ABSTRACT
Career transition in sport has become an increasingly popular area of study due to the high volume of athletes struggling with transition. Unlike team and individual sports, there is limited research involving elite ballet dancers’ transition and the process that is experienced. Through examining Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) Conceptual Model of Athletic Retirement and an in-depth case study interview, the purpose of this paper is to closely analyze professional dancers’ self-identity issues when transitioning from elite dance roles to everyday life.

INTRODUCTION
Career transition for many athletes is extremely difficult. According to Sparkes (1998), high performance athletes often struggle with their adjustment to career transition due to their loss of self-identity and their perceived feeling of descent from extraordinary to ordinary. It would appear therefore, that similar to high performance athletes, professional dancers undergo identity issues when transitioning from elite performance roles to dance-related occupations. This comparison and contrast of supporting research studies will provide a better understanding of career transition for dancers.

Planning for career retirement appears to be an uncertain process that athletes tend to avoid until the time for change transpires. There are many reasons why athletes decide to transition out of sport, but most decisions are involuntary, such as, age, injury or illness. Athletes are conscious of the fact that retirement is inevitable, but do not accept that reality while actively competing. Jeffri and Thorsby (2006) reinforce that there appears to be a gap between perception and reality. Bailey (1993) suggests that the athlete’s view on transition will determine his or her success with the adoption, and having a negative outlook will likely lead to resistance and difficulty.

Preparation for career transition is a process that seems to lack importance in the eyes of a dancer. Jeffri et al (2006) suggest that preparation for career transition for dancers is the key to success after dancing, yet some dancers avoid preparing for fear of jeopardizing their career, and due to a lack of confidence to succeed in a different area. Pickman (1987) found similar evidence through interviews with former dancers who expressed that a lack of transferable skills creates a barrier when transitioning. Dancers don’t generally retire until the mid-thirties, and the thought of having to begin a new career at that age without any post-secondary education or field experience prevents a smooth transition.

Throughout the process, many dancers feel a sense of emptiness in having to abandon something that has been such a large part of one’s life. Jeffri et al (2006) found that dancers mourn the loss of their identity before starting a new career. These feelings of loss can lead to depression and despondency that further hinder successful career transition. Individuals who began a dancing career at a very young age, and who have defined themselves through dance, have an even more intensified feeling of loss and turmoil suggests Pickman (1987). In order to move on with a new career, dancers must first accept and deal with these feelings of loss and grief.

METHODOLOGY
Participants
The study involved a 51-year-old participant named Sarah (pseudonym), a former elite ballet dancer. Sarah performed in various professional ballet academies around the world from the age of 5, discontinuing her career at the age of 19. This particular ex-professional ballet dancer was chosen to be the case study for this research, as her background in the sport at such a young age gave good insight into the lives many dancers experience before reaching adulthood.

Procedure
The methodology chosen for this study consisted of two qualitative, face-to-face, in-depth interviews. The factors related to adapting to career transition from Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) model was used to compare the factors associated with Sarah’s career transition, using self-identity as a major theme of the interviews. Qualitative interviews allow for in-depth, full descriptive, analysis of individuals’ behaviour when transitioning from a sporting career. The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

RESULTS
Taylor and Ogilvie’s (1994) Conceptual Model of Athletic Retirement was used as a general framework to organize the results from the interview, specifically to the factors related to sport career transition. From an analysis of the two in-depth interviews, there were two emerging themes that were identified: 1) lack of social and emotional support, and 2) self-identity issues.

Lack of Social and Emotional Support
It appears that dancers experience a lack of social and emotional support during their professional dancing career, resulting in self-identity issues that evolve over the course of their profession. In order for ballet dancers to experience a smooth career transition from elite dancing, there must be emotional and social support from both the internal and external environment. There is a large amount of independence and rejoice that is expected in ballet dancers, regardless of age. Sarah experienced a lack of support while first traveling afar to pursue a dancing career at the age of 6:

“I remember being my self in the room and already feeling alone, and knowing I couldn’t be homesick knowing that I couldn’t cry I had to do what I needed to do.”

With the amount of pressure to uphold a reputation of a professional ballet dancer, there leaves little room to be vulnerable. Throughout Sarah’s worldly career as a dancer, the thought of abandoning the ballet life due to the lack of support was not an easy process to accept:

“It was difficult emotionally as I was away from my family and friends and no one could quite understand the major thing that was happening in my life. Again not wanting to disappoint anyone or let them down I kept the part of me that was dying on the inside to myself. It felt very much like a mourning process.”

Career transitions for elite dancer’s are not always something they can be prepared for even if the decision was voluntary. Sarah expresses that she was ill-prepared for the process due to lack of support:

“There really wasn’t anyone or anything that was available to help me prepare for the transition. I had to come to it and work it out on my own.”

Self-Identity Issues
“At 19 I realized that I had put my focus on getting to where I was and it wasn’t what I thought it would be. I was lost emotionally.”

At the beginning of a dancer’s career, especially during adolescence years, there appears to be self identity issues that continues to evolve over the course of a dancer’s career. Dancers develop a strong level of discipline and increased rate of maturity earlier than the average child, therefore resulting in feelings of detachment from oneself and society. Sarah expressed her feelings as follows:

“I have always and will always think of myself as a dancer, it is who I am in my head and I can’t change that.”

Dancers, when dealing with career transition, eventually learn to grow through the experience to help better cope with accepting their lives’ post transition.

“I still identify myself as being a dancer, it is just who I am inside. It is the one thing in life I feel confident in, no one can take away that knowledge or path that has led me here.”

CONCLUSION
The themes highlighted from the interviews suggest that dancers encounter similar self-identity issues to that of elite athletes when transitioning from elite performance. Dancers encounter differing issues with self-identity than elite level athletes, both individual and team. Dancers do not always have the support of a coach to guide them through highs and lows of their careers like that of an elite level athlete. Dancers also lack the support of teammates, a system that many athletes benefit from. The lack of support systems can cause the dancer to feel alienated and estranged from their dancing careers. Through evidence in the research, the age a dancer begins a career does in fact intensify the transition process, due to the amount of environmental adaptations necessary to succeed at a young age.

Elite dance performers are highly aware of the emotional, psychological and educational difficulties that complicate the career transition process. There are various institutions that help dancers cope with the struggles, but Jeffri et al (2006) suggest the lack of preparation contributes to self-identity crises and subsequent negative experiences. It appears that the better the dancer is prepared, the more satisfied the dancer will be in his or her post-transition career. Further research is necessary to examine how dancers are exposed to the current institutions to experience a smoother transition.

REFERENCES

