

Balancing female basketball players' career progression with family planning decisions

by

Alliasen Miscione

A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Public Health Sciences

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2026

© Alliasen Miscione 2026

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Background: Female professional athletes face unique challenges, including lack of funding for league improvements or player salaries, fewer opportunities in terms of exposure to or abundance of professional leagues, and gender norms that limit their engagement in professional sport careers. These limitations are exacerbated when childbearing during the peak years of their career comes into consideration. The goal of this research is to better understand the impact of family planning and pregnancy on career progression of professional female basketball players.

Research Questions: This thesis examined: What impact, if any, do female basketball players believe pregnancy, giving birth, and parenting may have on their career progression? Specifically, I explored (a) What potential implications on physical performance exist because of pregnancy? (b) What financial changes do athletes anticipate pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period could bring to a career in sport? (c) What supports are necessary to help female athletes balance pregnancy and motherhood with a career in sport?

Methods: This study employs a qualitative research design. Narrative inquiry was used to examine how athletes navigate decisions regarding pregnancy, childbearing, and the career progression. The study population included nine professional athletes who are considering or who have experienced childbearing, and who have or had a basketball career. Participants were recruited through personal social media accounts. Individuals were eligible for this study if they self-identified as a professional basketball player and felt they could speak on pregnancy or motherhood in sport through personal experiences. Semi-structured, individual interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes explored participants' accounts regarding the factors influencing their pregnancy decisions and the effects childbearing may have on their careers. Narrative thematic analysis was used to capture common themes across interviews.

Findings: Three stories were created from a compilation of participants' accounts at three stages of the decision-making process to have children. Five participants did not have children at the time of interviews, and four participants were mothers of one or more children. First, a professional basketball player before pregnancy and motherhood, a professional basketball

player after pregnancy while still competing, and lastly, a retired professional basketball player who waited until after their career was over to have children. These three stories demonstrate multiple stages of this decision and how the participants navigate the decision-making experience. These three stories also highlight four main themes within the analysis. The themes highlighted are financial insecurity and structural constraints that exist within professional women's basketball, global mobility in sport, the body as a site of uncertainty because of pregnancy, and lastly, the stigma surrounding pregnancy and motherhood in professional sport. Many participants experienced difficulty or conflict in making decisions about pregnancy and childbearing and participants often found balancing motherhood and professional basketball challenging. Lastly, their perspectives on pregnancy and motherhood in sport was largely influenced by their personal situations and experiences and therefore is different for every athlete.

Conclusions: The findings from this study contribute to understanding the unique challenges female athletes might face when making decisions about pregnancy and childbearing. The findings can also be leveraged to advocate for improved support systems and practices in professional sports to ensure female athletes who choose to become pregnant and give birth are supported in maintaining their athletic career. Ultimately, this research highlights the need for further exploration into the intersection of gender, sport, and reproductive choices.

Acknowledgements

I first want to say thank you so very much to my supervisor Dr. Elena Neiterman, your guidance and patience was everything I could have asked for. You are such a pleasure to work with, and I cannot thank you enough for your kindness, understanding, and attention to detail in always reviewing my work while also understanding all of the crazy events life threw at me throughout this degree.

Thank you to my committee members Dr. Warren Dodd and Dr. Brendan Riggan for your helpful feedback and flexibility throughout this process.

To my family, and friends thank you for supporting me through this journey and always giving me your words of encouragement.

Most of all, thank you to the nine women who participated in this research. This thesis could not happen without the sacrifice of your time and your stories. Thank you for your vulnerable answers, your detailed stories, your thoughtful well wishes, and trusting me to build a narrative around your experiences. Your stories are what have driven this thesis, and I thank you for wanting to take part.

Table of Contents

Author's Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	3
2.1 Sociocultural forces shaping the intersection of sport and motherhood.....	3
2.2 History of women in professional sports.....	5
2.3 Women as professional athletes.....	7
2.4 Challenges for women in sport in connection to childbearing decisions.....	9
2.5 Career decisions intercepting pregnancy/maternity leave issues.....	11
2.6 History of women in professional positions.....	13
Chapter 3 Study Objectives.....	15
Chapter 4 Methods.....	16
4.1 Theoretical framework and methodological orientation.....	16
4.2 Research design.....	17
4.3 Study, sample, and recruitment.....	17
4.4 Data collection.....	19
4.5 Data analysis – Narrative thematic analysis.....	20
4.6 Reflexivity and positionality.....	22
Chapter 5 Findings – Participant stories: decision making factors.....	25
5.1 An athlete deciding to have children during an athletic career.....	25

5.2 A mother still competing.....	32
5.3 A mother waiting until retirement to have children.....	40
Chapter 6 Discussion.....	46
6.1 Key insights.....	46
6.2 Strength, limitations, and implications.....	49
Chapter 7 Conclusion.....	54
References.....	55
Appendices.....	61
Appendix A: Recruitment email.....	61
Appendix B: Recruitment poster.....	62
Appendix C: Letter of information and consent form.....	63
Appendix D: Interview guide.....	67
Appendix E: Feedback letter.....	71

Chapter 1: Introduction

The spotlight surrounding female athletes in recent years has been slowly growing. There has been a recent increase in media representation, discussions surrounding higher salaries, and larger agreements in place for athletes to feel supported (ESPN, 2023). However, a part of female athlete experiences that has remained taboo is pregnancy and motherhood in sport. A long-standing assumption that a career in sport and motherhood/pregnancy are unsupportive of one another continue to restrict the ideals of female athletes (Little et al. 2015). Additionally, there is more work to be done to support female athletes who are trying to balance both pregnancy/motherhood and a career in sport outside of their country of origin, especially when navigating work visas as a condition to their contract. This need for support has sparked an increased frequency of research, however, the initiatives to support female athletes are moving at a very slow pace. Aiming to create a stepping stone for change in these athletes' careers, a qualitative narrative inquiry using narrative thematic analysis was completed using semi-structured interviews with nine female professional basketball players. The participants were between the ages of 23-41 and included four mothers and five players who were seriously thinking about pregnancy and parenting.

This thesis will begin with a literature review discussing how motherhood/pregnancy and family planning are experienced and previously understood in a professional athlete context. I will discuss the sociology of sport, the niche aspects of a professional athlete career, and the challenges athletes may face with family planning. Following will be a description of how narrative inquiry was employed for this research and why constructionism and sport sociology informed this research. Lastly, findings from the narrative inquiry are summarized through stories compiled from women at different stages of their decision as well, followed by a discussion of my findings, reflection on what might limit the contributions the research could make, and a conclusion.

A note about language:

I recognize that the language throughout this manuscript is in line with a binary classification of gender due to the sample of participants that were interviewed. All participants were female

athletes participating in women's sport identifying as women. I recognize that this may be a limitation of my research in that as the inclusivity of non-binary athletes in sport grows, the direct conclusions of this study could be affected by new perspectives. However, this also highlights opportunity for new research with expanded participant pools as sport continues to evolve using gender-neutral language.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Sociocultural forces shaping the intersection of sport and motherhood

The field of sociology of sport provides critical tools for understanding how athletic careers are shaped not only by physical performance demands, but also by the social structures, cultural norms, and institutional practices that govern sporting environments. Sport is not a neutral arena; rather, it is a sociocultural institution deeply intertwined with gender, capitalism, nationalism, and broader ideologies about body, work, and identity (Besnier & Brownell, 2012). This perspective is essential when examining how female basketball players navigate family planning during the most physically and professionally demanding phases of their careers.

Historically, sport environments have been constructed around male bodies and male life patterns, privileging masculine ideals such as strength, endurance, competition, and independence (Senne, 2016). Female athletes who have entered this system later and with fewer resources often faced institutional barriers that limited their opportunities (Fink, 2015). These structural inequalities include disparities in salaries, media visibility, sponsorship opportunities, facilities, and institutional supports (“Annual wages”, 2025; Ford, 2024), all of which contribute to shaping professional women’s basketball environments today.

Gendered expectations about the ‘ideal athlete’ often conflict with the normative expectations of the ‘ideal mother’ (Fink, 2016). These expectations conflict because of the intense schedule and level of commitment a professional athlete is expected to uphold, in tandem with the caregiving expectations on a mother (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). Sociological research has shown that these norms construct motherhood as incompatible with elite sport, reinforcing the belief that pregnancy represents a natural interruption of athletic identity, progression, and commitment (Darroch et al. 2023; Cosh et al. 2013). As a result, athlete-mothers experience a form of “double burden” attempting to meet both the demands of high-performance sport and the societal expectations of femininity, caregiving, and maternal responsibility (Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Palmer & Leberman, 2009).

Researchers within sport sociology view an athlete’s body as a site of work and value (McGregor et al. 2024), which may complicate female athletes’ reproductive choices. Athlete-mothers are simultaneously expected to have their body perform at peak levels and to fulfill social expectations of childbearing. Other studies in sociology note that female athletes’ bodies

have historically been policed by league administrators and coaches (Dubose, 2022). This control over women's bodies has created space for society to then further objectify them. The constant objectification creates a search for femininity, sexual appeal, and reproductive potential in female athletes much more intensely than in male athletes (Dubose, 2022).

Within professional women's sport, contracts, coaching practices, training regimens, and sponsorship obligations function as systems of ownership regulating athletes' bodies (Dubose, 2022). Pregnancy becomes a point of tension since the body can no longer function in the same ways it was contractually agreed to do. Pregnancy is often viewed as a risk, threatening team performance, contract reliability, and marketability of the athlete herself. The sociological concept of 'biopower' is particularly relevant, referring to how institutions exert control over bodies, health, and reproductive decisions (Sugden, 2022). These mechanisms of control can influence whether athletes feel supported, hesitant, or fearful when contemplating pregnancy.

In professional sports, career length is short, income is often unstable, and employment is dependent on temporary contracts, performance statistics, and visibility. For women playing overseas or in leagues that lack strong collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), the uncertainty is increased (The Canadian Press, 2024). Additionally, many players - unless they have obtained local citizenship - may have their contracts tied to working visas. Non-EU citizens, including those who granted visas, do not automatically get the same rights and access to social services, including parental or sick leaves, as EU citizens under free movement rules (Andrew, 2023; Impact of Brexit on Foreign Footballers' Work Permits, 2024). Moreover, in most cases, the athlete's contract would be tied to the entry visa, and if an athlete's contract was to end, whether due to termination or expiration, the visa will also end unless renewed or changed to an alternate status (O'Leary et al. 2025). Thus, the terms of employment may differ considerably for those who are a citizens versus import players. This creates a space for sport organizations to circumvent policy because contract termination may also result in work visa termination (O'Leary et al. 2025). Pregnancy intersects with this instability in ways that differ remarkably from traditional workplaces. While some professional fields support maternity leave, careers in any sport almost exclusively rely on physical peak performance, which is impossible to meet when taking time away from sport for childbearing. This makes time away from play particularly consequential. Sociologists describe this as a temporal mismatch between athletic career

trajectories and reproductive timelines; a theme echoed repeatedly in research on female athletes navigating motherhood (Davenport et al. 2022; Smith et al. 2023).

Another reoccurring narrative in existing research is athletic identity: the internalized sense of self that athletes form because of their participation in sport. High-performance athletes often develop identities deeply tied to achievement, physical ability and competitive success (Ronkainen et al. 2016). For women in professional basketball, becoming pregnant could disrupt this identity, or conversely, lead to reconceptualization of what it means to be an athlete-mother. Narrative based sport sociology research has shown that female athletes often tell stories of tension, negotiation, and resilience as they attempt to merge pregnancy and motherhood with their athletic self-understanding (McGregor et al. 2024). This developing narrative is not just personal, but it is also shaped by cultural ideas around how pregnancy is interpreted within sport communities.

2.2 History of women in professional sports

For decades, female athletes have faced the unique and often hidden challenges of balancing the barriers for success in professional sports. Whether the discussion revolved around athletic performance, decisions around family planning, or living in the shadows of their male counterparts, the historical rise of female professional sports has been neither linear nor quick. Female presence in professional sports was insignificant compared to their male counterparts for a long time. Societal norms exacerbated this issue because traditional gender roles have long dictated that women should be engaging in less physically demanding activities which limited opportunities for women to be taken seriously as professional athletes (Senne, 2016). The lack of funding and media representation of female sports could also have played a role in this, resulting in the low levels of public exposure female athletes were getting to further their careers. In comparison to men, women, collectively, faced more barriers in accessing a multitude of things that are essential in player and league success.

The first Olympic games that female athletes were allowed to compete in was at the 1900 games in Paris (ESPN, 2023). Since the 1900 Olympic games, female participation in professional sports and Olympic competitions has been growing; however, this increase is slow. In the Olympic games in 1900, only 22 out of 997 of athletes were female (ESPN, 2023). These

female athletes represented their countries in five sports: tennis, sailing, croquet, equestrian, and golf (ESPN, 2023). Comparatively, at the 2024 Paris Olympic games, there was female participation in many contact sports, and, for the first time in history, gender parity was reached between approximately 10,500 athletes (“Frequently asked questions”, n.d.). Therefore, it has taken 128 years of Olympic games, approximately 64 games (every 2 years, winter and summer games alternating) for this parity to be achieved.

Female athletes now compete in the more “physical” or “masculine” sports such as basketball. While overall there has been progress, in basketball, this progress was slower. The first time women’s basketball was a part of the Olympic games was in 1976; this was approximately forty years behind men’s basketball which began in 1936 (“Olympic Basketball”, n.d.). The delayed entrance of women into professional basketball was also seen with the National Basketball Association (NBA): the NBA was established in 1949 (National Basketball Association, 2025), but the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) was not established until 1996 (“History and origin of the games”, n.d.). The facilities that exist for female professional athletes are often drastically different as well; many WNBA teams must practice at shared facilities. The shared spaces include public recreation centres, local colleges with locker room and gym space that WNBA teams can rent or shared athletic complexes with the NBA teams (“The NBA’s new practice facilities”, 2016). Conversely, within the NBA, which is the ‘equivalent’ men’s league to the WNBA, every team has their own multi-million-dollar private training facility equipped with many variations of recovery rooms, lounges, nutrition centers, sport medicine doctor access and private locker rooms (“The NBA’s new practice facilities”, 2016). Lastly, when viewing the salaries for male players versus female players, there is a remarkable difference. The average salary in the NBA during the 2024-25 season was approximately 12 million dollars (“Annual wages”, 2025). In comparison, the average WNBA salary during the 2024-25 season was approximately 120 thousand dollars, and even the top earners only reached salaries of approximately 250 thousand dollars (“Annual wages”, 2025).

Female university basketball also has faced many barriers. Title IX is a civil rights law in America for university level athletes that prohibits sex-based discrimination in any athletic program within educational institutions that receive federal funding. This law ensures that there are equal opportunities for both genders in sports. Therefore, girls and women have the same

access as boys and men to athlete participation, scholarships, and resources (Dubose, 2022). Before Title IX was passed in 1972, women's basketball programs were largely underfunded and often remained restricted for female participation in any formal competition (Bell, 2007). Title IX created a surge in women's participation in formal competition. This surge assisted in allowing women to be put on similar stages to men, such as the participation of women in the NCAA basketball national tournament (March Madness). Women's college basketball has faced similar barriers to professional basketball such as lower-quality facilities, less opportunity for scholarships, and far less media coverage than that provided to their male counterparts (Fink, 2015).

In addition to facing these barriers, women are also struggling with gendered representation of athletes. For instance, the sexualization of women in sport often starkly contrasts with the treatment of their male counterparts, particularly as female athletes begin to gain more spotlight in the professional sport realm. While male athletes are typically celebrated for their athleticism and achievements, female athletes are frequently subject to scrutiny based on their appearance and sexuality. As women continue to rise in professional sports, the emphasis on their physical appearance rather than their athletic prowess highlights the ongoing challenges of gender inequality in the sport industry (Dubose, 2022).

These barriers have left amateur female athletes underfunded and under supported in reaching their potential within athletic careers which further worsens the existing gender gap. Recently female athletes have begun to receive more opportunities in sport with more leagues created, more teams added, and more coverage of women's sport. The establishment of women's leagues in sports, such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), has provided more opportunities for women to compete at a high level and earn a living as athletes. Currently, the WNBA has approximately 12 teams holding 144 athletes ("Frequently asked questions", n.d.), and the countless leagues overseas in Europe, Australia, and the United Kingdom have slowly been expanding. Additionally, the inclusion and success of thousands of female athletes who have represented their countries in the Olympics has been critical in elevating women's sports. Iconic performances by female athletes have inspired generations and demonstrated that women can and should be competing at the highest levels.

2.3 Women as Professional Athletes

While there has been significant growth in female sport research that has emerged in recent years, existing research on professional athletes regarding their physical fitness, return to play following an injury, and satisfaction in their profession focuses mostly on men and offer less insights into women's experiences. However, as research on female athletes continues to expand, it has become increasingly evident that female bodies respond differently to treatment, rehabilitation after injury, and training than male bodies, and, therefore, the approach to each of these components of sport should differ accordingly. For example, in a study about concussion recovery in collegiate level male and female athletes, it was found that female athletes report increased symptoms following a concussion (Ono et al. 2016). Additionally, in a study about the male and female risks for an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury, female athletes were found to possess a genetic predisposition which creates an extra Q-angle in the knee. This extra angle adds to the risk of an ACL tear. There is also evidence that there are hormonal influences that may influence a women's chance of tearing their ACL (Washington, 2012). This supports the need for research in specifically female sports so that these female professional athletes can be supported as much as possible in recovery journeys. Without having progressing data collected on female athletes, recovery programs, training regimens, and protocols will be built around incorrect information for the female body. These study results show the physiological and hormonal differences that exclusively occur between male and female bodies. Many researchers have examined the effects of exercise on pregnancy, the impact of injury on the body, and the science behind return to play protocols (Committee on Obstetric Practice, 2020). However, fewer have incorporated the realities of participating in a contact sport such as basketball during pregnancy. Additionally, the professional athlete expectation that women will return to rigorous activity as quickly as possible postpartum rather than gradually resume mild exercise at their own pace is typically neglected from examination as well (Committee on Obstetric Practice, 2020). Without research on these athletes' experiences in the process of making these decisions, the advancement of support programs and training adaptations regarding pregnancy and maternity leave in this career path will remain unsupported (McGregor et al. 2024).

Guidelines for physical activity and exercise during pregnancy exist for the general population; however, these guidelines are not built for elite athletes whose daily training already exceeds current exercises recommendations (Davenport et al. 2023a). There is a lack of guidance

and many potential barriers that athletes can face during and following pregnancy. Elite athletes have expressed feeling disconnected from the support and guidance needed from coaches or health care providers for their careers when currently pregnant or postpartum (Davenport et al. 2023a; Davenport et al. 2024). In a study interviewing coaches, physicians and health care providers that all work directly with athletes, five main themes were highlighted. The first theme was lack of female athlete reproductive research, next, the need for evidence-informed education and training. The study explained that the goal of education and training was to inform both the athletes on what supports are available as well as the coaches and health care providers to adapt their training programs or care regimens to match what athletes need. Another theme was the need to develop evidence-based return-to-play progression for sport participation in pregnancy and postpartum athletes. Lastly, changes in supports for pregnant/postpartum athletes as well as open communication to support athlete-centred care was a major take away from this research (Davenport et al. 2023b).

Another study described the advancement of acceptance of elite athletes becoming pregnant or parents (Smith et al. 2023). In the past, if a female athlete was pregnant, she was “done” and no longer considered as a professional athlete. Organizations would use funding on another athlete that would not need the same time off. However, in recent years, as athletes with larger platforms begin to speak up, publicly drawing more attention to the lack of maternity support within athletes’ contracts, changes have begun (Smith et al. 2023). This study also found that many participants felt if these narratives had been shared sooner, they would not have been heard, nor would these women continue in their sport after breaking nondisclosure agreements with their sponsors (Smith et al. 2023). Lastly, this study found that all participants identified the need for continued progression in acceptance and support for high-performance athletes balancing pregnancy and parenthood (Smith et al. 2023). This highlights the current state of female athlete voices beginning to be heard and shows the need for more testimony from this community to advocate for change.

2.4 Challenges for women in sport in connection to childbearing decisions

Pregnancy and childbirth may significantly affect the athlete’s body and require a lot of time and hard work to recover and regain strength and endurance that they may have lost throughout the pregnancy (Davenport et al. 2023a). Often, the training regimen for high-level athletes needs to

be modified during pregnancy and the post-partum period to accommodate the changing physical abilities while also keeping health at the forefront of training programs (Committee on Obstetric Practice, 2020). This means that the physical strength and conditioning an athlete is in when training to be “game ready” is rarely upheld, suggesting that return to play can take time. Rebuilding strength, endurance and skill after pregnancy and childbirth can be a lengthy process, sometimes outside the confines of the allotted return to play timeline. To make things harder, the risk of injury can be higher when returning to intense physical activity after such a long period of reduced training (Stokes et al. 2020).

In addition, pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period may require taking time away from the sport, which can result in losing career momentum and visibility. In sports, visibility, statistics, and game accomplishments are what promote and improve every aspect of an athlete’s professional career. Without games played in a season, the career is at a standstill. A professional athlete’s career span is relatively short in comparison to most people’s careers. Unfortunately, age-wise it overlaps with the time female athletes might be at peak of their reproductive capacity.

Pregnancy also raises concern about injuring the athlete or the fetus. Continuing to play while pregnant typically does not last beyond the first trimester. The age and performance window can only last so long, and it is not up to the athlete to ‘want’ to keep playing. In some circumstances, the ‘want to play’ is present from the athlete but physically they are no longer capable. If their bodies can no longer handle the rigorous physical activity that comes with their career, then they are forced to retire (Subijana et al. 2020). Having a year or multiple off for childbearing is a much larger percentage of the total career timeframe in comparison to a typical 30–40-year career and can greatly affect the longevity of women’s careers and their achievements along the way.

In basketball, players make contact during defence, rebounding, or going after loose balls. These legal contact situations can become dangerous when more contact is made than what is allowed. The danger stems from opposing players receiving hits that use excessive force. The challenge of female athletes’ attempting to merge reproductive choices with sport lies in the fact that the body itself is a tool for sport careers, and lack of training could have a detrimental effect on the body's ability to take contact (Stokes et al. 2020).

In addition, career in sport can also interfere with parenting due to travel demands and scheduling conflicts. A career as an athlete requires extensive travelling for competition which

can be challenging with a newborn or a young child. Balancing competition schedules with childcare and family responsibilities can also be difficult because of the unorthodox work schedule of an athlete and can reduce access to childcare which is generally organized around a more consistent 9am-5pm work schedule. Thus, female athletes' reproductive decision making can also include concerns about parenting, which go beyond pregnancy, birth, and the immediate postpartum period (Hellborg, 2024).

Professional athletes must also balance the intricacies of their unique career in addition to family planning. Unlike corporate careers, where progression and promotion often follow a linear trajectory, skills and expertise can be honed over decades, and there are opportunities for extended leaves without intense setbacks, athletic careers are defined by peak physical performance. This can be time-sensitive in terms of age, physical fitness, and athletic ability. A career in sport requires intense dedication and training from a young age as well as a lot of mental resilience. Additionally, this career comes with large amounts of pressure on a national or world stage and may put these athletes in a very public view while handling the stress and pressure to perform.

Overall, being a professional athlete is marked by a relentless commitment to maintaining peak physical condition; however, peak physical condition typically intercepts with peak reproductive timing as well. This highlights the dilemma that may arise when childbearing decisions intercept with the time frame of peak physical performance to advance in a professional sport. Female athletes, therefore, might be forced to decide if they want to remain active in their career or take a break to focus on family planning, and while such decisions may be necessary in any professional field, they are arguably riskier in sports where one's body is a vehicle for career progression.

2.5 Career decisions intercepting pregnancy/maternity leave issues

There are many decisions to consider around pregnancy, especially when trying to pursue a serious career. These choices impact both personal and professional aspects of a woman's life and many of these choices do not coincide with each other. Career-focused women often attempt to plan pregnancy around career milestones, and the timing of childbearing can influence the pace of career progression (Simoni et al. 2016). In the case of professional athletes, these accolades come as you continue to play. When deciding to take time off for pregnancy this can

affect a multitude of things within their career. With extended time off the team that may sign them can change, which could be cause for relocation or loss of contract. The athletes' playing time could change upon return, which typically coincides with their salary contract. But most importantly, their physical condition post pregnancy and their ability to be on the road constantly as this career requires, will likely change.

In an unsupportive work environment where pregnancy is viewed negatively or where maternity leave policies are inadequate, women may feel pressured to delay their pregnancies to not jeopardize the work they have done for the place they have achieved in their careers. This is an issue in professional sports because of the abundance of trades and lost contracts when a player is ineligible to play, even if the time away from sport is due to pregnancy (Coello, 2023).

Access to paid maternity leave in professional sports is not always guaranteed. Depending on the sport, league, and country an athlete plays in, the contracts' stance on maternity leave can differ greatly. For example, the WNBA has established policies around maternity leave (The Canadian Press, 2024). Many leagues create CBAs that are negotiated between players' unions and the leagues they play for (The Canadian Press, 2024). These agreements can contain details about paid leave, contract security, and return-to-play conditions. However, these CBAs will vary from player to player and league to league (The Canadian Press, 2024). The WNBA's CBA includes provisions for maternity leave, providing full salary for players during their leave ensuring their return to team post maternity (ESPN, 2023). However, many private leagues that athletes play for in other countries or in less established leagues will not provide the same benefits.

Additionally, because of the low salaries given to female professional athletes in comparison to their male counterparts (Ford, 2024), many female professional athletes find their income through sponsorships and endorsements. These also bring challenges with pregnancy because these contracts often lack standard maternity provisions. Therefore, the continuation of sponsorship deals during maternity leave depends heavily on terms and conditions of these contracts and the willingness of sponsors to support athletes through pregnancy and post-partum periods if the reasons for the sponsorships cannot be upheld during these periods (Scott et al. 2023).

For example, two female athletes who have addressed this in the media are Dearica Hamby (WNBA) and Allyson Felix (Olympic Track & Field). Felix was a 6-time Olympic gold

medal winner and an 11-time world champion, she was also contracted on an endorsement deal by Nike. When Felix was deciding to become a mother in 2018, she was amid renegotiating her deal with Nike, and she says “I asked Nike to contractually guarantee that I wouldn’t be punished if I didn’t perform at my best in the months surrounding childbirth.... Nike declined” (Felix et al. 2019). She continued with “If we have children, we risk pay cuts from our sponsors during pregnancy and afterward. It’s one example of a sports industry where the rules are still mostly made for and by men” (Felix et al. 2019). Hamby is a current player in the WNBA. In 2022, she signed a two-year extension for her current team, but after becoming pregnant, she was abruptly released from her current contract and traded. The team did not believe she would be able to play by the next coming season. She stated through her own social media "I was accused of signing my extension knowingly pregnant. This is false. I was told that I was a question mark and that it was said that I said I would get pregnant again and there was a concern for my level of commitment to the team. I was told that I didn't hold up my end of the bargain” (Coello, 2023). These cases show even when a league has created countless rules, CBAs, and protection for athletes, discrimination against pregnancy still exists.

2.6 History of women in professional positions

Sport is not the only industry which has historically marginalized women. In fact, women’s entrance to many professions, including medicine, engineering, business, law, policing, firefighting, or academia, has been filled with a multitude of challenges (Gregory, 2022). In addition to being denied educational and training opportunities in many professional fields, upon entering these careers women might also face a ‘glass ceiling’, or the invisible barriers that tend to prevent women from advancing into the highest levels of leadership. Discriminatory practices, such as being passed over for promotions, receiving fewer high-profile assignments, or encountering biased evaluation criteria catered to their male counterparts, often leave women at a disadvantage and slow down their career progression (Starmarski & Son Hing, 2015).

Workplace culture that favours male-dominated leadership styles can marginalize women from achieving high level professional status. Additionally, implicit biases and stereotypes about gender roles can influence perceptions of women’s capability in a leadership role (Way & Marques, 2013).

Moreover, since women often tend to continue taking on more caring responsibilities in their communities and families, they may also experience greater challenges in balancing their professional endeavors with their family and caregiving duties. It must be noted that the reliance on women to do the majority of the caregiving is also a result of gender roles created over time by our society (Little et al. 2015; Way & Marques, 2013). Work life integration for women has been made difficult when it comes to childbearing because of the battles childbearing poses to remaining in the workplace. The attainment of success in the professional world takes abundant time and effort (Little et al. 2015).

For women in professional careers, reproductive choices are often tied to their career developments, and many women in academia, law, or medicine might ‘time’ their pregnancy to fit their career needs. However, such a calculated approach might not work for women in athletics, because pregnancy might have more implications on the career progression, and it may affect their ability to rely on a training regimen. Within a woman’s life, her gender, ethnicity, race, marital status and her parental status all must be balanced (Little et al. 2015).

Throughout the literature there is a clear need for increased visibility on what these athletes’ experiences entail. Understanding the intricacies of professional sport careers has allowed researchers to find the differences in male and female career progression. However, the unique experiences female athletes face in balancing their careers with family planning are underrepresented in the literature. Therefore, this research aimed to understand how women who are in professional basketball, perceive their ability to combine childbearing and family planning with the development of a successful sport career.

Chapter 3: Study Objectives

This research aimed to describe the perceptions of female professional basketball players who are dealing with the decision-making process surrounding pregnancy and career progression. Specifically, this study was designed to understand their attitudes and perceptions on choosing whether or not to bear children, when the best time in their career to do so would be, and their experience during pregnancy while maintaining a basketball career. My research project, while not directed at postpartum athletes, also aimed to inquire about what these athletes may see as barriers to continuing at a high level of sport once they are in the process of pregnancy/motherhood, including what maternity leave/return to play policies may look like for them when they are postpartum. The overarching goal was to investigate how these women combine their societal and personal beliefs with their athletic experiences to shape their views on family planning and pregnancy.

Therefore, the research questions that guided this research were:

“What impact, if any, do female basketball players believe pregnancy, giving birth, and parenting may have on their career progression?”

Specifically, I aimed to understand:

(a) What potential implications on physical performance exist because of pregnancy?

(b) What financial changes do athletes anticipate pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period could bring to a career in sport?

(c) What supports are necessary to help female athletes balance pregnancy and motherhood with a career in sport?

Chapter 4: Methods

4.1 Theoretical framework and methodological orientation

This study is grounded in qualitative, constructivist ideals that view human experience as socially and relationally produced (Costantino et al. 2008). The project examines how female professional basketball players make sense of pregnancy, family planning, and career development. These are experiences that cannot be separated from gendered norms within sport and society, as discussed within the literature review. This research, while guided by narrative inquiry, is underpinned by social constructionism, sport sociology, and principles of intersectionality (Costantino et al. 2008). Together, these frameworks have shaped how the participants' stories are elicited, interpreted, and contextualized within broader structures that influence female athletes' choices (Chand, 2024).

4.1.1 Social Constructionism

One of the ontological assumptions with a narrative inquiry approach is the subjectivity of experiences (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). This ontological assumption recognizes that female athletes' perceptions and interpretations of their reality can be influenced by their individual backgrounds, identities, as well as their social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Further, social constructionism helps to shape the ontological assumptions behind this approach because the view is that reality is socially constructed through interactions and interpretations (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). For female athletes, gender roles, athletic identity, motherhood expectations, and the structural organization of professional sport all contribute to their perceptions and storytelling.

The epistemological assumption within this study is interpretivism. Interpretivism is defined as understanding the social world through subjective meaning and personal experience rather than seeking objective truths (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This allowed emphasis on the fact that we can only understand someone's reality through their experience of that reality. It acknowledges that understanding the pregnancy decisions and career trajectories of female athletes requires delving into the meanings they attribute to their experiences, rather than seeking universal laws.

Axiological considerations within this study focus on empowerment of female athletes. The structure of the interviews may help shape the analysis process to ensure participants feel heard, respected, and supported throughout the study. Another axiological consideration that drove this inquiry is advocating for change in the professional sport industry to better support female athletes who choose to have children during their professional careers. This advocacy lens shaped the research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

4.2 Research design

For this research, I used a qualitative, narrative inquiry design to explore how female basketball players make sense of their family planning decisions. Narrative inquiry was chosen because decision-making around pregnancy and career progression is deeply personal, contextual, and temporal (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Therefore, these participants experiences can be best understood through stories rather than isolated information (Chand, 2024).

Narrative inquiry focuses on three central dimensions: temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). In this case, temporality can allow athletes' stories to unfold over time across athletic development, peak performance years, contract timelines, aging, and personal aspirations. In terms of sociality, these narratives are shaped by relationships with teammates, coaches, partners, healthcare providers, and the sport organizations to which they belong. The pregnancy decisions discussed in this study are balanced between relational and emotional environments. Lastly, place considers the geographical and physical environments that shape experiences for these athletes. Policies can differ across leagues and countries which can also influence perceived feasibility of pregnancy in this career path. By weaving these dimensions together, this study aimed to construct a comprehensive portrait of how athletes' narratives are shaped by their personal histories and social worlds (Chand, 2024).

Ethics approval was obtained through the University of Waterloo (ORE#47574). Ethical considerations included informed consent, protection and confidentiality through pseudonyms and removal of identifying details, secure data storage, and the right to withdraw until the point of aggregated analysis (October 1, 2025).

4.3 Study, sample, and recruitment

A total of nine female basketball players were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. The recruitment flyer with information about the study and my contact information (see appendix B) was posted on Instagram. In addition, I also reached out and forwarded the recruitment flyer to my personal networks with a request to share the information about the study. Based on the explanation of the study that participants were presented with, they could self-declare if they feel this study aligns with their current stage in life and career. The recruitment process emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the importance of these women's unique experiences contributing to deeper understandings of the intersection between professional sport and family planning. Participants included current or former professional athletes who were actively pursuing basketball careers or retired. Additionally, these athletes were also currently considering childbearing, had decided not to have children, or had already become mothers.

When a potential participant reached out with an interest to take part in my study, I followed up by sending the recruitment email which provided them a more in-depth explanation of the study (see appendix A). Once participants confirmed their interest to take part in the study, I sent them the letter of information and consent form (see appendix C), invited them to ask additional questions if they had any, and booked an interview.

The nine participants varied in age, career length, and number of children. All participants were between the ages of 23-41. Out of the nine participants, six were in their twenties, two in their thirties, and one in her forties. Out of these nine participants, 4 women had one or more children, and 5 women were actively considering family planning and pregnancy. Out of the four women with children, two were married and two were single mothers. Among those without children, two did not have a partner and three were in long-term, steady relationships. Seven of the participants were self-identifying Canadian-born women and two women identified as Canadian immigrants. Eight participants were Caucasian, and one was a Black woman. While four participants were single and working alone overseas, two had partners working and living with them overseas, and the other two participants had partners who worked outside of their country of origin but not in the same country as their respective partners. The participants were all professional female basketball players currently or formerly a part of a European professional women's basketball league. The professional basketball career lengths

ranged from 1-7 seasons. Four of these women also competed internationally for their country of origin.

4.4 Data collection

4.4.1 Interview style

Data for this study was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that contained open-ended questions about the athletes' experiences in basketball, experiences and thoughts regarding pregnancy, and their feelings about whether or not childbearing might influence their career in professional basketball. I used interview guides – one tailored towards mothers and the other focusing on the experiences of female athletes who were considering parenthood but have not yet experienced pregnancy and/or childbirth. These questions were designed to elicit detailed personal narratives about participants' experiences with family planning, pregnancy (if relevant), and their athletic careers (Chand, 2024). Questions focused on the support systems available to the athletes, moments of conflict or affirmation, and how their identities as athletes and potential or current mothers might have intersected. The interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, and with the permission of the participants, the audio was recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, any identifying information was not included in the transcripts and was deleted after data analysis was complete.

Throughout the research process, I kept a reflexive journal documenting my emerging insights, emotional reactions, positionality considerations, and reflections immediately after each interview. These notes were incorporated into the analytic process to enhance reflexivity and transparency in researcher position.

The interview guide was intentionally open, inviting my participants to share stories about their pathways into and through basketball, encounters with pregnancy or family planning, moments of tension, uncertainty, or affirmation related to childbearing in this athletic identity, and interactions with coaches, teammates, organizations, and their personal support systems. Lastly, I also asked for their reflections on how they understood themselves as athletes and as current or potential mothers. The interviews were conducted online via secure video conferencing platform (Microsoft Teams). With consent from the participants, demographic information was collected. I asked about age, duration of career, race/ethnicity, and number of children to explore how the decisions regarding pregnancy may vary from person to person

based on these characteristics. For this study, age, in particular, was a crucial factor because it helped determine when these athletes typically face the decisions surrounding pregnancy and career progression. While the interview guide provided general direction, the interviews prioritized participant-led storytelling, allowing each woman to shape her conversation in ways that felt most meaningful to her. Probing questions were used not to steer responses, but to deepen unfolding narratives, elicit context, and clarify meaning. This flexible structure also supported exploration of temporality which encouraged participants to mentally work through their past experiences, present interpretations, and imagined futures within their career.

During the interview process, participants were asked to tell their stories of deciding on pregnancy timelines and, if applicable, how their pregnancy journey impacted their professional athlete journey. Lastly, a concluding email was sent to all participants thanking them for their participation in this research. I employed member checking by offering to share transcripts with participants before analysis to give them an opportunity to verify that the transcription is correct and aligns with their experiences to ensure participants have an opportunity to clarify or revise something they said to better reflect their perspectives. Only one participant out of nine requested to do so. Only minor edits were requested, primarily related to contextual details. This process strengthened the credibility of the narratives and honoured participants' ownership of their stories, reinforcing the collaborative nature of narrative inquiry.

4.5 Data analysis – Narrative thematic analysis

I used narrative thematic analysis guided by Riessman's (2007) approach. Riessman (2007) proposes that narrative is content focused. The goal of Riessman's (2007) approach is to keep the story from a participant intact, theorizing from the case itself rather than the themes. The focus when analyzing interviews is on 'what' is said instead of 'how' or 'to whom' (Riessman, 2007). In comparison to other forms of narrative analysis, narrative thematic analysis focuses on the content from the stories that participants tell instead of how they may explain it (Riessman, 2007). Therefore, my analysis has used reoccurring themes and patterns (Riessman, 2007). Narrative thematic analysis also gives space for the understanding that a personal narrative is shaped by their societal context aligning with constructionism (Riessman, 2007). This analysis will be completed in the following steps:

Step 1: I have reviewed the transcriptions and completed an initial reading of transcripts to gain a broad understanding of each participant's narrative. While reading through each interview transcript, initial notes were taken to capture thoughts, impressions, and potential themes that emerge from an initial review of the data.

Step 2: Transcription review ensured the accuracy of transcriptions by cross-referencing audio recordings to ensure meaning behind tone, body languages and context was understood correctly. Additionally, I started initial coding by identifying the excerpts from interview transcripts that could be organized into open, inductively derived codes for further analysis. During initial coding, things like phrases, story events, decisions, and emotional expressions were observed. For example, I assigned code "fear of contract loss" to the segments of the participants' narratives that expressed worry about pregnancy's effect on their ability to secure a contract following childbirth.

Step 3: Thematic analysis then allowed me to formulate the themes that have developed from transcription reviews to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Additionally, stories for participants were made to visualize key events, decisions, and turning points within the narratives. Through these processes' codes were clustered to create four major themes with subthemes. This stage involved reviewing similarities and differences across narratives, mapping decisions onto temporal sequences (stories), managing relational, structural, and emotional dimensions, and lastly, revisiting my reflexive notes to ensure balanced interpretations across data.

Step 4: I constructed the narrative summaries for participants by focusing on each athlete's stage in their career, how they interpreted challenges they faced or supports they needed, and how their identity and sense of self have evolved. Next, I examined individual cases that best illustrate each stage of the decision-making process using the themes and patterns that stood out within these interviews. These narratives were then used to create the depiction of the three difference stages of this experience. This was done using restorying techniques (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Restorying is a common technique for narrative analysis. Restorying is the process of gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements, then rewriting the story to place it within a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This allows a researcher to provide a common link between ideas because often when a participant tells their story within the form of an interview, the chronological sequence may be missing or

not logically developed (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The three stories that I constructed from participants' narratives represented the collective experiences of the participants: "an athlete deciding on whether she should have children during her career", "a mother still competing", and "a mother waiting until retirement to have children".

Step 5: Themes generated through analysis were used to shape subsequent thesis chapters. Excerpts were selected to illustrate thematic points while maintaining the integrity of participants' voices and ensuring anonymity.

Special attention was given to how these athletes framed their experiences, the language they used, and the temporal sequences they described, reflecting the principles of narrative inquiry (Thomas, 2015). The goal was not only to draw out commonalities between interviews but also to preserve the uniqueness and complexity of each participant's story.

I made it clear to participants that the analysis is from my interpretation of their experiences. The transcription review that I did prior to analysis helped decrease the notion of research-participant power that can occur when conducting interviews (Riessman, 2007). Participants' willingness to share their stories was critical in ensuring the authenticity and richness of the collected narratives (Riessman, 2007).

4.6 Reflexivity and positionality

As a former female basketball player, I occupy a position that is both personal and analytical within this research. A narrative inquiry approach recognizes that both participant and research co-construct meaning through stories situated in time, place, and social context. Having recently transitioned out of my athletic career, I brought to this work an insider understanding of the high-level athlete environment and its physical demands, cultural norms, and the gendered expectations.

This insider status provided valuable insight and had helped me to develop rapport with my participants. My participants might have been able to view me as someone who understood the realities of elite sport, which I often found to be true, as during the interviews, the participants would use phrases like "you know how it is" or "as you probably know" etc. However, this insider position also had the capability to introduce potential biases. My personal reflections on identity transition, career longevity, and considerations around motherhood have inevitably influenced how I interpreted my participants' stories. To mitigate interpretive

dominance, I engage participants in member reflections where possible, inviting dialogue around emerging narratives. To address this, I engaged in ongoing reflexive journaling throughout the research process, documenting my assumptions, emotional responses, and points of resonance or tension between my experiences and those of the participants. This process has helped maintain critical awareness of how my personal narrative might intersect with, but not overshadow, my participants.

In line with narrative inquiry methodology, I acknowledge that meaning is not simply “found” but has been co-created in dialogue (Chand, 2024). My interactions with participants are shaped by shared histories of gender, sport, and performance, which might have encouraged openness but also risk mutual reinforcement of familiar discourses. I therefore sought to remain attentive to moments of difference or discomfort, viewing them as opportunities for deeper understanding rather than dissonance to be resolved.

As a woman researching women, I share a gendered understanding of the social and institutional forces that shape female athletes’ experiences. This shared identity can foster trust, openness, and mutual understanding, creating space for participants to share sensitive reflections about pregnancy, motherhood, and professional identity. Conversely, I could also remain detached from some of the narratives as I am not a mother myself.

The topic of pregnancy and career in professional sport is inherently emotional, intersecting deeply personal and professional domains. My personal transition away from competitive basketball carries emotional resonance that informed my engagement with the research. Feelings of loss, nostalgia, and identification with participants’ struggles were present for me during interviews or interpretation. Practicing emotional reflexivity, I acknowledged these affective responses rather than attempting to suppress them.

I brought to this research an embodied understanding of how I engaged with participants and interpreted their narratives. This insider perspective allowed for nuanced insight into the complexities of balancing athletic identity and womanhood within a high-performance context that a researcher removed from this community might have not picked up on or understood. Additionally, in restorying, my interpretation of their narratives could have influenced the construction of these stories. As a researcher, understanding that I have certain personal ideas or experiences regarding the highlighted themes across participants helped me to remain objective in building the stories in chapter 5.

As an insider in a relatively small sporting community, I recognize the ethical dimensions of representing my participants' stories with integrity and care. Protecting confidentiality and portraying participants authentically were crucial to this research. By maintaining a reflexive stance, I have aimed to honour my participants lived experiences while also critically examining how my positionality as a former athlete informed the co-construction of meaning within this narrative inquiry study.

Chapter 5: Findings – Interweaving participant stories into pregnancy decision’s themes

In this chapter, participant narratives are reconstructed into chronological stories. These stories are written by compiling multiple participants’ narratives by focusing on the same stages of their decision-making process. Following each story, I provide my own reflection to discuss the major themes that arose across the participant narratives capturing the respective stages of the decision-making process. To uphold confidentiality, a pseudonym was used when referring to each story, and some of the demographic information was mixed and/or changed. None of the stories show a narrative exclusively related to one participant. The quotes within these stories are a mixture of quotes from multiple women. The first story, ‘an athlete deciding on whether she should have children during her professional career’, is a compilation of five participant narratives. The second story, ‘a mother still competing’, is a compilation of two participant narratives. Finally, the third story, ‘a mother waiting until retirement to have children,’ is a compilation of two participant narratives.

5.1 An athlete deciding to have children during an athletic career.

Jen (pseudonym) is a white Canadian professional basketball player. She has a degree in psychology and plays basketball in Italy. In the fall of 2024 at the age of 24, she began her professional career. She does not have children. Her decisions regarding pregnancy are intertwined with many factors largely influenced by the status of her career. This is her story:

After university basketball in Canada, Jen turned her love for sport into a career. Within a few months of graduating university, she had signed a contract to play overseas in Italy. This contract involved a full season of play, compensation, housing, transportation, and a meal per day for free. Without any partner or dependants, she moved across the world to start her career.

Throughout the first year of play, Jen did very well. She had statistics that would easily secure her a second contract for following seasons, and she loved the trajectory she was on. In her contract, injury protocols were stated: if an injury on court occurred, she would receive pay for up to two weeks without medical documentation. Beyond two weeks, medical documentation was required for proof of injury/treatment needed to continue to receive pay. However, no regulations regarding maternity leave or pregnancy were listed within her contract.

She found this strange, as many jobs include maternity leave policies and offer compensation even during time off. This sparked uncertainty in her decision to potentially start a family. The lack of information available to her left her with an impression that if she were to leave this career due to pregnancy, she may not be accepted back.

Additionally, stories from past teammates who have already been through pregnancy and never returned to sport deterred Jen from thinking about integrating childbearing with her profession. Based on the stories she heard, Jen felt unsure about the possibility for them to co-exist harmoniously. Her teammates' experiences hinted that sport organizations and coaches no longer saw these athletes in the same way once they returned from a maternity leave. Jen was anxious after witnessing her teammates' experiences, because it seemed like the returning athletes were categorized as distracted, not committed, and a step behind in comparison to where they were when they left. The athletes themselves had also expressed to her that they felt a step behind upon their return, and that the expectation of top performance was difficult to meet in the months following childbirth. If they had not built a big enough foundation with statistics and reputation prior to leaving, it was extremely difficult to secure more work once they returned to basketball after having a child. Jen was worried that the stigma surrounding pregnancy in this career would harm her chances of playing for multiple years.

Jen addressed the gender biases that exist in professional sports by stating: "Men [in basketball] can have as many kids as they want... It won't really affect them. But your body is the vessel that is used to literally create a baby". She felt as though she was just a piece of the organizations business model, and that having a child did not fit into it.

Jen felt conflicted about the decision to have a child. She felt it was unfortunate that female athletes are made to feel like they must decide between motherhood or a career as a professional athlete. "I mean, it does suck that I have to choose". Since Jen was only in her first season, although she performed well, she wondered if this was enough to secure another contract with prolonged time off.

She also became hyperaware of the fact that she was alone, across the world from her family and friends, isolated by language barriers in the city she lived in. Her support system, although still present, was almost entirely virtual, which is another factor she considered while contemplating the idea of pregnancy in her near future.

Jen stated, “You just kind of have to do it yourself”. In some cases, if an athlete is playing in a larger league, they may be able to offer some help to players with children in terms of childcare, but many leagues do not have the resources to support mothers in the way someone with family and friends around might have access to. The lack of information around pregnancy in this career attributed to the uncertainty in Jen’s decision-making process regarding having children. If she did decide to start a family during this career, she expressed “I would have no idea where to go or, like, what to do if I... if I got pregnant during the year”.

In addition to pregnancy, Jen also worried about managing medical bills that may accumulate with prenatal care and birth. Jen described that if she were to return to basketball, she was not sure if any medically guided sport specific protocols existed to protect an athlete following pregnancy. She explained that returning postpartum as an athlete would be new territory for her and potentially her athletic therapy team overseas, as opposed to returning from sport-related injuries. She worried that if she were to get pregnant, the organizations lacked qualified healthcare professionals with experience in postpartum specific protocol. “I feel like there's more education that needs to be had on the topic [returning to play from pregnancy] for everyone”.

Jen explained that social media today may be a place for support for women who pursue motherhood alongside professional career in sport. Advocates for female athletes on social media were becoming more abundant, creating an environment that makes it much easier to find women in the same situation as herself. Due to the physical isolation from her family and friends, trying to reach women around her that could relate to her situation might be helpful, however, the distance between her loved ones still weighed heavily on this choice.

She was aware what sacrifices this career entails and believed having a child in this context would be extremely difficult. Jen expressed the need to be selfish to succeed in this sport. She explained how year to year, your position, location, compensation, and even season could be drastically different. To live overseas and be alone was one thing, but adding a young child into the mix produced a lack of stability in early childhood. The instability was something that worried her about combining her career with family. She felt as though finding a career based on the qualifications her degree in psychology gave her seemed more realistic for providing a stable life for young children as opposed to professional sports.

Jen recently celebrated her 25th birthday. She knew that she her biological clock was ticking faster the older she got. The decision, however, never became any easier. She ultimately was at the point that if having a child was her priority “it would make me kind of just like stop playing, maybe get into coaching”. She believed that having a child would cause her to end her professional basketball career, something she never saw male athletes grapple with. This gender difference emphasized barriers that female athletes are faced with.

Another struggle Jen addressed that emphasized the gender differences in sport was the pay gap. This career was, in her opinion, not lucrative enough to support herself and a child. In the context of financial stability, she knew she personally wanted to have a secure salary before making family-planning decisions, and with her current situation, this was just not her reality. “I mean, at the end of the day, men's basketball, they make more money” she said.

Ultimately, Jen said she chose to wait until her career ended to pursue a family. Contemplating her course of action in the event of unplanned pregnancy, she believed she would have to retire prematurely to take care of her child. Jen’s decision does not come easily and even in deciding to wait to have children, she still has to personally sacrifice things that not all professional women may experience. Without a paid maternity leave option, a guarantee that her body will bounce back to top performance, or support for the child overseas, she felt as though her hands were tied, and she did not really have a choice to start a family while still playing: “I actually don't even know how people do that. Like unless they have a stay-at-home [partner], I don't know”.

5.1.1 Reflection on an athlete deciding to have children during an athletic career

Out of the five participants within this stage of the decision-making process, four were Canadian citizens and therefore were import players to their league. One participant obtained dual citizenship and therefore did not need to be considered an international recruit. This dual citizenship eliminated the need for a working visa, however, her concerns regarding pregnancy remained consistent with the women at similar stages of their decision.

Across participants who had not yet become mothers during their careers, narratives centred heavily around uncertainty, fear, and constraints in their ability to continue playing. The body emerged as the primary site of anticipation for change and risk in the ability to obtain consistent income. Athletes who participated in this study described pregnancy as a

psychological unknown, difficult to reconcile with the demands of elite basketball. Participants discussed that they were hesitant to experience pregnancy because of the optional outcomes it may have on returning to their career. For example, a 23-year-old participant without children expressed:

Yeah, I think like the four months that we have off is definitely not long enough to be able to bounce back. I think also the problem is with pregnancy, everyone's so different. Like some people have to be on bed rest for the last like three months of their pregnancy. Or some people have really good ones, some people have horrible ones. And so, I think like you don't know going into it and obviously if you're planning on having a family and stuff like that, like you still don't know. ... for example, if you're on bed rest for the last three months. You are gonna lose so much muscle, you're not gonna be able to bounce back nearly as fast. And like, even I think for people that need to have a C-section or anything like that, like that would be very, very difficult cause they cut your abdomen like muscles.

The physical destabilizing that pregnancy can bring to an athletes' life made the coordination of pregnancy and professional sport difficult to imagine. Many participants spoke of unknowns; the weight gain, the strength loss, and the hormonal fluctuations. There was concern with the pregnancy itself. For example, they discussed the physical difficulties that could come with early stages of pregnancy such as morning sickness and increased fatigue, while still trying to compete. As well, athletes mentioned the fear of muscle loss if they would need to stop participating in heavy contact after their first trimester.

The participants also talked about the uncertainty related to the instability of women's professional basketball as a career. Athletes described financial instability, lack of maternity leave protections, and ethically questionable practices by organizations. Participants repeatedly mentioned that professional women's basketball salaries are insufficient to support a family. A 25-year-old athlete without children mentioned:

I think like honestly the salary for women in sport, like, I mean I wasn't making like enough money to support myself, and, honestly, like, I made enough for just me, but if I

was gonna be thinking of a family I would... you'd have to like negotiate, you know, the best of the best contracts because I... I'm not sure, like, how financially it would work.

Many participants described playing overseas as financially sustainable only for themselves, not for themselves and dependents. Another athlete without children recalled a past teammate who had a child and did not return to subsequent seasons. Ultimately, this pregnancy caused her teammate to prematurely retire because of the financial responsibility her child created for her and the inability for a professional a sport salary to meet this financial need.

This story about a past teammate also touched on the lack of maternity leave for paid time away for athletes in this career. The risk of being unpaid if pregnancy interrupts competing was at the forefront of participants hesitancy to have children. The same participant who witnessed a teammate retire after having a child also explained that within her current contract, there was nothing about pregnancy. This lack of pregnancy provisions within contracts creates uncertainty on where to turn to if pregnancy was to occur within the basketball season. This athlete also mentioned she could potentially be cut from the team for becoming pregnant because pregnancy would make her unable to uphold the expectations written within her contract. This risk of losing her job made childbearing extremely challenging.

Additionally, most participants discussed their year-to-year contracts, the constant threat of losing employment due to injury or pregnancy, and the organizations' ability to terminate agreements if an athlete is unable to play. They explained that these organizations are businesses, and if you chose to become pregnant, you are no longer meeting the expectations the business hired you to uphold. So, although it is normal to take a break from work due to pregnancy, in professional basketball such practice does not align with the business model. This reinforced the reality that organizations may value players' bodies only as long as they produce wins. Pregnancy disrupts this, making athletes feel replaceable, expendable, and unsupported. All non-mothers in this study stated that pregnancy would most likely result in being sent home in many leagues.

Another common experience highlighted by non-mother participants was the isolation overseas, long distances from family members, and the scarcity of familiar social networks. This made motherhood appear nearly impossible unless supported by presumed rare occurrence that a

team provides childcare assistance. Athletes called playing overseas “a very isolating experience”.

The participants also commented on the instability of the professional sport lifestyle. This emphasized the reality of constantly moving across countries or cities, from team to team, and never fully having control over where you will end up year-to-year which created a difficult environment to have children.

The athletes without children praised the mothers who currently play but also understood why so many other athletes wait to have children. A 25-year-old participant mentioned:

So, in like, yeah, the instability is definitely something that has changed my mind about it [pregnancy]”. And “For sure, I can imagine for myself that it probably would lead to an early retirement. But that being said, now that we're starting to talk, some people like can totally do it.

All non-mothers believed that if they were able to build a large enough support system - one where they did not feel isolated to complete this journey alone - only then could they see pregnancy and childbearing during their career as a realistic pathway. However, in saying this, many athletes concluded that the difficulties to make this work, even with immense effort and planning, still largely caused uncertainty. Ultimately, making the choice to wait to have children until after their professional basketball career was over, seemed like the better option.

5.2 A mother still competing.

Talia (pseudonym) is a white Canadian professional basketball player and a single mother of one. She has a degree in business administration and plays basketball in Spain. In the fall of 2019 at the age of 22 following her university career, she began her professional career. Her pregnancy experience is largely influenced by her professional sport career. This is her story:

After university basketball, Talia was approached by an agent who represents Canadian athletes overseas. Talia performed extremely well on a university basketball team, so finding a contract to play professionally seemed to come relatively easy, and she signed her first contract four months after graduating. This contract involved a full season of play, compensation, housing, transportation, and a meal per day for free. Without any partner or dependants, she moved across the world to start her career.

After moving overseas, approximately halfway through the basketball season, COVID-19 shut down all operations, and Talia was forced to move back home to Canada. During the pandemic, she got pregnant. She knew she wanted to keep the baby and thought that the pandemic would give her plenty of time to get herself back on track physically for the following season. COVID-19's timeline was unknown at the time, so Talia took advantage of the time-off to focus on pregnancy without feeling like she was skipping a season of basketball. She did as much as she could to make sure her return to play timeline was as smooth as possible. Ultimately, she was able to return to play five months post-partum, when COVID restrictions were lifted and the professional league's operations resumed. However, she did express that the changes to her body were more than she ever expected would happen.

Talia had a difficult pregnancy; she dealt with more weight gain than anticipated along with the loss of a large amount of her muscle. Since COVID-19 had shut down not only professional basketball, but the world, she struggled to workout - all the resources that typically are available, were in lockdown. She dealt with urinary incontinence, a common issue following birth in which you lose control of your bladder. This resulted in embarrassment in the first year of returning to play. Not only was this a physical battle she had to face; it was also a mental battle that challenged her to accept the changes her body had undergone. In addition to urinary incontinence, Talia noticed how different her postpartum body had become: "The biggest thing I dealt with postpartum is a lot of tendonitis issues, whether it was like Achilles tendonitis, quad tendonitis. All these things that like magically happen, I think because of like pregnancy

hormones. So, and then just, like, overtraining probably or, like, not being completely ready to go back and play”.

Talia advocated for more discourse around the struggles athletes go through following pregnancy “Yes, postpartum active wear. Very hard to find. Very hard”. She explained that athletes need more support in pregnancy experiences, and that the changes to athletes' bodies are not widely discussed. Ultimately, Talia emphasized that without a more open conversation surrounding this topic, female athletes will remain unsupported. To this day, five years following childbirth, she still does not feel the same as pre-pregnancy. She said “[So] yeah, that was tough for me physically. Losing the weight was really, really tough, ... I lost my starting spot because I was so out of shape, which really hurt 'cause, like, skill wise, I was still, like, I was still there” and “...to this day... I'm never the same as I was before giving birth physically. I will say I am stronger now, but I'm not as quick”.

Additionally, she discussed the challenges she faced in navigating policies in place to support or not support athletes when moving overseas. Depending on the country she chose to work in, the rules, policies, and regulations around basketball, pay, living accommodations, and pregnancy all change. Because of this, it was difficult to ensure she was being supported in the correct ways.

For example, most teams are only allowed one or two Canadian or “import” players (someone who is not European). This made it more difficult to guarantee a spot on a team because if you cannot play up to the caliber they expect, someone else will. She also described some of the stigma she has witnessed while being a part of the professional basketball community: “I've seen and heard of it in France, where teams are being just so unethical, so unethical, like barring top... I'm talking like top, top level Euroleague teams in France, not allowing players to enter the practice facilities if they're pregnant. Benching them, not allowing them to sit on the bench because they're pregnant. Being super rude about, like, breaking their contract, which it should be... like it should be considered like an injury almost, like, you should be covered if you're pregnant”.

She explained how her organization was willing to re-sign her after COVID-19, an opportunity that did not happen for all athletes following the pandemic. She mentioned that without the strong relationship she built with this organization, she would be scared to consider having another child during her career. “But for a lot of them ... it burns bridges to be

pregnant. It's like the teams are mad at them that they're pregnant and they won't return there. Like, obviously, they don't want to go back there, they don't feel supported”.

Therefore, because of the business structure of this industry, she knew she was paid to be in shape, perform, and pull her weight. If she could no longer meet these expectations, she would be rapidly replaced. Talia reflected on the lack of support: “So there was, there's agents as well that won't accept me and there's teams and clubs that won't accept me because I do have a [child] and that's been said to me. I had to turn down a really nice contract because they wouldn't accommodate my [child]”.

She reiterated that she had found a great organization that **did** support her. Her contract stipulates that her club pays for her child's flights, and a babysitter during practices and game. The club also pays for her child's healthcare insurance and provided housing large enough for the two of them. Talia also appreciated the support of her teammates, who donated multiple larger items (strollers, play pen, toys) that she could not bring to Europe from Canada. Relying on these supports, Talia mentioned how important it is for the athlete mothers to surround themselves with those who can help: “And you have to build your village, too. And that's what I tell people, too. I'm, like, hey, if you don't have grandparents who can, like, support you all the time, like. You have to build a village wherever you are in the world. Reach out to people. Find people that you bond with”.

Geographic location also added to the challenges she experienced as a parent. She explained that since she had built good relationship with her organization, she was able to return on a new contract year after year. However, this is not the case for every athlete. In her time overseas, Talia saw many athletes bounce from country to country on one-year contracts. She expressed that this lifestyle – moving from one place to another on a yearly basis - would make it difficult to create stability for her child. Putting herself first sometimes led to “mom guilt”. She chose to homeschool her child because even though she does remain with the same organization, she still must go home to Canada in the 4–5-month off-season. The typical school year does not directly line up with the basketball season, as the time to go home is between April to September, therefore, mid-way through the school year she must move.

Like Jen, Talia was also worried about the financial side of her job. As a single parent, Talia was acutely aware that her income is supporting both, herself and her child. Moreover, to ensure that her child is provided with adequate accommodations, she had to agree for a lower

pay in her contract. She explained: “I had to take a pay cut so I'm not getting paid as much as other athletes because I'm a mom. Because again, like if I was on my own, I know like nobody has to pay for my kid, right? But because [they're] part of my contract and part of like... the flight is not cheap. It's like 1000 euros, right? So, because of that I do have to, I guess, sacrifice more than somebody who isn't a parent or a mother, I guess. So that kind of sucks”. Reflecting on this arrangement, Talia noted that raising a family is expensive, and that she was not upset about the trade-off she had to agree to in her contract. However, the difference in pay between male athletes and female athletes did contribute to her feeling her pay was inadequate. She said, “I'm sure you know, like, women's basketball just does not pay a lot unless you're like the top of the top players playing in the top league”.

Although Talia said she is extremely proud to be a mother and a professional athlete, she indicated that she can sympathize with the difficult decision so many female athletes are faced with when deciding having children: “I absolutely agree [with] why people are waiting after [their basketball career] because they're, you know, most of the time not going to have these super lengthy careers. And then they'll just come home and then, you know, hopefully, like, be able to, like, set roots where they want to, you know, live and bring their child up. Just because, yeah, like, women's basketball is just, it's rough sometimes. Sometimes, like, the conditions are really hard”.

5.2.1 Reflection on a mother still competing

The two participants within this stage of the journey differed. While one participant lived with her partner overseas, the other participant was a single mother. Since one participant had her partner working in the same country, she was able to have immediate support from family. However, the participant who was a single mother found support through her organization and teammates. Although their situations differed, their thoughts on becoming a mother in sport warranted the same concerns and conditions for success.

For participants who became pregnant during their basketball careers, narratives shifted from anticipatory fears to the embodied realities of pregnancy and postpartum competition. The body remained central, but in more tangible and lived experience ways. Mothers described profound physical changes following childbirth. They talked about pelvic floor damage, urinary incontinence, stretched musculature, slower reaction time, difficulty regaining strength and

explosiveness, and breastfeeding related challenges. While some regained high performance through extensive training, many noted that their bodies were forever changed. One mother described how every pregnancy is different. How she had a great experience with her second pregnancy but her first pregnancy left her feeling weak, out of shape, and slower than pre-pregnancy. The 30-year-old mother explained that returning to competition was often a negotiation between athletic demands and maternal recovery:

Unless you have like a full team working with you, probably not in the cards for everyone to be back at such a high level [quickly]... our body just goes, it goes through so much and your muscles are still really like stretched thin.

These mothers also expressed concerns about the risk of injury because of inadequate recovery time. Participants noted that many European club timelines cause circumstantial pressure on athletes because of internalized expectations to shorten their postpartum leave as to not sit out of competition and risk losing a contract which compromises long-term health. The narrative of rushing back was strong in athletes who continued to play after childbirth. One mother explained that she went back to high-level sports only four months postpartum, and after doing so can admit she was not ready. This injury risk is exacerbated by the absence of knowledge in postpartum return to sport protocols between medical or physiotherapy staff. The same 30-year-old mother felt that:

Everywhere in the world, there should be more training on like, how to support women pregnant and postpartum. It's something that I'm super passionate about because, yeah, there's just like a huge shift happening. You can't do the same stuff that everyone else around you is doing. It's so basketball specific. Once you add that layer of having been pregnant, like, your body is different. You know, and you just, it's just not, you can't expect women to do the same thing and just they're at a greater risk for a lot of injuries. So, because of just the hormones. So yeah, I think there definitely is a lack of training all around.

This leaves athletes to self-manage injuries or deficits in sport related skills that were directly connected to childbirth. Several athletes described discrimination or unethical practices during pregnancy. They experienced or witnessed other leagues deny access to facilities, contract termination, or inability to secure a contract. Many participants mentioned having friends and/or past teammates who have gotten cut and sent home from their teams because they were not upholding the terms of their contract to the standards of the organization. A 27-year-old mother stated:

I can totally understand why mothers would not want to go back and play again. Like, 'cause it's just not the same after. It's really not. And then you have to think, like, I'm playing now, and I have a lot of guilt because I have to put myself before [my child] somedays... Yeah, it's really hard. I've had people actually say to me, like, that I'm putting myself before my [child] just because I want to come over here, like, and isolate [my child].

Participants also noted that clubs directly discriminated against athlete-mothers. They shared stories about struggling to have their child accommodated within their contract, and, ultimately, turning down great career offers because the lack of support the organization was willing to provide for their children.

These stories underscored the belief that pregnancy positioned athletes as financial burdens, conflicting with the business-first priorities of professional sport organizations. Even for those who received support, the lack of formal policy in place meant that maternal accommodations were inconsistent and dependent on team culture, league resources, and athlete status.

Athlete-mothers also described navigating motherhood within the unstable environment of international sport. This narrative captured the ways that mobility, limited support systems, and inconsistent organizational resources shape athletes' experiences. Professional basketball is inherently mobile and geographically unstable, creating unique pressure for mothers. Raising a child across the world with new cultures, languages, time zones, and countries can create logistical and emotional strain. Most mothers relied heavily on teammates or partners for childcare where available. The absence of extended family was deeply felt, with participants

repeatedly emphasizing that mothering in professional basketball requires a “village” that most organizations will not provide. One 30-year-old mother expressed:

Like I got zero support, I got zero check-ins [during and after pregnancy] ... there's a lot of work to be done, a lot of work to be done. It kind of felt like me choosing to get pregnant was me choosing to quit the team against my will. So, no more invites, always having to advocate for being on the team again. So, the other chances I got were me like reaching out, being like hey, like how can I get back on? I gave the team probably 7-8 years of my life So, I expected more, but really, did I expect more? No, I knew the infrastructure wasn't in place. ... During like my pregnancy, my postpartum, they just don't have any support in place for athletes that get pregnant. It's not a thing.

Additionally, while athlete-mothers were thankful for the ability to pursue this career they also understood the complexities. The same mother also said:

I love being an active mom and having my kids at the gym because they get to see that mom is just not just our stay-at-home mom. ... and I think it's so cool to like, set that example and I really don't come across many basketball moms, like really even local players, like they just stop playing. It's like, it's like their bodies are incapable, but they are, they are capable. I think it's just obviously the priorities shift. ... Absolutely, it depends obviously on your resources. ... the hard part is that we have to leave home, right? We have no options to play professionally at home; therefore, we have to leave. And go overseas. And then you get into everything we talked about moving every year, having to bring your children with you. Who's taking care of your children? Are your kids going to school? It's so, so hard. So of course it leads to early retirement. Absolutely.

Therefore, for moms who may not have access to the necessary supports and resources to thrive in a professional basketball environment, this experience can be much more difficult. While participants in this study had children and continued their professional basketball career, they had unique circumstances, and even with advanced planning these athletes are still in vulnerable positions when leaving their country of origin. The lack of support, the uncertainty, and the stigma surrounding a woman who combines professional sport and motherhood exponentially increase the difficulties and the precaution around integrating motherhood with

sport. Although these mothers execute it powerfully, due to the low representation of athlete-mothers, female professional athletes do not often get to see the outcomes of motherhood and professional sport careers.

5.3 A mother waiting until retirement to have children.

Melissa (pseudonym) is a black American retired professional basketball player and a mother of two. Melissa had her two children once her professional basketball career had ended.

This decision was intentional. She has a degree in sports management but played basketball in multiple countries both as a national team player and as an import professional over her 7-year professional basketball career. In 2009, at the age of 25 following university, she began her professional career. Her family planning timeline is and always was greatly informed by the desire to be successful in her basketball career. This is her story:

Melissa started playing basketball at a very young age. She played in grade school and was immediately recognized by adults for her athleticism and natural ability to learn new basketball skills. From early on she knew pursuing basketball was not only a hobby but something that could potentially one day turn into a career. At just 15 she was able to play for her national team. She then went on to play university basketball in the United States of America where, following the completion of her degree, she secured a contract to play overseas.

Melissa intentionally did not have children throughout her career. Basketball was her top priority. “I knew it was going to be a big responsibility, and I knew a lot of things were going to change. And I had friends who weren't playing basketball necessarily, but had kids, like, at that age. And I saw how much their lives change and how, I'll say, tied down, but, like, you have to be a bit more rooted. And I wanted the freedom to travel and play and have experiences that I knew I wasn't gonna be able to do as freely if I had children. And so that was definitely like a... very much a far off thought for me, it was definitely not, like, in the front of my mind, like, basketball was life. Like, basketball was a child. Like, basketball would be the thing that I nurtured and grew. So yeah, I... it wasn't even a consideration, to be honest”.

Melissa retired because of reoccurring knee injuries that were beginning to compromise her long-term health. She then had two children. One ten years old now and the other 6 years old. Now that she is a mother, she reflects that “I only have a couple... couple hours of free time [each day], 'cause I have work, I have my [child], I have to be a wife. I'm also the chef. I gotta clean. I gotta do all these things. So, I gotta be more intentional”. And in terms of a professional basketball career, Melissa mentioned that the schedule is much busier. She thought

it could be difficult for some to find time to load and unload yourself as a mom while also being present for your child.

Like Talia, Melissa discussed that a large consideration to being a mother in any career is the support you can build. “You need a village” she said. “You need a partner who is willing to do the work and be coachable, as well as I need to be coachable as well. And, honestly, like children, they put a mirror on you, and they really make you realize like what you got to work on”. Melissa believed that without the support it would be difficult. She had teammates in her time playing overseas that relied heavily on babysitters when raising children, and she saw just how tough this was for them. She also discussed that the supports the organizations themselves provided in both European leagues and on the national team was lacking at the time. In terms of national team supports for children “There wasn't a ton when I was playing. There is a lot more now”. When she played on the national team, she recalled “But yeah, no, I, there was like support in terms of people watching [a child], but in terms of like getting back into shape and all that and no, that wasn't [there]”.

After having a child following her career, she described the toll her pregnancies took on her body and what that would have been like if she was trying to return to professional basketball in a time where supports were lacking. “... ‘cause getting in shape is like I had to have a pelvic floor physio, like, my... my... I tore in three places like it was... my epidural failed. So, I was just, like, it was brutal. I know I laboured for 52 hours, like, it was crazy”. She said: “I think having kids takes not just a physical toll, but, like, an emotional and mental toll on you. And so many people go through, or so many women have, like, postpartum depression, and you have to find a way to navigate that and still show up and be... and give 110% at practices, and I would imagine there's so much pressure on you to want to get back into groove and perform well, because people are probably looking at you, like, she done went and had a baby, like, is she going to be able to bounce back? Is she going to be like she was before? Because it changes your anatomy. Like, it's not, like, do you know what I mean? And just, like, similar to injuries, like, torn ACL, like, sometimes you come back and you're good and other times it's, like, you're never the same as you were before”.

Melissa has never returned to play professionally after having children, but she is playing recreationally. Even recreational play, however, made her notice the changes in her style of play. “I could see that, like, I was a step off, and I didn't have the same sort of, like, regimen I

would have, had I been playing professionally to, like, get back in shape and get back in basketball shape and strength and all that stuff. So, I'm sure that had an impact on it, but I think personally it would have taken me a little bit longer”.

Overall, Melissa believed there was a stigma surrounding pregnancy in sport even without merging the two experiences herself. In her opinion, "we're expected to be the nurturers and the ones that take care of and the one that sacrifice, so that the guy can go and have his professional dreams”. She said: “But I think even, like, when you bring your kid to practice. It just like shows that kids... kids kind of put a little bit of a speed bump, but it's like a speed bump that kind of pushes you forward, you know? Yeah, like 3 steps back to go 10 steps forward”.

After finishing a professional career and having her children she has since pursued coaching basketball to remain a part of the game from a new perspective.

She ultimately concluded that even though there are many barriers that may be changing since she played professionally, they are moving at a “glacial pace”. She believes the conversation around women in sport not only needs to involve player-centered change for mothers, but these conversations need to also include other aspects of sport such as coaching or sport administration positions. “I think it's broadening the conversation around what impacts women at large in these other spaces and not just on the floor because we don't think about that in the same way”.

5.3.1 Reflection on a mother waiting until retirement to have children

Participants who became mothers only after retiring from basketball offered retrospective insight into how their playing careers shaped their reproductive trajectories. Their narratives largely echoed the anticipatory concerns described by active athletes without children but were framed with hindsight and clarity. Out of the two participants in this stage of the decision-making process, one participant was a Black woman and another one was White. One mother had two children, and one mother had one child.

The participants who retired before having children reflected on their pregnancy experiences and what it would have been like to try and return to a professional basketball training regimen postpartum. One 41-year-old participant stated:

I think it would have been challenging for sure. Um, both of my kids were C-sections, but I'm guessing it probably would have been then too, just how my body's set up... I would have had, I think, a more challenging time coming back from that than I did from my previous knee surgeries for sure. And like I said, it's not just a physical like demand, right? Like it's all of the things like you don't fully feel like yourself for a long time.

The toll pregnancy can take is unpredictable. If she had children during her professional career and needed a C-section, the return to play timeline would have increased in comparison to natural birth. Additionally, because of the damage to abdominal muscles, extensive physiotherapy would be needed to return to sport, therapy that not all organization may provide access to leaving her in a vulnerable state with risk of injury. However, another participant mentioned that she witnessed many women have children and come back better than they were before childbirth. She said that although she could not do all the physical things she did when initially returning to play recreationally, after the correct medical treatment and more intentional workouts, she felt stronger and more disciplined than ever. Conversely, a 41-year-old mother felt she was forever a “step off” following childbirth. These conflicting views post pregnancy show the complexity of this experience and unpredictability of childbirth.

A large consideration for these retired athletes was the instability of professional basketball which contrasted with a much more grounded lifestyle they chose to raise their children. First, all participants commented on the inequities between men’s and women’s pay in sport as well as stark differences between how motherhood and fatherhood are treated in professional basketball. While male athletes father children with minimal disruption to career status or playing time, women face scrutiny, doubt, and pressure to justify their decisions. One athlete mentioned that making pregnancy in sport less taboo has the ability to make pregnancy be received better in female athletes. One 41-year-old athlete thought:

I think more conversation need to be had around the other partner being willing to like, step in and make sacrifices, whether it's like same sex and or like heterosexual relationships, like, often a guy can go off and pursue all the things, and he can be a father, an expecting father, but like that doesn't impact him at all whatsoever, right?.

This reflects the gendered expectations of caregiving that mothers face. Although both male and female athletes can be parents, the societal gendered expectations negatively impact female athlete outcomes and cause internalized guilt. Some mothers described exceptional support from organizations. Others described zero guidance, no postpartum physiotherapy expertise, and no awareness of maternal health needs.

It's like you are just treated like, I don't know, just a name on a roster and not like, oh, person or like human being, which I think it's sad but not surprising... I was taken care of, yes, but I.. there was never... a conversation about like if you got pregnant, how would that impact your contract and yada, yada, yada. I know I had to show up in the gym more than a lot of other people who weren't on contract. So, the expectations were higher because I was being paid more, but I'm assuming if you're one of their better players and you're playing more and getting paid more. That probably isn't like the smoothest conversation to have, because if it's a revenue generating business and you can't show up the way they need you to, then I'm guessing they're probably going to be like, OK, well, you're not, right, like the requirements or like the stipulations in your contract, so you're going to have to find somebody else.

Additionally, the requirement for stability and support remained strong with retired athletes as well. Even beyond children if supports had been in place, participants who have since retired might actually have considered continuing their career with children. However, the lack of information for athletes on what would happen if they were to leave for pregnancy is a large deterrent because they find the risk outweighs the reward. Retired participants emphasized that their decisions to delay motherhood were rooted in bodily, financial, and structural constraints. Pregnancy was perceived as too risky to athletic longevity, and the lack of maternity leave protections made it an undesirable choice during their careers. With the benefit of distance, these athletes described the tension between wanting children earlier and recognizing the impracticality of doing so while maintaining a professional basketball schedule.

Retirement released many of the pressures previously shaping their reproductive decisions. Athletes described feeling more in control of their bodies, less scrutinized, and more physically and emotionally ready for pregnancy without the demand to return to elite

performance. Stability in employment, partnership, and location after retirement enabled them to imagine family life in ways impossible during their playing years.

One mother was enthusiastic about the changes we are currently seeing in women's basketball. She was hopeful that as policies and supports begin to change for athlete-mothers, female athletes would be able to continue their professional careers in tandem with motherhood. She said "women are superheroes, don't let anybody tell you different" and "kids kind of put a little bit of a speed bump, but it's like a speed bump that kind of pushes you forward."

Yet, a retrospective narrative from another mother also contained grief, frustration, and disappointment. Both athletes reflected on what might have been possible with better structural supports, maternity policies, or cultural shifts within sport when they were competing. Their stories highlight the long-term implications of the structural and cultural conditions present during their athletic careers, conditions that even today, continue to influence decision.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings of this study within the context of existing literature and the theoretical frameworks informing the research. Through narrative inquiry and sociological analysis, this study explored how professional female basketball players navigate pregnancy decision-making and family planning throughout their careers. Intersectionality provided a valuable framework that assisted in the understanding of these competing identities and varied experiences. Intersectionality foregrounds how multiple social positions operate simultaneously rather than in isolation (Anders et al. 2023). The overlapping structures athletes are faced with create uneven conditions under which pregnancy is experienced. By centering lived experiences through narrative inquiry, intersectionality aligns with the approach of this study. The findings highlight the deeply social, structural, and embodied nature of these decisions, revealing how sport environments shape what seems possible for female athletes (Chand, 2024).

The current atmosphere around women in sport demonstrates how advocating for female athletes in society has finally been getting more recognition. However, as this study demonstrates, combining pregnancy and childbirth with professional career in basketball is still out of reach for many women who pursue this sport. Four major themes emerged from this research: (1) the body as a site of uncertainty, pregnancy recovery, and risk; (2) the financial insecurity and structural constraints of women's professional basketball; (3) the relationship between motherhood and global mobility in sport; and (4) the stigma surrounding pregnancy and motherhood in elite sport. These findings parallel and extend existing research on women's sport, athletic motherhood, and gendered workplaces.

6.1 Key insights

6.2.1 *Motherhood and the athletic body*

Across the nine narratives, several core conclusions emerged. First, pregnancy is perceived as largely incompatible with the demands and structure of professional basketball. Athletes associated pregnancy with physical uncertainty, prolonged absence, high injury risk, and decreased performance, all of which are concerns shaped by the cultural construction of the rigorous professional athlete schedule and the expectations build for an athletic body. This resonates with prior research showing that athletic body is constructed as disciplined, controlled, and optimized (Dubose, 2022). Contrarily, pregnant or postpartum bodies are often represented

as unpredictable or “risky” (Darroch et al. 2023). This study extends that work by demonstrating how athletes internalize such narratives, often perceiving pregnancy not only as a personal health concern but as a threat to their professional identity.

Mothers in this study described pelvic floor trauma, hormonal instability, weight changes, urinary incontinence, fatigue, and shifts in performance capacity. All of these bodily responses to pregnancy and motherhood are consistent with existing research on postpartum physical changes in elite athletes (Davenport et al. 2022). However, they also highlighted the emotional dimension of returning to play. The feelings of guilt, shame, fear of injury, and pressure to match pre-pregnancy versions of themselves have also heavily informed their experience returning to sport.

Narrative inquiry illuminated how these embodied experiences were intertwined with identity. Athletes reconciled two competing narratives: “the disciplined athlete” and the “the selfless mother”. Sport sociologists have nodded to the possibility that these two identities are positioned as incompatible (Cosh et al. 2013; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). This study adds nuance by showing that athletes often foresee these tensions years in advance of motherhood, shaping family planning long before pregnancy actually occurs.

6.1.2 Precarity in finances and structure

Women’s professional basketball is a precarious work environment lacking maternity protections and consistent policy standards. With the low pay, unstable contract renewals, and limited healthcare support many athletes see motherhood as financially and professionally risky.

Participants across all career stages described the structural instability of women’s professional basketball. These findings reinforce critiques of women’s sport as a precarious labour market (Fink, 2015), where institutional support is inconsistent and often dependent on athletes’ marketability, nationality, or league status.

Athletes repeatedly described the absence of maternity leave, health coverage gaps for pregnancy related care, and the likelihood of being released if pregnancy prevented their full participation. These conditions positioned pregnancy as an economic risk, one many athletes felt was not in their best interest to take. While some leagues, like the WNBA, established formal maternity policy to protect athletes, this study shows that international women’s basketball is falling behind, and many other leagues remain largely unregulated (ESPN, 2023). Therefore, this study contributes important insight for global inequities in sport labour policies.

Additionally, athletes' descriptions of unethical practices such as revoked contracts, exclusion from team spaces, and being treated as "replaceable" highlight how power operates within sport. This reinforces the critiques that sport institutions often privilege profit and performance over athlete wellbeing (Schlawe et al. 2025). These findings also expand existing literature by showing how such practices are normalized internationally, leaving athletes with little power to challenge mistreatment.

6.1.3 Support systems and global mobility

Motherhood in international sport depends on extensive support systems that most athletes do not have access to away from their home country. Geographical mobility, lack of local family networks, and varying international resources create unequal opportunities for athlete-mothers to be able to rely on their support systems. Without having a fixed location, it is extremely difficult for these athletes to build and keep a support system. As well, every location might have different levels of supports, which adds instability. Lastly, many of these athletes move to new countries on their own, without family and friends who, in a typical context, would be nearby for support.

This study illustrates how professional basketball's global nature complicates motherhood. Athletes often change countries annually, creating instability for education, childcare, partner co-location, and community support. Prior research has acknowledged the importance of familial and social support for athletes (DeFoor et al. 2018). However, this study extends the conversation by adding nuance to the importance of support systems in the global context as one of the key factors in athletes' decision-making about pregnancy and motherhood.

The findings suggest that motherhood is not merely a personal decision but a relational, structural, and geographic one. Support systems varied dramatically across leagues, revealing deep inequalities in who can return to play after childbirth. Higher-profile athletes sometimes received childcare assistance, whereas younger or lower-status players reported having zero access to supports, postpartum physical therapy, or health guidance.

This variability deepens the divide between who can and who cannot realistically consider motherhood during their athletic career, confirming intersectionality's relevance to sport (Anders et al. 2023; Cooky et al. 2010). Athletes' race, nationality, and socioeconomic position shaped access to care, job security, and support.

6.1.4 Stigma and the social construction of the athlete-mother

The stigma around being an athlete-mother shapes how athletes think about, delay, or avoid pregnancy. The cultural narrative of the ‘ideal athlete’ conflicts with expectations of the ‘ideal mother’ (Fink, 2016), placing athletes at a seemingly impossible conflict.

The decision-making is relational, temporal, and narrative-driven. Athletes’ stories illustrate anticipatory planning, emotional tension, and meaning-making across their career trajectories. Each piece changing as they move through different stages of their career and of their lives. Many of these women consider so much more beyond themselves as individuals when making or attempting to make this decision. They integrate their social, cultural, and political contexts to form a cohesive opinion on the effects childbearing may have on them.

Stigma was embedded in athletes’ experiences and perceptions, shaping decisions even among athletes who never became pregnant. Participants framed pregnancy as incompatible with elite performance, reflecting dominant cultural narratives in sport (Zahl Marken et al. 2025). These narratives suggest that motherhood diminishes commitment, reduces competitiveness, and increases risk. However, these perceptions are shaped by gendered ideals of caregiving.

The belief that becoming pregnant is a signal of decreased seriousness reveals the persistence of the “athlete-first” ideal (Smith et al. 2023), which rarely accommodates the caregiving responsibilities associated with motherhood. Athletes’ comparisons to male players, as well as the frustrations expressed about unequal expectations, reinforce longstanding ideas regarding gender inequity in sport (Cooky et al. 2010).

Using narrative inquiry helped to demonstrated how stigma operates not only externally (from coaches, media, and organizations) but internally, through self-surveillance and guilt. During interviews, the participants in this study described guilt for missing time with their children. Non-mothers also described guilt for delaying or deprioritizing motherhood. This demonstrates the emotional stressors involved in navigating athlete-mother identities.

6.2 Strengths, limitations, and implications

Using narrative inquiry allowed athletes to articulate not just what they have experienced, but also how they made meaning of that experience. It also allowed their perceptions of the experience to be shared instead of only focusing on those who have actively gone through

pregnancy in their careers. These perceptions opened a narrative that we can analyze to understand how women in sport are viewing the possible outcomes of their decisions and what factors specifically might be driving this process. Participants constructed temporally rich stories that connected early career decisions, peak performance windows, family aspirations, and anticipated future life stages.

This research shows that reproductive decision-making is deeply personal. Each athletes' stories shaped by their personal imagined futures, possible outcomes, fears and aspirations. This has confirmed narrative inquiry was suitable for research in women's sport, where identity, embodiment, and temporality are central to the process.

Conversely, narrative inquiries central regulations still pose some limitations in the sense that this research is very subjective to the athletes I have interviewed. Being that this experience is so unique from athlete to athlete, interviewing other athletes might have shaped by analysis differently. Nevertheless, it is worth to point out that some themes – those discussed above – were consistently appearing in the participants' narratives, hinting that they might be experienced by many other female athletes, including those outside of basketball.

6.2.1 Strengths

The strengths of this research design are that the use of narrative inquiry prioritizes participants lived experiences and personal meaning-making. In such a participant-focused approach, complex, nuanced accounts of pregnancy decision-making can be highlighted throughout the analysis process. Additionally, this methodology aligns well with exploring the factors contributing to how these women define their identity, emotion, and long-term career aspirations and trajectories. The data collected through the semi-structured interviews created a diverse understanding of detailed experiences across nine women. The in depth, open-ended nature of interview design allowed for deep analysis using all the data collected. In turn, this allowed narratives to form from participant language, which elicited detailed insights, not typically captured in a quantitative or surface-level methodological approach.

Another strength of this research is the focus on an underrepresented population. While research exists on professional female athletes, specifically targeting female professional basketball players and the reproductive decision-making has rarely been given direct attention. This research addressed a gap in sport sociology, gender studies, and athlete motherhood

research, and helped to generate original knowledge that challenges the dominant narratives about motherhood in elite sport.

This study is also capturing narratives during a period in our world today where female professional sports are actively growing in visibility. This timely relation to policy discussions about maternity rights, contracts, and athlete welfare gives my research an opportunity to advocate for change. In particular, the findings from this study might be used by sport organizations and stakeholders to develop new, women-friendly policies in sport.

6.2.2 Limitations

Limitations in this research begin with the recruitment. The challenges associated with a small sample size are limited generalizability; however, this aligns with narrative inquiry. When trying to understand such a specific and personal experience, in many instances, these niche experiences are not generalizable, and this is the beauty of narrative inquiry. It allows for a deep understand of topics that may not always be relatable to all. However, these findings carry a greater benefit for the women who go through this experience. Additionally, this study, although specifically connected to professional basketball, may also still be somewhat transferable to other professional female sport organizations and generalizable within a pregnancy context for female athletes.

As a partial insider, my interpretations may have been influenced by shared experiences, a concern that I discussed earlier in this thesis. To address this concern, I regularly practiced reflexivity and aimed for co-construction of narratives while avoiding projection of my own experience. Additionally, reflexive journalling was a large piece to mitigating this potential limitation.

This study's reliance on a binary classification of gender poses limitations to the breadth of gendered experiences represented. All participants identified as women and were competing in women's professional basketball. This classification structured eligibility, policies, and expectations around a binary understand of sex and gender in sport. As a result, the narratives presented reflect the experiences of cis-gendered women and do not capture the perspectives of transgender, non-binary, or gender-diverse athletes who may navigate pregnancy, family planning, and athletic careers in different ways. However, this binary framing reflects the reality of current professional sport structures, which is largely organized along sex-segregated lines

(Lütkevitte, 2023). Future research would benefit from intentionally including gender-diverse athletes and critically examining how non-binary and transgender identities intersect with reproductive decision-making, athletic eligibility, and institutional support within professional sport.

Finally, a limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the participant sample, which may constrain the breadth of perspectives captured. While narrative inquiry prioritizes depth over representativeness, the shared characteristics of participants –being close in age and the limited racial diversity – may have shaped the themes that emerged. This homogeneity is also reflective of my positionality as a researcher as recruitment largely occurred through existing athletic networks. As a former basketball player, my reach facilitated trust and rapport but may have simultaneously favoured participation to athletes with comparable backgrounds, experiences, or social proximity, potentially marginalizing alternative or more divergent narratives. Furthermore, my passion for the subject of study and my personal experience in women’s basketball might have also shaped how I approached data collection and analysis, including interview questions and interpretation of participants’ narratives. Future research would benefit from engagement with larger platforms and more diverse participant samples. Expanding recruitment networks may help capture a wider range of experiences and illuminate how intersecting structural conditions shape pregnancy and family planning in more varied ways.

6.2.3 Implications

The implications around policy for these leagues and organizations are that there needs to be an implementation of standardized maternity protections in international women’s basketball contracts. The findings from this study are the first step in calling for a development of ethical guidelines to prevent discriminatory contract termination. Instead of informal, individualized accommodations, these maternity policies need to become formalized, organization wide policies that recognize pregnancy and motherhood as integral to athletes’ career trajectories. All of the athletes in this study were playing in countries where federal laws exist to protect workers, however, considering a work visa is a large and necessary piece to offer athletes employment in the international sport, the federal and/or national policies are not completely protective of these players, and their visa status may prevent them from accessing worker protection and benefits (O’Leary et al. 2025). Moreover, their work contracts are tied to their immigration status, which

can create occupational precarity, a problem that has been examined in the literature on international migration and women's employment (Taylor, 2022) but has not been as widely documented among women who play professional sports internationally. This precarity increases the power of the organizations that negotiate contract terms with the athletes and can ultimately choose when to terminate contracts, in turn terminating work visas (O'Leary et al. 2025). This thesis demonstrates a need to adjust policy within professional women's basketball organizations that accept import players. The creation of a postpartum return-to-play protocol to follow maternity leave is essential for supporting athletes throughout the process of becoming an athlete-mother. Specialized physiotherapy and mental health supports should be offered and accessible to all professional athletes, regardless of the geographical location.

In addition, childcare assistance, family housing options, and resources for partner co-location are also beneficial in making sure athlete-mothers are supported, reducing the confliction of their motherhood and their career. Providing paid or subsidized childcare during training, competition, and travel would contribute to a critical structural change that can reduce barriers for athlete mothers and promote greater equity and career sustainability in women's professional basketball.

Coaches and support staff need training on perinatal health, postpartum rehabilitation, and athlete well-being. The lack of knowledge in these areas hold a direct attribution to the lack of support.

Another implication highlighted from participant narratives are mentorship programs pairing professional female basketball players with experienced athlete mothers may further support career planning, identity recognition, and informed decisions around family planning. The greater visibility and representation of athlete-mothers in these contexts can increase the normalization of motherhood in sport. Without more contractual protection for athletes, the representation will likely remain low if the 'taboo' perception of athlete-mothers persists. Participant narratives suggested that speaking with other women who have navigated pregnancy while maintaining professional careers provides emotional validation, practical knowledge, and a sense of collective solidarity. Institutionalizing these networks can help normalize motherhood within professional sport, reducing isolation. Such implications can represent a shift from symbolic inclusion to material support and signal that caregiving responsibilities are compatible with professional athletic participation.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study examined how professional female basketball players navigate pregnancy decision-making while building athletic careers in international sport systems. Through narrative inquiry, it illuminated the complexities, contradictions, and inequalities embedded in these decisions, showing how athletes wrestle with the realities of their bodies, their contracts, their aspirations, and the sociocultural expectations surrounding motherhood.

This research contributes to the sport sociology, reproductive decision-making research, and athlete motherhood space by providing narrative accounts from Canadian and international basketball contexts where maternity protections prove inconsistent. It also contributes to these spaces by extending feminist critiques of sport by revealing how geographical mobility and work environments shape reproductive decisions which offers new insights into how athletes may anticipate motherhood long before it occurs. Lastly, it contributes to these spaces by highlighting how systemic inequality, not individual choice, constrains these athletes' perceptions on their ability to integrate motherhood seamlessly with sport.

The recommendations for future research are the need for comparative studies across sports and countries to map global disparities in maternity support. There is also need for longitudinal research following athlete-mothers through pregnancy, postpartum, and return to play. Lastly, more research is needed on the experiences of LGBTQ2S+ athletes, racialized athletes, and single parents navigating motherhood in sport and how barriers found within this research are the same or even more extreme in more complex contexts.

Overall, the narratives in this study reveal a stark reality: for many professional female basketball players, the decision to become pregnant feels like a forced choice between two deeply meaningful identities. Yet, athletes' stories also show the resilience, creativity, and initiative these women have for imagining new possibilities, advocating for change, and challenging the structures that currently limit them.

The findings from this study can be seen as a stepping stone in highlighting the need for systemic change and acceptance. With appropriate policies, resources, and ideology shifts, motherhood and elite sport no longer need to be perceived as mutually exclusive. Athletes deserve environments where their full identities as competitors, women, and potential or current mother are recognized, respected and full supported.

References

- Anders, A. D., DeVita, J. M., Fisher, L. A., Corr, C., & Myers, C. L. (2023). Looking back to look forward: Exploring Crenshaw's political, structural, and representational intersectionality in sport. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 24(1), 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086231207825>
- Andrew. (2023, September 13). The Overseas Overview. *Women's Basketball News and Opinions*. <https://wbasketballblog.com/2023/09/12/the-overseas-overview/>
- Annual wages in the NBA & WNBA 2024/25. (2025, May). Statista. Retrieved November 18, 2025, from <https://www-statista-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/statistics/1120680/annual-salaries-nba-wnba/>
- Bell, R. C. (2007). A History of Women in Sport Prior to Title IX. *The Sport Journal*, 10(2).
- Besnier, N., & Brownell, S. (2012). Sport, Modernity, and the Body. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41(1), 443-459. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092611-145934>
- Chand, G. (2024). Narrative inquiry: A critical examination of its theoretical foundations and methodological applications. *Far Western Review*, 2, 135–152. <https://doi.org/10.3126/fwr.v2i1.70514>
- Clandinin, D. J., Huber, J. (2010). Narrative inquiry. *International Encyclopedia of Education (Third Addition)*. 436-441. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-044894-7.01387-7>
- Committee on Obstetric Practice. (2020). Physical activity and exercise during pregnancy and the postpartum period. *The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists* 135(4), 178-188. <https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/committee-opinion/articles/2020/04/physical-activity-and-exercise-during-pregnancy-and-the-postpartum-period>
- Coello, S. (2023, July 11). *Dearica Hamby's pregnancy allegations: What do laws, WNBA CBA say?* ESPN.com https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/37990199/dearica-hamby-pregnancy-allegations-do-laws-wnba-cba-say
- Cooky, C., Wachs, F. L., Messner, M., & Dworkin, S. L. (2010). It's not about the game: Don imus, race, class, gender and sexuality in contemporary media. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 27(2), 139–159. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.27.2.139>

- Cosh, S., LeCouteur, A., Crabb, S., Kettler, L. (2013). Career transitions and identity: A discursive psychological approach to exploring athlete identity in retirement and the transition back into elite sport. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 5(1), 21–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2012.712987>
- Costantino, T. E., Thompson, C., & Bales, S. (2008). Constructivism. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909>
- Darroch, F., Schneeberg, A., Brodie, R., Ferraro, Z. M., Wykes, D., Hira, S., Giles, A. R., Adamo, K. B., Stellingwerff, T. (2023). Effect of pregnancy in 42 elite to world-class runners on training and performance outcomes. *American College of Sports Medicine*, 55(1), 93-100.
- Davenport, M. H., Nerdoly, A., Ray, L., Khurana, R., Thornton, J., & McHugh, T.-L. F. (2024). “Is it realistic?”: A qualitative study of the experiences of elite women athletes considering parenthood. *Sports Medicine*, 54(9), 2411–2421. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-024-02019-y>
- Davenport, M. H., Nerdoly, A., Ray, L., Thornton, J. S., Khurana, R., & McHugh, T.-L. F. (2022). Pushing for change: A qualitative study of the experiences of elite athletes during pregnancy. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 56(8), 452–457. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2021-104755>
- Davenport, M. H., Ray, L., Nerdoly, A., Thornton, J., Khurana, R., & McHugh, T.-L. F. (2023a). We’re not superhuman, we’re human: A qualitative description of elite athletes’ experiences of return to sport after childbirth. *Sports Medicine*, 53(1), 269–279. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-022-01730-y>
- Davenport, M. H., Ray, L., Nerdoly, A., Thornton, J. S., Khurana, R., & McHugh, T.-L. F. (2023b). Filling the evidence void: Exploration of coach and healthcare provider experiences working with pregnant and postpartum elite athletes - a qualitative study. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 57(24), 1559–1565. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2023-107100>
- DeFoor, M. T., Stepleman, L. M., & Mann, P. C. (2018). Improving wellness for LGB collegiate student-athletes through sports medicine: A narrative review. *Sports Medicine - Open*, 4, 48. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-018-0163-y>

- de Subijana, C. L., Galatti, L., Moreno, R., & Chamorro, J. L. (2020). Analysis of the athletic career and retirement depending on the type of sport: A comparison between individual and team sports. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*(24), 9265. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249265>
- Dixon, M. A., & Bruening, J. E. (2005). Perspectives on work-family conflict in sport: An integrated approach. *Sport Management Review*, *8*(3), 227–253. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1441-3523\(05\)70040-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1441-3523(05)70040-1)
- DuBose, R. (2022). An unexpected result of gender equality initiatives in sports—The sexualization of female athletes. *Mitchell Hamline Law Review*, *48*(4), 1140-1169. <https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/mhlr/vol48/iss4/9>
- ESPN. (2023, July 13). *The pros and cons of all 12 WNBA teams' training facilities*. ESPN.com. https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/38001050/wnba-training-facilities-pros-cons-all-12-teams-practice-homes
- Felix, A., Crouse, L., Jensen, T., & Cantor, M. (2019, May 22). *Allyson Felix: My own Nike pregnancy story*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/22/opinion/allyson-felix-pregnancy-nike.html>
- Fink, J. S. (2015). Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really “come a long way, baby”? *Sport Management Review*, *18*(3), 331–342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.05.001>
- Fink, J. S. (2016). Hiding in Plain Sight: The Embedded Nature of Sexism in Sport. *Journal of Sport Management*, *30*(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2015-0278>
- Ford, C. (2024, May 1). *Ford: Wage gap leaves women athletes and others in second place*. Calgary Herald. <https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/ford-wage-gap-women-athletes-others-second-place>
- Frequently asked questions*. (n.d.). WNBA. Retrieved November 18, 2025, from <https://www.wnba.com/faq>
- Gregory, K. B. (2022). *Improving Spaces for Women First Responders: Investigating women's occupational experiences using a comparative grounded theory*. [Master's thesis, University of Waterloo]. UW Space.
- Hellborg, A. M. (2024). Making it work—Fitting parenthood into an elite sport career. *Sport in Society*, *27*(8), 1274–1292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2024.2329597>

- History and origin of the games* (n.d.). International Olympic Committee. Retrieved November 18, 2025, from <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/faq/history-and-origin-of-the-games/when-did-women-first-compete-in-the-olympic-games>
- Impact of Brexit on Foreign Footballers' Work Permits. (2024, November 23). *REREGULATE: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF REGULATIONS IN FOOTBALL*. <https://reregulate.co.uk/2024/11/23/impact-of-brexit-on-foreign-footballers-work-permits/>
- Little, L. M., Major, V. S., Hinojosa, A. S., & Nelson, D. L. (2015). Professional image maintenance: How women navigate pregnancy in the workplace. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 58(1), 8–37. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.0599>
- Lütkevitte, S. (2023). Sports participation and beliefs about male dominance: A cross-national analysis of sexist gender ideologies. *Social Sciences*, 12(4), 207. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12040207>
- McGregor, B., McGrath, R., Young, & J., Nottle, C. (2024). A scoping review of the experiences of elite female athletes concerning pregnancy and motherhood. *Sport in Society*, 27(8), 1221–1253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.2270438>
- National Basketball Association. (2025, November 17). *League growth and membership*. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Basketball-Association>
- Ollerenshaw, J., & Creswell, J. (2002). Narrative research: A comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(3), 329–347. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004008003008>
- O'Leary, L., Seltmann, M., & Smokvina, V. (2025). Elite Athletes and Worker Status. *Industrial Law Journal*, 54(2), 248–277. <https://doi.org/10.1093/indlaw/dwae025>
- Olympic basketball: History, top teams and all you need to know*. (n.d.). Olympics. Retrieved November 18, 2025, from <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/olympic-basketball-history-dream-team-usa-soviet-union>
- Ono, K. E., Burns, T. G., Bearden, D. J., McManus, S. M., King, H., & Reisner, A. (2016). Sex-Based Differences as a Predictor of Recovery Trajectories in Young Athletes After a Sports-Related Concussion. *The American Journal of Sports Medicine*, 44(3), 748–752. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0363546515617746>
- Palmer, F. R., & Leberman, S. I. (2009). Elite athletes as mothers: Managing multiple identities. *Sport Management Review*, 12(4), 241–254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2009.03.001>

- Pervin, N., Mokhtar, M. (2022). The interpretivist research paradigm: A subjective notion of a social context. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(2), 419–428. <https://doi:10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i2/12938>
- Pino Gavidia, L. A., & Adu, J. (2022). Critical narrative inquiry: An examination of a methodological approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 16094069221081594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221081594>
- Ronkainen, N. J., Kavoura, A., & Ryba, T. V. (2016). Narrative and discursive perspectives on athletic identity: Past, present, and future. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 27, 128–137. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2016.08.010>
- Riessman, C.K. (2007) *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage Publications. 53-76. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/narrative-methods-for-the-human-sciences/book226139#preview>
- Schlawe, A., Christiansen, A. V., & Henriksen, K. (2025). The high-performance sport environment: The high-performance sport environment: laying the foundation for a new research topic. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 7, e1503199. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2025.1503199>
- Scott, T., Smith, S. V. M., F. E., & Giles, A. R. (2023). Selling vs. supporting motherhood: How corporate sponsors frame the parenting experiences of elite and olympic athletes. *Communication & Sport*, 11(6), 1181–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795221103415>
- Senne, J. A. (2016, February 26). Examination of gender equity and female participation in sport. *The Sport Journal*. <https://thesportjournal.org/article/examination-of-gender-equity-and-female-participation-in-sport/>
- Simoni, M., Mu, L., & Collins, S. C. (2016). Valuing work success and family planning: Attitudes on pregnancy planning, delayed childbearing, and the acceptability of reproductive technologies among career-focused women. *Fertility and Sterility*, 106, (e31–e31). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fertnstert.2016.07.100>
- Smith, S. V. M., Giles, A. R., & Darroch, F. E. (2023). Pregnancy, parenthood, and elite athletics: “There’s a lot of work still yet to be done.”. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 41(2), 201-210. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2022-0162>

- Stamarski, C. S., & Son Hing, L. S. (2015). Gender inequalities in the workplace: The effects of organizational structures, processes, practices, and decision makers' sexism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01400>
- Stokes, K., Jones, B., Bennett, M., Close, G., Gill, N., Hull, J., Kasper, A., Kemp, S., Mellalieu, S., Peirce, N., Stewart, B., Wall, B., West, S., & Cross, M. (2020). Returning to play after prolonged training restrictions in professional collision sports. *International Journal of Sports Medicine*, 41(13), 895–911. <https://doi.org/10.1055/a-1180-3692>
- Sugden, J. T. (2022). Fight the biopower! Mixed martial arts as resistance. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 57(6), 879–898. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902211039772>
- Taylor, D. (2022). *An international overview on women and migration*. Murphy & Moore Publishing.
- The Canadian Press (2024, July 22). *Rise of women's sports brings greater emphasis on maternity and parental needs*. TSN.ca. <https://www.tsn.ca/olympics/rise-of-women-s-sports-brings-greater-emphasis-on-maternity-and-parental-needs-1.2151715>
- The NBA's new practice facilities*. (2016, June 5). Sports Business Journal. <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Journal/Issues/2016/06/06/Facilities/NBA-facilities/>
- Thomas, M. (2015). Book review: D. Jean Clandinin, Engaging in narrative Inquiry. *Qualitative Research*, 15(1), 126–128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114520885>
- Washington, J. (2012). The “X” factor: Why female athletes have a higher rate of ACL injury than their male counterparts. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 29(19), 16–18.
- Way, A. D., & Marques, J. (2013). Management of gender roles: Marketing the androgynous leadership style in the classroom and the general workplace. *Organization Development Journal*, 31(2), 82–94.
- Zahl Marken, M., Mass Dalhaug, E. F., Thing, L. F., Abrahamsen, F. E., Bø, K., & Hagen Haakstad, L. A. (2025). Experiences and perspectives on pregnancy and motherhood in elite athletes – a qualitative study. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 33(1), e2501832. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2025.2501832>

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment email

Dear [Participant Name],

My name is Alliasen Miscione and I am a student-researcher working under the supervision of Dr. Elena Neiterman, in the School of Public Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo. This email is an invitation to participate in research about *Female Basketball Players' Career Progression in Tandem with Family Planning Decisions*. The purpose of this study is to understand how individuals experience making decisions starting a family while also balancing the difficulties of a professional basketball career. We are interested in individuals' social experiences pertaining to their everyday career schedules, their thoughts on motherhood and family planning, and their thoughts on how this challenging balance can be better supported.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve taking part in an open-ended interview where you will be asked to share your experiences of being a professional basketball player and building a career while also making decisions about having children. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete and will be arranged either over phone, or through an online platform of the participant's choice such as Microsoft Teams. Attached is a Letter of Information and Consent Form where you can learn more about the study's purpose and procedures. I would like to assure you that the study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Alliasen Miscione at amiscion@uwaterloo.ca. Once I receive your confirmation email, I will provide you with more information about the study and, if you are still willing to participate, I will set up an interview.

For more information regarding this study feel free to contact me at amiscion@uwaterloo.ca.

Sincerely,

Alliasen Miscione

CALLING ALL FEMALE BASKETBALL PLAYERS

- ✓ Are you playing university or professional basketball?
- ✓ Have you, or are you going to, consider having children during your career?



WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR STORY

Participate in a confidential 45-60-minute interview and share your experiences with family planning while maintaining a career in basketball.

- Flexible interview options (online)

Your voice matters. Your experience is valuable.



Contact Alliasen Miscione

or message me on
Instagram

UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Appendix C: Letter of information and consent form

University of Waterloo

September 3, 2025

Dear Participant:

This letter is an invitation to participate in research titled **Female Basketball Players' Career Progression in Tandem with Family Planning Decisions**. The the purpose of this study is to understand how individuals experienced making decisions about starting a family while also balancing the difficulties of a professional basketball career. In particular, we are interested in individuals' experiences pertaining to their everyday career schedules, their thoughts on motherhood and family planning, and their thoughts on how this challenging balance can be better supported.

This study will be undertaken by Alliasen Miscione, an MSc student at the School of Public Health Sciences under the supervision of Dr. Elena Neiterman.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve taking part in an open-ended interview that will take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. The interview will be conducted via video-conferencing. You will be participating in a study that uses Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams has implemented technical, administrative, and physical safeguards to protect the information from loss, misuse, and unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, or destruction. However, no internet transmission is ever fully secure or error free. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party. University of Waterloo researchers will not collect internet protocol (IP) addresses or other information which could link your participation to your computer or electronic device without first informing you.

With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate the collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. Additionally, because the use of Microsoft Teams cannot offer exclusive audio recordings, video recording will also take place. Immediately following the interview, the audio and video will be separated and the video recording will be

discarded to ensure your identity confidentiality. During the interview, a series of open ended and demographic questions will be asked. These questions are written to allow the researchers to understand demographic information that may contribute to how you understand your personal experiences and contextual information on family planning choices. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions and/or share your personal information with the student-researcher. Further, you may withdraw from this study at any time by advising the researcher. If you decide to withdraw, we will erase the interview transcript and all the research notes that were taken during the interview process. You may withdraw consent any time following the interview up until October 1st, 2025 as this date will mark the thesis write up process at which time your answers can no longer be removed from the data collection. Your identity will remain confidential. Your name or any other personal identifying information will not appear in any research papers or publications resulting from this study. To protect your confidentiality, we will erase the audio recording of the interview right after we transcribe it, but the transcription which will be assigned a pseudonym will remain. Lastly the data from this study will be kept securely on the personal computer of Alliasen Miscione for a period of 1 year following the last use of the information. The consent form that you signed will be stored separately from your anonymized interview transcript.

Participation in this study may not provide any personal benefits to you. We hope the data collected will advance our understanding of females experiences in professional sport careers. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB 47574. If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca. For all other questions regarding this study, or if you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact Alliasen Miscione at [REDACTED].

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

CONSENT FORM

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about the study being conducted by Alliasen Miscione under the supervision of Dr. Elena Neiterman, School of Public Health and Health Systems, University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio and video recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis paper and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time during the interview by advising the student researcher as well as withdraw my data by advising the student researcher until October 2025.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB 47574. If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca. For all other questions contact Alliasen Miscione at

████████████████████

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

YES NO

I agree to have my interview audio and video recorded.

YES NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in the thesis and any other publications based on this research.

YES NO

Are you interested in seeing the interview transcript and preliminary analysis to give input on your interview answers? If yes, what is the best email to reach you on?

YES NO

Email: _____

Participant Name: _____ (Please print)

Participant Signature: _____

Witness Name: _____ (Please print)

Witness Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview guide

Research questions:

What impact, if any, do female basketball players believe pregnancy, giving birth, and parenting may have on their career progression?

- (a) What potential implications on physical performance exist because of pregnancy?
- (b) What financial changes do athletes anticipate pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period could bring to a career in sport?
- (c) What supports are necessary to help female athletes balance pregnancy and motherhood with a career in sport?

Disclaimer:

There are two separate interview guides, those who have children and those who have not had children. Many questions are similar (core questions) but worded slightly different for the language to reflect their status with or without children. The interview guide for those without children will also be used if any participants have already gone through the process of deciding and ultimately came to the conclusion of not wanting children.

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your age?
2. How long have you had a career in basketball? How long would you like to maintain the career if possible? If you have not started your career yet, how long do you hope to have this career?
3. What race and/or ethnicity do you identify yourself as?
4. How many children do you have? If you do not have children yet, how many do you wish to have?

Interview guide for women without children who are making or have already made decisions regarding pregnancy:

1. Can you tell me a bit about how you became involved in professional basketball?
 - a. What age, which level
2. How easy/or challenging it is for the women in your career to have children?
 - a. Other teammates getting pregnant, stigma, impact on career
3. Can you walk me through your thought process when deciding whether and when to have children?
 - a. Are there career specific concerns? Concerns about career progression, impact on career stage, long/short-term impacts
4. Have you met someone who is playing the same sport as you who has had children during their career?
 - a. If yes, what did you think about these persons experience and how has it affected your thought process around athletic careers and pregnancy?
 - b. Were there opportunities for you to seek advice or mentorship from those who had these experiences?
5. Can you describe how pregnancy would impact your training regimen and performance? Is this timeline a factor when deciding to have children or not?
 - a. Timelines on return to play after birth, are these challenging to handle, would you feel support? If so from who?
 - b. Would there be specific adjustments you had to make, and how would they influence your athletic performance?
6. Are there any pre-determined agreements to support you as female athlete during pregnancy?
 - a. Contracts with endorsements, maternity leave deals, sponsorship pay during leave?
7. What are some of the thoughts you have about your ability to have children and continue in your career?
 - a. Adjust your ambitions or priorities?
8. How do you think your decisions regarding childbearing would influence the length of your career?
 - a. Would it lead to an earlier or later retirement than you initially anticipated?

9. What advice would you give to younger female athletes who are considering childbearing while pursuing a professional sports career?
10. Is there something else that you would like to add that we did not discuss?

Interview guide for women who have made the choice and already have children:

1. Can you tell me a bit about how you became involved in professional basketball?
 - b. What age, which level.
2. Can you tell me a bit about your thoughts on having children?
 - a. Concerns about career progression, impact on career stage, long- and short-terms impacts
3. How and when did you decide to have a child?
 - a. Where there career specific thought processes? Planned or unplanned, at what time of the career stage, accomplishments in career, age, how many children.
4. How easy/or challenging it is for the women in your career to have children?
 - a. Other teammates getting pregnant, stigma, impact on career
5. What reactions did you have from the people around you about your pregnancy?
 - a. Partner, family members, teammates, coaches, others
6. Have you felt that your pregnancy impacted your athletic performance, both during and after pregnancy? If yes, in what way?
 - a. Specific challenges or improvements you experienced, training regimen modifications and changes, etc.
7. Can you describe your journey back to professional sports after giving birth?
 - a. Most significant challenges and milestones, how soon, support systems,
8. What supports did you have in place (or have lost), both while pregnant and after being back?
 - a. Sponsors, endorsements, organizational supports
9. Has becoming a mother influenced your long-term career goals and aspirations? If yes, in what way?
 - a. Shifting priorities or ambitions shifted

10. How do you think your decisions regarding childbearing have influenced the length of your career (if at all)?
 - a. Will it lead to an earlier or later retirement than you initially anticipated?
11. Looking back, how do you feel about the impact of pregnancy on your career?
 - a. What advice would you give to other female athletes who may face similar experiences?
12. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we did not discuss?

Appendix E: Feedback letter

University of Waterloo

June 1, 2025

Dear Participant,

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study titled **Female Basketball Players' Career Progression in Tandem with Family Planning Decisions**. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to understand how individuals experience making decisions about starting a family while also balancing the difficulties of a professional basketball career. In particular, we are interested in individuals' social experiences pertaining to their everyday career schedules, their thoughts on motherhood and family planning, and their thoughts on how they can be better supported.

We hope the data collected during interviews will advance our understanding of individuals' experiences of balancing and making decisions around family life and work life. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB 47574). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca. For all other questions, please contact Alliasen Miscione at [REDACTED]

Please remember that your identity will be kept confidential. Once all the data is collected and analyzed for this project, we may share this information with the research community through seminars, conferences, presentations, and journal articles. If you wish to receive the final copy of the study, please let Alliasen Miscione know and, when the study is completed (approximately January 2026), Alliasen Miscione will send you the information.

Yours Sincerely,

Alliasen Miscione, MSc

Email: [REDACTED]

Elena Neiterman, Ph. D.

Associated Professor, Teaching Stream

School of Public Health Sciences
University of Waterloo
LHN 3721, 200 University Ave West
Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1
Email: [REDACTED]