	8
1:30-2:00 am	8
2:00-2:30 am	8
2:30-3:00 am	8
3:00-3:30 am	8
3:30-4:00 am	8
4:00-4:30 am	8
4:30-5:00 am	8
5:00-5:30 am	7
5:30-6:00 am	7 (20 min) & 4 (10 min)
6:00-6:30 am	2
6:30-7:00 am	2
7:00-7:30 am	2
7:30-8:00 am	2
8:00-8:30 am	7
8:30-9:00 am	9
9:00-9:30 am	9
9:30-10:00 am	9
10:00-10:30 am	8
10:30-11:00 am	8
11:00-11:30 am	9
11:30-12:00 pm	9

TIME	CODE NUMBER & TIME
12:00-12:30 pm	7
12:30-1:00 pm	9
1:00-1:30 pm	9
1:30-2:00 pm	9
2:00-2:30 pm	2
2:30-3:00 pm	2
3:00-3:30 pm	2
3:30-4:00 pm	2
4:00-4:30 pm	2
4:30-5:00 pm	2
5:00-5:30 pm	2
5:30-6:00 pm	7
6:00-6:30 pm	7 (15 min) & 9 (15 min)
6:30-7:00 pm	9
7:00-7:30 pm	9
7:30-8:00 pm	9
8:00-8:30 pm	11
8:30-9:00 pm	11
9:00-9:30 pm	8
9:30-10:00 pm	8
10:00-10:30 pm	8
10:30-11:00 pm	8
11:00-11:30 pm	8
11:30-12:00 am	8

**TYPICAL YEARLY SCHEDULE DURING MOST COMPETITIVE YEAR
RETIRED ATHLETE - SWIMMING**

MONTH	SCHEDULE
January	End of 2 week training camp (very hard) 2 dual meets (1 travel)
February	2 dual meets (1-2 away) Conference championships
March	Olympic trials & NCAA championships
April	Begin training, no competitions
May	Hard training, 1-2 competitions
June	Medium training, 1 competitions
July	Easy training, 1 competitions
August	Olympics
September	Off
October	Start back
November	Medium training
December	Medium training

RETROSPECTIVE ESTIMATES OF PRACTICE OVER SPORTING CAREER
RETIRED ATHLETE - SWIMMING

YEAR	AGE	LIFE EVENT	ESTIMATED PRACTICE
1975	5	Started sport	1 hr x 5 practices/wk
1979	9	Start year around swimming	1-2 hr x 5 practices/wk
1982	12	First National record	2 hr x 6 practices/wk
1984	14	Junior Nationals	2 hr x 8 practices/wk
1986	16	Senior Nationals	2 hr x 9 practices/wk
1988	18	Olympic trials & started college	2-4 hr x 9 practices/wk
1992	22	Olympics & end college	2-4 hr x 9 practices/wk
1996	26	Olympics	2-4 hr x 9 practices/wk

Appendix F
Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

- Do you ever think about quality of life?
 - What do you think?
 - When do you think you have experienced the highest quality of life?
 - What allowed for that to happen?
 - Are there conditions or prerequisites you have to respect for a certain quality of life?
 - Has your quality of life changed over the years?
-
- Have you thought about the role of balance in your life?
 - What do you think about it?
 - When do you think you had the most balance in your life?
 - What allowed for that to happen?
 - To what extent do you think your life was or is balanced as an elite athlete?
 - Was (is) it important?
 - What do you do outside of your training for a lift?
 - What does balance mean to you?
 - How would you define balance?
 - Do you think you have ever achieved balance?
 - Can you step outside yourself for a moment and tell me, if other people were looking at your life, how do you think they would see it in terms of balance?
 - Has your personal balance changed over the years?
 - Has the level of balance changed in your life at different times?

- Has there been a time in your life where anything other than sport was the priority?
 - Explore (ie. a relationship, occupation, etc.)
 - How do you try to maximize your productivity and performance in the different areas of your life?
 - Are there conditions or prerequisites you have to respect for personal balance?
 - Do you know anyone who has achieved a high or ideal level of balance?
 - Describe their life or their balance and why you think that?
 - Do you think that you can have excellence in life and excellence in sport?
 - If yes, how? If no, why not?
-

- What are the most important things you have learned about living your life fully and joyfully?
 - Are you able to live these lessons?
 - Where are you getting the most joy in your life?
-

- If you were giving advice to a young athlete just starting out who wanted to become an elite athlete and still maintain balance in their life, what advice would you offer?
-

- Now that you know what this research is about, is there anything that you feel I should have asked that you would like to talk about?
- Do you feel that I have influenced your responses in any way?
- Did you feel free to say exactly what you felt?

Appendix G
Sample Matrix

Breakdown of the themes discussed by current athletes

During Most Competitive Years	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Total
Have personal balance	*	*	*	*	*	5
Do not have personal balance						0
Other people would not see them as balanced	*	*	*	*	*	5
Definitions Of Balance						
Defined balance – goals/planned focus	*		*			2
Defined balance - respecting the different areas		*		*	*	3
Prerequisites For Balance						
Conscious decision to have balance	*	*	*	*	*	5
Emphasized self discipline	*	*	*	*	*	5
Enjoyment/loved it	*	*	*	*	*	5
Family understanding/supportive	*	*	*	*	*	5
Partner understanding/supportive		*	*	*	*	4
Emphasized importance of leisure	*	*	*	*	*	5
Have to be in the moment	*	*	*	*	*	5
Factors Affecting Balance						
Emphasized and knew how to prevent burnout	*	*	*	*	*	5
Emphasized importance of sleep	*	*	*	*	*	5
Emphasized importance of eating well	*		*	*		3
Coach supportive of balance	*			*	*	3
Travel		*	*		*	3
Mentioned dealing with media		*			*	2
Mentioned affect of injuries on balance			*			1
Perspectives On Balance						
Mentioned balance shifting with priorities	*	*	*	*	*	5
Mentioned time when referring to balance		*				1
Partner is also an elite athlete				*		1
Chose not to have relationship now	*					1
Friends understanding/supportive	*	*	*	*	*	5
Felt teammates were not balanced		*				1
Received energy from nature		*		*	*	3
Reading	*	*	*	*	*	5
Believed can have excellence in sport & life	*	*	*	*	*	5
Highest quality of life at the present time	*	*	*	*	*	5
Referred to transitions when discussing Q of Life	*	*	*	*	*	5

Breakdown of the themes discussed by retired athletes

During Most Competitive Years	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total
Had personal balance		*	*		*	3
Did not have personal balance	*			*		2
Other people would not see them as balanced	*	*	*	*	*	5
Definitions Of Balance						
Defined balance – goals/planned focus	*		*	*		3
Defined balance – respecting the different areas		*			*	2
Prerequisites For Balance						
Conscious decision to have balance	*	*	*	*	*	5
Emphasized self discipline	*	*	*	*	*	5
Enjoyment/loved it	*	*	*	*	*	5
Family understanding/supportive	*	*	*	*	*	5
Partner understanding/supportive	*	*	*	*		4
Emphasized importance of leisure	*	*	*	*	*	5
Have to be in the moment	*	*	*	*	*	5
Factors Affecting Balance						
Emphasized and knew how to prevent burnout		*	*		*	3
Emphasized importance of sleep	*		*	*	*	4
Emphasized importance of eating well		*	*	*	*	4
Coach supportive of balance		*	*			2
Travel	*	*				2
Mentioned dealing with media		*	*	*	*	4
Mentioned affect of injuries on balance						0
Perspectives On Balance						
Mentioned balance shifting with priorities	*	*	*	*	*	5
Mentioned time when referring to balance						0
Partner was also an elite athlete	*	*		*		3
Chose not to have relationship during competit yrs					*	1
Felt teammates were not balanced		*			*	2
Friends understanding/supportive	*	*	*	*	*	5
Received energy from nature	*		*	*		3
Reading	*	*	*	*	*	5
Believed can have excellence in sport & life	*	*	*	*	*	5
Highest quality of life during competitive years	*			*	*	3
Found transitions into retirement fairly smooth		*	*	*	*	4

Appendix H
Ethics Approval Forms



Université d'Ottawa • University of Ottawa

Faculté des sciences de la santé
Cabinet de la doyenne

Faculty of Health Sciences
Office of the Dean



April 6, 1998

Professor Terry Orlick
Student Kimberley Amirault
School of Human Kinetics
Faculty of Health Sciences
125 University, Montpetit Hall
INTRA

Dear Professor, Dear Student:

Subject: Your project entitled –
“The perception of balance in elite athletes lives”

It is my pleasure to inform you that the Faculty of Health Sciences, Human Research Ethics Committee, after study of the documentation provided, concluded that your project met the appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and falls within **CATEGORY 1A**.

I hereby attach a copy of the certificate of clearance granted by the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

This certificate is valid for a period of one year from the time of issuance. I would also like to remind you that, in accordance with the policies of the UHREC, it is your responsibility to notify the Committee of any major changes in this project.

On behalf of the Committee, I wish you success in your project.

Sincerely,

J. Roger Proulx, Ph.D.
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee

Encl.



Université d'Ottawa - University of Ottawa

Faculté des sciences de la santé
Cabinet de la doyenne

Faculty of Health Sciences
Office of the Dean

CERTIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES

This is to certify that the Institutional Human Research Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences has examined the research proposal from Professor Terry Orlick and Student Kimberley Amirault from School of Human Kinetics for the project "*The perception of balance in elite athletes lives*" and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research protocol meets the appropriate standards of ethical acceptability, at a Category 1A level.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

<u>Name (Optional)</u>	<u>Position held</u>	<u>Department of discipline</u>
Victor Boucher	Professor	Audiology and Speech-Pathology Program
François Tremblay	Professor	Physiotherapy Program
Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz	Professor	Occupational Therapy Program
Jocelyne Tourigny	Professor	School of Nursing
Julian Roberts	Professor	Department of Criminology
Roch Paquin	Member-at-Large	
Mark Grenier	Student	School of Human Kinetics
J. Roger Proulx	Chair	Human Research Ethics Committee School of Human Kinetics

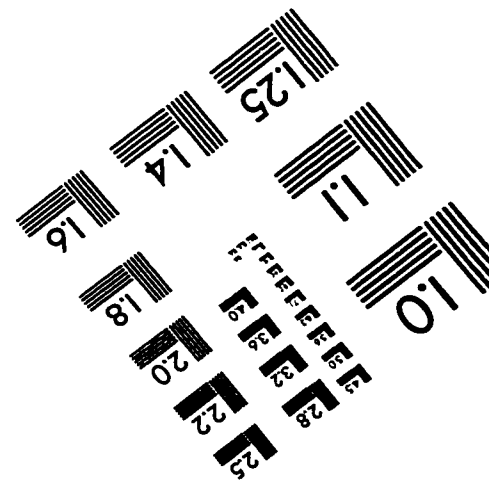
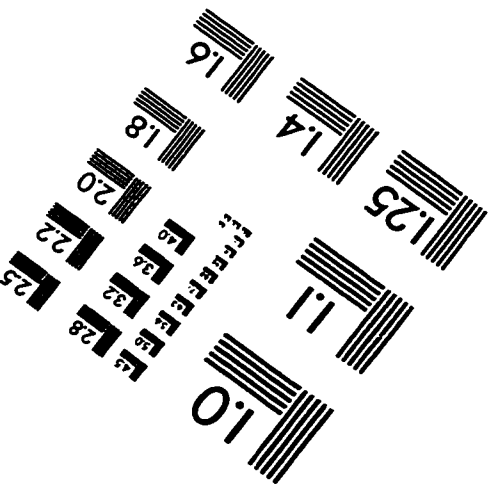
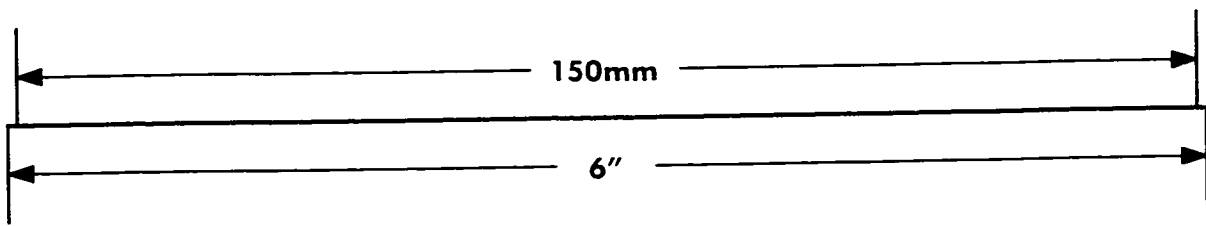
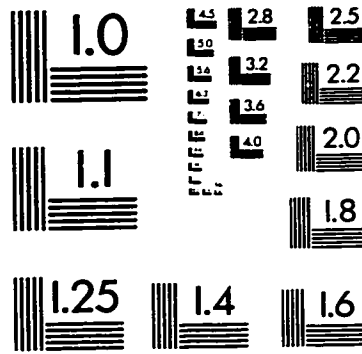
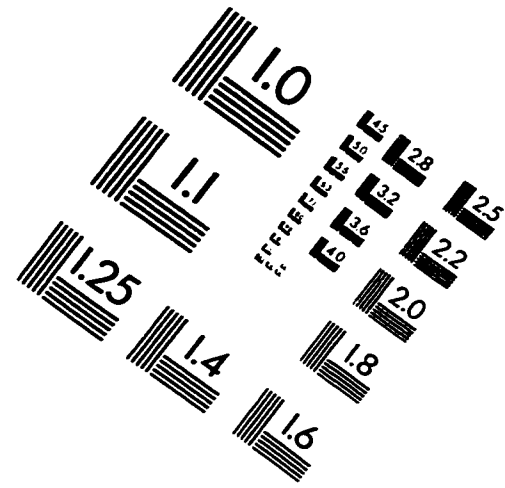
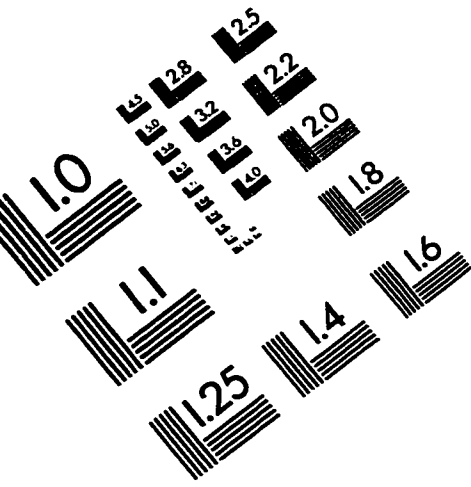
SIGNATURE

06/04/98

Date

Committee Chairperson - J. Roger Proulx, Ph.D.

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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