# No longer a myth: A study of the happy and healthy marriages of African American male professional athletes

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## ABSTRACT

The marriages of professional athletes have been examined for years, but the positive factors in those marriages have rarely been observed. This study focuses on the factors that contribute to the strength and happiness in the marriages of professional athletes. Professional athletes and their wives were interviewed in effort to determine the factors that contribute to the strength of their marriages. Open communication, shared values, religion/ faith, and trust were consistently found to be important components contributing to the strength of these marriages. This study adds to the limited literature available discussing the positive aspects of professional athlete marriages.

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

## *Statement of the Problem*

How do professional athletes manage to have healthy marriages in light of their adverse circumstances? A few examples of adverse circumstances are be the intrusive media, overwhelming fans, groupies, and extensive amounts of time spent away from the family traveling and training with the team. These are all things that the professional sports family face that other families would not. In most families the partners have regular working hours, typically working an eight hour day between the hours of nine to five. At the end of the workday the spouses return to the home and spend time with the children and their mate. When people marry professional athletes they give much of their personal time with their spouse to the team. Professional athletes quite often do not operate in the regular working hours of nine to five. They spend countless hours in the gym maintaining their physique, days training with their team, and holidays entertaining fans while playing the game they love and doing their job. Meanwhile as fans gather with their loved ones to watch the game, the athlete's family is waiting to celebrate with their loved one after his workday is done.

How do wives cope with spouses that are constantly on the road and often have little time to spend at home? In most families, a wife has many opportunities to be intimate, or become closer with her husband. They can chat at breakfast or maybe catch a late movie. For most couples spending time together can be squeezed into any minimal activity, even picking up the dry cleaning. Partners in some dual-career couples plan family activities such as evening walks, weekend outings, and "catch-up" conversations

in an attempt to maintain intimacy or reduce stress (Bird & Schnurman-Crook, 2005). The couples in the Bird and Schnurman-Crook study (2005) also stated that the unscheduled talks between partners, or family chats, assisted family cohesion. Conversely, the wives of athletes sometimes spend days and weeks with their partner away from the home. The spouses of professional athletes rarely have the opportunity to enjoy such simple activities with their partner. The larger context of the problem is how these challenges affect the family life. How do "missing partners" manage to fit into the home life that they return to when the season is over? The return of the athlete to the home could cause a change in the routines of the family. For the few months in the off-season when the professional athlete returns home he will continue to train, or rehabilitate if injured. However, when he returns home in the off-season the athlete must find his niche in the family and around the home.

> "Job-related-spousal- absence is a requirement for economic survival in many occupations. …One difference which makes coping more difficult today is the change in societal norms which suggest that people go to work and come home each day. Because of this, many people are unprepared for the realities of traveling alone or for the maintenance of the family structure with only sporadic assistance of one's spouse" (Riggs, 1990).

This statement rings true of many families. A 1999 Department of Defense study states that there are approximately 2.3 million active-duty and reserve U.S. military personnel. More than 5,700 dual career couples served during the Gulf War (Norwood, Fullerton, & Hagen, 1996, In Rotter & Boveja, 1999, pp. 379). These people are

husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers who can spend many months away from their families. When they are deployed and separated from their families they to have to find ways to cope with their absence from family. Rotter and Boveja (1999) conducted interviews with members of the military and asked about their experiences during deployment. One soldier remarked that some soldiers had more difficulty being separated from loved ones, and that difficulty was often expressed in terms of anger and misbehavior in the workplace. Some soldiers had to deal with crises at home while they were deployed. Their spouse may not have been ready for the changes that accompanied the soldier's deployment. One of the female soldiers mentioned finding comfort in a women's spiritual group while deployed and away from family. Other soldiers found comfort in reading their local newspaper on the Internet or corresponding via email with family (Rotter & Boveja, 1999). Similarly a study of upwardly mobile middle-class London families found that when wives had to adjust to family life that did not meet their expectations they found comfort in a "women's network". This network consisted of other women in the community that were experiencing similar emotions due to work induced separations in the marriage (Frank, Shanfield, and Evans, 1981; Cohen, 1977).

How do professional athletes remain connected to their children? Of concern is how the professional athlete as a parent remains in touch with his children. Spending large amounts of time away from children, especially in their early years, is difficult for any parent. So how do athletes manage to stay close, or connected, with their children when they quite often have little time to spend with them? Children could become disenchanted with the *parent* due to the *athlete's* obligation to fulfill the responsibilities of his career. The larger context is the way that these families react to as well as manage

the emotions and power struggles between partners, as well as, between parent and children that await them when they return to the home. Riggs (1990) suggests that the time of greatest physical separation due to career advancement often corresponds with the stage of the life cycle when young families have an increased need for time together. Furthermore, Riggs states that this stage of career development often coincides with the time when the first child is born thus placing more strain on the family. Another possible strain on the family is discipline. Military wives have stated discipline as a source of conflict. When military wives have been carrying the sole responsibility of disciplining the children during their husbands' absence and the husbands begin to overrule their authority upon their return, conflict ensues (Bey &Lange, 1974 In Riggs, 1990).When the media, the team, the management are all gone and it is just the family, how does the professional sports player cope and integrate into a world in which they may spend very little time?

This is an important problem to study because as more and more high school students take the option to skip college and go directly into professional sports they are often unaware of the challenges that their families face when they make such a decision. Also those college couples that marry right before the athlete begins his or her professional athletic career may also have a Pollyannaish view of how their married life will be. There are dozens of families nationwide that assume when their exceptionally talented child or partner enters the professional world of sports their family life will remain the same. These families are often rudely awakened to the changes that accompany the professional world of sports when media crews are camped out on their front lawn in search of a top story. These families might be unaware of the commitment

that joining a professional sports team entails. When a person becomes a sports figure their lives are changed, even a dinner with their spouse is an opportunity for some fan to seek an autograph or sporting advice.

There is a wealth of research that examines the relationship between athletes and the viewing population, especially in the area of consumer interest. Brown, Basil, and Bocarnea (2003) conducted a study on the influence of famous athletes. Their study revealed that people identify with professional athletes and when those athletes endorse a product or a program the fan is more willing to discuss the product or the program. A similar study by Brown, Fraser, and Bocarnea (1994) reported that 45.5% of the respondents in a national survey who were married or who had a romantic partner discussed the issue of spousal abuse with their partner as a result of the O.J. Simpson case. This adds further credence to the argument that famous athletes have some influence on the lives of those fans that follow and support them. When Charles Barkley was playing for the Phoenix Suns in 1993 he vehemently stated that he was not paid to be a role model. He argued that because he was a talented athlete that did not make him a role model (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003). Karl Malone, power forward for the Utah Jazz and co-MVP of the 1993 NBA All-Star Game, responded to his friend Mr. Barkley by informing him that he did not have the option to choose to be a role model, he had the option to decide what type of role model he would be. Karl Malone's stance appeared to be that being a role model was associated with their career as professional athletes, and the choice was whether you are a positive role model or not (Gleman, Springen, & Raghaven, 1993).

In researching this topic I had quite a bit of difficulty even finding literature on the subject of professional athletes marriages. There have been a few people who have used this as a topic for their dissertations but the research available is minimal to say the least (Crute, 1982; Matejkovic, 1986; Ortiz, 1994; Powers, 1991; Wentzell, 1986). The majority of the information available is dated in the late 80's and early 90's. In light of this finding, this study adds to the body of literature that is available on the subject. Having examined this subject I offer some pertinent information about a topic that many people neglect or overlook in the hype and glamour of becoming a professional sports athlete. This study can also assist the families of talented athletes in understanding what challenges may face them as a family or married couple once they enter the world of professional sports. My contribution to the field offers an updated view of the challenges and obstacles that professional sports families face, as well as presents ways in which these families cope and overcome those challenges while remaining healthy functioning families. This study has given the professional sports family an opportunity to share their personal views about the challenges in their lives, their experience in the world of professional sports, and how the world of professional sports affects their marriage. This study has also given professional athletes and their families an opportunity to discuss the strength of their marriages.

### *Rationale*

I chose to study this topic by conducting interviews with 5 couples in which one spouse was either continuing to play a professional sport, or a retired professional athlete. I interviewed couples that had been married two years or more and that reported their marriage as being a happy one. Kaslow and Robinson (1996) found that couples satisfied

with their marriage were willing to ask one another for help, share leadership, consult during decision making, and participate in joint decision making. These findings are very similar to other findings in the literature regarding couples in long-term satisfying marriages (*Family Therapy News*, 1990, p.8; Fennell, 1987; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, 1992).

I decided to interview couples as opposed to other family members because it is the marital unit that would likely be the most directly effected by the professional player's schedule and obligations to the sports club. Also it seems that by interviewing the marital couple I stood to gain the most pertinent information about the couple and how they adjust to the life of the professional athlete.

Interviews with couples offer perspectives from both sides, that of the wife that remains at home with the children or maintains her career, as well as that of the husband who is often away traveling with the team. An important part of the interview process was to determine how these couples maintain spousal support during absences. The ability to hear from each partner what things are the most challenging and how they face those challenges provided a springboard for conversation as well as an opportunity to determine exactly what each partner feels as a challenge. This format has also allowed for the coping skills of each partner to be showcased and shared, and at times expanded upon. I chose to conduct interviews because it appeared to be the most effective way to determine what the family of a professional athlete actually considered to be challenging and to understand how they manage those challenges. The best way to understand what any family considers a challenge is to ask them, and in that respect professional sports families are no different.

## *Theoretical Framework*

### *ABCX Model*

The developer of the ABCX model, R. Hill (1949), was interested in what individuals and families did right in successfully adjusting and adapting to the normal and unusual demands placed on people through the life cycle. Hill (1949) developed a model of stress and coping. His model suggested that families are in a state of balance, or homeostasis, until a stressor event occurs which disrupts their regular procedures leading to disorganization or crisis. The family returns to its homeostatic balance after a period of trying various coping efforts and the crisis has been resolved successfully.

In the ABCX model there are four components. The A factor in Hill's theory relates to the stressor, which consists of life events or occurrences that create change in the family. In this study the A factor would be the stressors described by the participants, e.g., time spent away from family. The B factor symbolizes the resources or strengths of the individual or family to handle the stressor. These are the things that are used to help the family deal with the stressful events or circumstances. In the context of this study, for example, the B factor might be increased communication between spouses. Next the C factor refers to how the family perceives or defines the stressful event. In other words the C factor is how the couple views the event, whether they see it as a challenge or expected event. Some couples participating in this study may perceive the husband's time spent away from the family as an expected occurrence due to his profession, whereas other couples might perceive the time spent away from the family as an unknown cost of the husband's profession. And finally the X factor is the stress outcome or crisis that follows

as a reaction to the stressful events and the coping process. Crisis is reached when the family is unable to prevent the stressor event and/or has inadequate resources for handling the stressor. In this study it is my hope that the couples will have designed methods of coping with the situations they feel are challenging and the family is able to return to a state of balance, or homeostasis. In other words this study aims to look at how these families respond to stressors without going into crisis.

This theory applies to the current study examining how families of professional athletes cope with the stressors they face as a result of their husbands career. The ABCX model provides structure in observing the ways in which these families cope. Although there are more recent models that could be used for the same purpose, the ABCX model has been selected due to its simplicity. Since many interviews were only allotted thirty minutes more in-depth models may not have been productive. Utilizing a simpler model allows me to make more use of the time that I have to interview the couples.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The present study enhances the literature surrounding families of professional athletes. In doing this study, pertinent information concerning what skills professional sports families use to manage the adversities that they face is uncovered. In other words, this study addresses and identifies the unknown, or seldomly known, challenges which professional sports families encounter as well as how they overcome those challenges. The overall goal of this study was to learn how the healthy professional sports family copes and manages blending the world of high profile sports with home and family life. In addition this study offers the world examples of professional athletes that have healthy

and happy marriages. This study gives insight as to how the challenges of a strenuous schedule, the obsessive and intrusive media, constant fan attention, and management decisions, such as being traded, affect the family life of a professional athlete. This study was also interested in understanding how "missing partners" manage to fit into the home life that they return to when the season is over.

### *Research Questions*

How do partners contribute to the happiness in their marriage?

What resources have these couples used to maintain a healthy marriage?

How do these couples adjust to the changes in their lives as a product of the husbands' career?

What do these couples feel were major contributors to their happy marriage?

How have these couples maintained a balance when one partner is away?

## CHAPTER II
## *Literature Review*

In examining the lives of professional athletes it becomes important to include some discussion about how these families are similar to our "traditional family". All marriages have certain elements that help to promote and ensure their success. In the following section I will include a brief recap of what some researchers have found as elements of successful marriages. Also I will review some of the stressors and coping methods experienced in many families, including those of professional athletes and military families. Military families are similar to the families of professional athletes because both families must deal with the extended absence of a spouse and or parental

figure. Finally, in this chapter I will review some studies whose primary focus has been research conducted with athletes as well as their families.

*Elements of Successful Marriages*

There have been numerous studies looking at the elements of successful marriage. A study by Fenell (1993) found ten characteristics contributing to happiness in long-term marriages. Fenell's study examined 147 couples residing in a mid-sized city in the western United States. All of the participants were in marriages lasting 20 years or more. Fenell's major finding was that husbands and wives in happy marriages of 20 years or more display considerable similarity in what they believe are the important characteristics that contributed to these long-term marriages. In other words after 20 years of marriage these couples agree about what characteristics contributed to their success in marriage. These couples identified the following as the top ten characteristics that contributed to their successful, long-term marriages:

1. Lifetime commitment to marriage
2. Loyalty to spouse
3. Strong moral values
4. Respect for spouse as a best friend
5. Commitment to sexual fidelity
6. Desire to be a good parent
7. Faith in God and spiritual commitment
8. Desire to please and support spouse
9. Good companion to spouse
10. Willingness to forgive and be forgiven

Each characteristic on this list is something that can be achieved in every marriage. However in every marriage there will be stressors and challenges that arise. The couples in Fenell's study listed some characteristics, such as faith in God and spiritual commitment, which helped them combat stress in their marriages. This study also suggested that characteristics like respect for spouse as a best friend and good companion to spouse reveal a level of caring for each other that is based on values of good friendship. No studies have examines the successful marriages of professional athletes.

## *Stressors*

When examining stress and coping it is important to remember that many stressors are connected to the social and economic contexts of couples' lives. So when studying stressors it becomes highly important to remain cognizant of the ongoing contexts from which they are generated. Couples experience stress in the marriage and in the work world. Sometimes stressors can spillover from home to work and vice versa. The following section will review some studies that have examined the cross over of stressors between home and work. This section will also look at some of the stressors that the athlete and his family face, including travel and absence from family which are distinctive stressors for athletes.

### *Relating to work*

In a study examining the spillover of workday stress to marital interaction, 42 married couples were asked to complete questionnaires on work and family experience (Schulz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004). The couples completed the questionnaires twice a day for three days, one at the end of the workday and the other before going to bed at night. Each partner answered their questionnaires independently. The results of

this study provided evidence that when husbands ended their workday negatively aroused they reported fewer angry behaviors toward their wives. So when a husband had a bad day at work he was not as angry towards his wife. Additionally, when wives ended the workday feeling more negatively aroused they reported behaving more angrily towards their husbands. The study also found that wives reported being more withdrawn at home after experiencing higher workload days. Interestingly the study concluded that higher marital satisfaction was associated with greater likelihood of the wives reporting that they behaved angrily after faster paced workdays (Schulz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004). In other words women who reported more satisfying marriages were more likely to increase their angry behavior toward their husbands after busier workdays than dissatisfied women. However, men in more satisfying marriages were less likely than their maritally dissatisfied counterparts to be angrier and more critical toward their wives after negatively arousing workdays. In conclusion the study suggests that women's tendency to respond to workday stress with increased angry behavior toward their partners might reflect their feelings of safety and satisfaction with the marital relationship. An interesting point in this study is the importance of bringing work stress home and vice versa. This study demonstrates how work stress and its spillover can affect the martial relationship.

*Relating to athlete's work*

Similar to the stress that couples experience at the end of a workday, after each partner has spent the day with an overwhelming workload, uncooperative co-workers and a demanding schedule, professional athletes often experience unique stressors including, career-ending or life- threatening injuries, and potential long-term health problems and

disabilities caused by chronic injuries; unexpected moves across country because of sudden trades, cuts, or free agency; retirement at a relatively young age and transition into one or more new careers; and occupational uncertainty as well as insecurity because of forced retirement, team politics, competition for positions on the team, or risk of injuries (Ortiz 2001). In Ortiz's original ethnographic study (1997) he gathered information by gaining acceptance into the closed world of the professional athlete. Marcus and Fisher (1986) in Sprenkle and Moon's *Research Methods in Family Therapy* define ethnographic research as "a research process in which the anthropologist closely observes records, engages in the daily life of another culture – an experience labeled as fieldwork method- and then writes accounts of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail" (p.26). For a three year period Ortiz acquired knowledge through a triangulation of methods including in-depth interviews, participant observation, personal documents, and print media accounts. However, his primary method of collecting data was through sequential interviewing of 48 women, including the wives of active players, wives of retired players, as well as the divorced wife of a retired player.

As the managers of family life, professional athletes' wives have numerous sources of stress that are a by-product of their husband's professional sports career. As these women struggle to fulfill their roles in their marriages they learn to rely on their emotion management skills. They learn to avoid emotion in their marriages, which in turn causes them to experience a form of emotion denial. Ortiz offers a very interesting suggestion about what these women are experiencing. He states, "Their marriages may be so emotionally painful that the idea of not feeling seems to be a more viable strategy in coping with certain emotions- and thus certain situations, events, or issues- wives do not

want to experience" (Ortiz, 2001, p.200). Ortiz goes on to further state that the process of denial becomes twofold including both reality and emotion denial and that this denial strategy becomes one in which the wives rely heavily upon.

While wives use denial to often face these challenges, husbands on the other hand differ in the response to challenges based upon how they see challenges. Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) argue that an athlete who organizes his or her thoughts of him/herself primarily in terms of an athletic representation and maintains little distinction between the athletic representation and other components of the self is vulnerable to depression in the aftermath of a sport injury. They suggest that athletes who see themselves as only an athlete encounter personal crisis when they face retirement, especially forced retirement. Brewer and associates imply that athletes who strongly commit themselves to the role of athlete may be less likely to explore other career, education, or lifestyle options due to their passionate involvement with the sport. This presents an issue for the committed athlete that becomes injured and is forced into retirement. If the athlete has not learned ways to cope with injuries and how to see him/herself as something other than an athlete he/she now has an increased likelihood of becoming depressed.

*Relating to parenting*

Typically a professional athlete's schedule does not blend well with the needs of a family. For many athletes their schedules require them to be at the stadium by early afternoon at the latest (Ortiz 2001). When there is a home game young children are often in bed asleep by the time the game ends. Some athletes go out to eat and unwind before coming home after a game. For baseball players the children's summer vacation falls in

the middle of the season, when they are the most occupied in the baseball world. It is also worth mentioning that many professional athletes do not have weekends off like other professions. There are often games on Saturdays and Sundays, the time that many parents spend bonding with their children.

The professional athlete also spends a lot of time training and traveling, which often causes them to miss the children's school plays and T-ball games. A recent study by Gmelch and San Antonio (2001) gathered data over a six year period, 1993 through 1999, from twenty-five wives whose husbands came from all levels of professional baseball. Gmelch and San Antonio conducted in depth interviews with these wives over the years and their results produced some intriguing comments. Some wives complained about being pregnant and not having their husbands at the hospital when they gave birth. One wife of a professional baseball coach interviewed in their study gave this comment on the subject:

> My husband has been gone on every one of my kids' first birthdays. My daughter played T-ball for the [first] time this summer and he missed that. It's funny people think that because your husband is a coach that your kid is going to be a talent, but the truth is they aren't ever there to help the kids (Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001, p.342).

One child of a professional baseball player recounted her mother's experience in raising her and her brothers:

> As I look back on what it must have been like for her, I realize it wasn't easy. She struggled with a lot of stuff. Even things like teaching her kids to drive…They wanted dad not mom to do it. My mother did that with all three of us. My dad

> should have been the one teaching us to drive. It's a small thing, but it created a lot of tension and stress for her (Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001, p.342).

Many wives were very disgruntled about not having their husbands' home for holidays, birthdays, and other special events in the children's lives. One wife said, "I want a normal life. I want to have cookouts with my kids in the summer and camping trips, do the things that normal people do" (Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001, p.342). This is an aspect that many spectators and researchers have overlooked in recent years; these families do lack a "normal life".

*Travel and absence*

When one partner travels frequently the family who is left behind can begin to feel disenfranchised and view the traveling member as an outsider when they return (Gullotta & Donohue, 1981 In Riggs, 1990). It is not uncommon for the returning parent to feel "out sync" with the rest of the family as they try to fit back into the family routines (Bey & Lange, 1974;Gates, 1989; Greiff & Munter, 1980; Yeatman, 1981 In Riggs, 1990). Military families often experience the absence of a partner for months at a time. They are an interesting group that has been the focus of much research. In the discussion of absence and coping there is much room for the comparison of athlete's wives and military wives. In the greater scope these wives are often referred to as "waiting wives".

Family separation consists of three stages: anticipation, separation, and reunion. In expectation of the separation, during the anticipation stage, one can experience feelings of denial, fear, anger, resentment, and hurt. Emotional withdrawal also occurs

during the anticipation stage, marked by feelings of confusion, ambivalence, anger, and pulling away (Norwood, Fullerton, & Hagen in Ursani & Norwood, 1996).

In the separation stage emotional confusion, adjustment, and expectation of reunion take place. During the separation stage responsibilities and decisions related to managing the household that are normally shared must now reside with the spouse remaining at home. The responsibility for the family falls on the at home spouse without benefit of the spouse's presence (Boss, 1986; Cooper & Marshall, 1977; Gullotta & Donohue, 1981; In Riggs, 1990). If there are children in the family, the parent left behind temporarily becomes a "single' parent. He or she must assume all responsibilities of caring for the children while the other parent is away (Norwood, Fullerton, & Hagen in Ursani & Norwood, 1996).

During the reunion stage feelings of euphoria and excitement happen when the couple is in the honeymoon phase. After the initial excitement wears off the couple usually experiences a period of readjustment. As the couple readjusts they may experience a feeling of being uncomfortable, role confusion, and finally satisfaction as they gain comfort with their adjusted roles (Norwood, Fullerton, & Hagen in Ursani & Norwood, 1996). It is not uncommon for a family to regress as it undergoes readjustment. Immature patterns of communication and behavior or under developed roles may be seen. Over the course of separation each family member will have changed. According to Mateczun and Holmes (1996), "the essence of readjustment lies in the recognition of these changes and the allocation of time for equilibration" (Mateczun & Holmes, In Ursani & Norwood, 1996). Losses are expected during separation, however losses also occur during reunion. Some roles, habits, and thoughts acquired during the separation

must be set aside and new ones integrated for a successful reunion (Mateczun & Holmes, In Ursani & Norwood, 1996).

It has been stated that rituals are an important part of return. Rituals can act as a guide to behavior and as a powerful catalyst for change. Homecoming rituals can heighten emotional states and facilitate the expression of feelings (Campbell, 1973 in Ursani & Norwood, 1996).

## *Resources*

Families possess numerous resources for handling stress and are often quite resilient when it comes to managing stress. Several traits, common in military families, have been associated with adaptability (Hicks, 1981; Lavee, McCubbin & Patterson, 1985; McCubbin & Lavee, 1986). These include mutual interdependence, supportiveness, closeness and intimacy (Riggs, 1990). It is important to keep in mind that the way a family defines its stressor will also influence the type of resource they use to combat that stressor. Resources revealed here include coping strategies and social support.

### *Coping strategies*

One way of coping with stress is by actively engaging the partner or spouse. A primary dimension of marital interaction is the extent to which spouses actively engage versus withdraw from interaction. Active engagement includes attempting to engage in interpersonal problem solving or discussing how the partner feels (Story & Bradbury, 2004). Researchers suggest that active engagement may also be beneficial when the topic is negative. A study conducted by Cohen and Bradbury (1997) of newlywed couples exposed to varying degrees of stress found that couples experienced fewer declines in satisfaction when wives expressed greater anger during observed marital interactions.

The researchers feel that one possible explanation is that anger reflects spouses' engagement in the marital discussions, this engagement in turn may help them successfully negotiate the challenges associated with exposure to stressors (Story & Bradbury, 2004).

Another option for reducing stress has been withdrawal. One recent study of police officers' daily stress and marital communication (Roberts & Levenson, 2001) highlighted the potential benefits of withdrawing, or disengaging, on days of high stress. On days of high stress and exhaustion, husbands exhibited more emotional negativity and less positivity during marital interactions. By disengaging slightly from the conflict, these wives may have been helping protect their relationships from the escalating effects of stress on conflicts. Other studies have found similar results suggesting that at times withdrawing from marital interaction on days of high stress may help protect the relationship from emotional negativity and decrease marital conflict (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Repetti, 1989).

In the non-military family who does not experience frequent separation, it is suggested that the experience of regular parental-work-related-absence actually increases the amount of family cohesion (Greiff& Munter, 1980; Margolis, 1979) so the phenomenon of the family pulling together appears to be a common coping mechanism used by many families that experience member absence or relocation (Riggs, 1990).

Research has found that coping strategies for military wives include: (1) maintaining family integrity; (2) developing interpersonal relationship and social support; (3) managing psychological tension and strain; (4) believing in the lifestyle; and (5) developing self-reliance and self-esteem (McCubbin & Lavee, 1986; Patterson &

McCubbin, 1984 in Riggs, 1990). No research has specifically examined the coping strategies of wives of professional athletes.

*Social Support*

Social support is a key family resource. It has many dimensions and is a part of family communication. Social support may come from within the family, from friends, or co-workers. Over the past decade social support has been defined in a variety of ways and been divided into numerous sections. This paper will use the definition of social support as given by Gardner and Cutrona (2004, p.495) as verbal communication or behavior that is responsive to another's needs and serves the functions of comfort, encouragement, reassurance of caring, and /or the promotion of effective problem solving through information or tangible assistance. For the purpose of this study we will examine two areas of support, spousal support and support given to athletes.

*Spousal Support.* In examining the role of social support in marriages there is research that suggests that social support plays an active role as a protective function within the marriage. Research has concluded that spouses who report higher levels of support from their spouses are more maritally satisfied (Julien & Markman, 1991). Dehle, Larsen, and Landers (2001) studied the role of social support within marriages. They found in their study of 212 married individuals that high levels of perceived marital support were significantly correlated with fewer reported depressive symptoms. In other words those who perceived themselves as receiving more adequate support from their spouses reported fewer depressive systems. These findings replicate the prior findings of Brown and Harris (1978) who found that supportive relationships within the immediate family (e.g. mother) did not make up for lack of spousal support in terms of vulnerability

to depression. Dehle, Larsen, and Landers (2001) suggest that the social support of a spouse takes precedence over the support given by others. They found that spousal support is different from other types of support. In addition, they suggest that spousal support is superior to other types of support. The reasoning behind this suggestion stems from the fact that in times of crisis it is often the spouse that is the first person sought for support.

Social support from the spouse is associated more strongly and with a wider range of positive outcomes than is support from other sources. Social support from other sources cannot compensate for the lack of a supportive relationship with the spouse (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004). One of the strongest findings in the marital literature is that individuals with supportive spouses are more satisfied with their marriages than are individuals who lack support from their spouse. Studies have similarly found that couples who support each other also report that their marriages are less conflict ridden (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999; Gallo & Smith, 2001).

A recent study found that when looking at the "support-gap hypothesis" women desire a higher level of support from their spouses than do men (Xu & Burleson, 2001). The "support –gap hypothesis" is when women receive less support from their husbands than husbands receive from their wives (Belle, 1982; Cutrona, 1996). In other words, when a wife gives her husband more support than he gives to her the "support-gap hypothesis" is in effect. The Xu and Burleson study also suggests that it might be possible that a longer duration of marriage and "marriage burn-out" leads to the support gap later on. A similar study (Schwarzer &Guitierrez-Dona, 2005) examined the relationship between age, gender, and social support and was conducted with 902 Costa

Rican adults. The Schwarzer and Guitierrez-Dona study yielded a number of findings, for example their study found that women reported slightly more friend support than men, however men reported receiving much more spousal support than women. The study also found that older men and women received less support from their families.

In the Costa Rican sample (Schwarzer and Guitierrez-Dona, 2005) spousal support was found to be the dominant type of support. The research found that spousal support operated differently in men and women. Men received more support from women than women did from men. This effect was moderated by age. Young men and women reported equal levels of spousal support, but with increasing age, women reported continuously less support received from their partners. The older the men and women were, the broader the gap between how much support they received from each other.

A benefit of spousal support is that it protects marriages from stress-related deterioration. Support acts as a buffer, protecting the relationship from decreased closeness and increased conflict, which follow acute and chronic negative life events (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004). There are studies that have found that spousal support protects against depressive reactions to stressful life events. Individuals who perceive high levels of support from their spouse report lower levels of perceived stress. Those with a supportive spouse are also more likely to be satisfied with their jobs (Adams, King, & King, 1996) and with their lives in general (Walen & Lachman, 2000).

A prior study revealed that intimacy was found to predict satisfaction with support in the marriage. When partners know how to be supportive, their supportive communications foster feelings of closeness and contribute to positive evaluations of the relationship (Johnson, Hobfoll, & Zalcberg-Linetzy, 1993). Stressful circumstances hinder the ability

of couples to support each other. When under stress, both spouses are less able to provide support and more likely to need support. Stressful life events erode warmth and increase hostility, criticism, and negativity during marital interactions (Conger et al.1990; Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996).

*Support for athletes.* Prior research examining the social support of athletes suggests that athletes experience different types of social support. One type of social support is given in regards to their athletic abilities, while another type of social support is given concerning their emotions. Rees and Hardy (2000) interviewed 10 high-level sports performers, five females and five males, regarding their experiences of social support. They found in their study that the athletes experienced four primary dimensions of social support: emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible. The results of their study seemed to show that the areas in which family and friends offered the most support were informational support regarding help with interpersonal problems, and emotional support in reference to help with future life direction. Friends and family were helpful in supporting athletes by helping them to "put things in perspective". Family was helpful with life direction issues because athletes reported that family members were the people who presented the pros and cons of their decisions and helped them navigate their choices. In reference to future life direction the athletes found it helpful to bounce ideas about their next career move off of friends who may be further along in their athletic career. The study also suggests that when those who are not skilled in a sport, such as certain family and friends, attempt to provide support based solely on intuition they become poor providers of support. The study reveals ways in which people outside the sport are unhelpful in providing support. Minimizing the importance of an event,

criticizing attempts at coping, encouraging quicker coping, and giving inappropriate advice were all examples of ways in which unhelpful support had been given to athletes.

A similar study conducted with 170 collegiate athletes from an NCAA Division I university found that friends and family were often described as offering support (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Hardy, 1989). Rosenfeld, Richman, and Hardy (1989) gave the Support Function Questionnaire to 78 male and 92 female college athletes. This questionnaire provided three types of data: who provides social support to the athlete, what types of social support are provided, and what perceived amount of support is provided. This study found that athletes indicated friends and family as offering support more often than coaches and teammates. The interesting fact brought to light in this study was that friends and family were deemed to offer a different type of support than coaches and teammates. Friends were described as providing listening and shared social reality support primarily, while parents were described as providing technical appreciation support and emotional support primarily. In other words, listening was provided primarily by friends, whereas, parents and friends primarily provided emotional support. Likewise, friends were found to provide the widest range of support for the collegiate athletes. They provide most of the athletes' shared social reality support, listening support, and emotional support. Parents also provided a wide range of support, although, they did not provide the greatest amount of any single form of support. However, parents were second to friends in providing listening support and emotional support. On the other hand, coaches and teammates were described as providing technical challenge support primarily. The difference between technical appreciation support and technical challenge support appears to be that challenge support is support offered to the athletes for

challenging themselves in an area of desired improvement, while appreciation support seems to be support given for improvement whether gained or attempted. Coaches were found to be the top providers of technical appreciation support.

One area that neither of these studies addressed directly was the amount of support that the athletes felt they received from their significant others. In the Rees and Hardy (2000) study there is one quote included in which an athlete discussed the support she received from her boyfriend. Otherwise the studies neglected the support given to the athletes by their spouses. It is quite possible that because these studies looked at collegiate athletes as well as high-level athletes that may have been younger in age than the majority of professional athletes the studies may not have had many married participants.

Other studies that have discussed the social support received by wives' of professional athletes suggest that these women find themselves very isolated (Ortiz, 1997, 2001, 2002). Ortiz found that the constant uprooting of professional athletes makes it quite difficult for their spouses to form friendships in the city where they are located. The constant shifting in professional athletes' families disrupts the family household and often separates them from any close friends and family (Ortiz, 2001). Many of the wives felt isolated because they believed that few people understood the special difficulties of their marital situation, and they feared that neighbors, friends, or outsiders would take advantage of them or reveal private details about their marriage or even try to break up their marriage. The fear of having their trust violated isolates professional sports wives even further. One wife had this to say, "There are so many people out there who want to be around you just because of who you are, who your husband is, that you have to be

wary"(Ortiz, 2001, p.340). The lack of social support is further intensified by the frequent separation from family members.

Building a relationship with other sports wives as a means of social or emotional support is an option for these women but there are many barriers that must be overcome in order for that relationship to develop. The wives are often friendly with one another but their relationships lack depth, due to their husband's mobility (Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001; Ortiz, 2001).

*Summary*

We see that couples who have been married for 20 years or more tend to be in agreement about what characteristics contributed to their long-term marriages. We have also seen that the ability to express and show anger in the relationship could be viewed as a sign of engagement in the relationship and satisfaction with the relationship. In accordance with the ABCX model we have also seen that how the athlete defines their situation shapes the potential outcome of the situation. We have heard from wives disappointed by their husbands' absences during childbirth and children displeased with their fathers' absence during adolescence. However we are interested in examining families who have maintained happy and healthy marriages in spite of these challenges. We have also seen how the role of spousal support is important to maintaining satisfaction with the marriage and protecting the marriage from stress-related deterioration. Finally we have also learned that having a spouse that communicates support is beneficial to the marriage and that athletes report receiving the most support from family and friends.

# CHAPTER III
# *METHODS*

## *Qualitative Study Design*

Many people are aware that professional athletes' marriages involve separation, suspicion, and betrayal. This study is one of the first to look at how some professional athletes make their marriages successful. The use of a qualitative design allowed a descriptive picture of the successful marriages of professional athletes to emerge. Participants in this study took part in open-ended, semi-structured couple interviews. Using open-ended questions promoted discussion between partners and allowed them to share the factors and experiences they found the most relevant. In addition, a qualitative design allowed each couple to discuss in more detail the components that have contributed to their successful marriage.

## *Participants and Recruitment Procedures*

I gathered information from 5 couples in which the husband is currently a professional sports player, an inactive player, or a retired professional sports player. The difference between retired players and inactive players is that inactive players were released by a team whereas retired players chose to leave the game. I attempted to recruit couples through player's wives associations of various leagues, head offices of various teams, players' organizations and foundations, and word of mouth.

Letters were sent to the head offices of all professional basketball, football, and baseball headquarters located within three hours of Washington, D.C. For a sample copy of the letter see Appendix A. I received no response from any of the teams that I attempted to contact. Phone calls were also made to team offices and those phone calls

also lead nowhere. I left messages explaining the purpose of my call and requesting a return call. I never received a return call from any of the organizations. The players associations of the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), and Major League Baseball (MLB) also received letters seeking couples that may have been interested in participating in this study. The NFL Players Association did send a response stating that they "are not able to contact professional athletes on [my] behalf." I received no response from the NBA or MLB players associations. Letters were also sent to the NBA retired players association. A connection was made with someone in the NBA retired players association, however that person left the organization before interviews began and communication with that organization ceased.

I also contacted, or attempted to contact a number of magazines and journals geared towards professional athletes and their families, such as Professional Sports Wives Magazine. I received no response from any of the magazines or journals. Attempts were also made to contact players and their families through foundations and organizations that the players themselves have established, such as Shoot for the Moon Foundation founded by an NBA player. A response was received from the Shoot for the Moon Foundation informing the researcher that the player and his wife were not interested in participating.

Finally a snowballing technique was used to include others that may not be members of the wives association, retired players association, or have their own foundation or organization. The researcher spoke to family, friends, colleagues, and people in the community attempting to locate connections to participants. When potential participants were identified by a friend, colleague, family, or community member the researcher received contact information for the potential participant. The researcher also

asked that her contact information be given to the potential participant. Potential participants were contacted by researcher after intermediary person (friend, colleague, family, or community member) had been given a few days to discuss the idea with potential participant. All participants in this study were recruited via word of mouth or the snowballing technique.

One thing that is worth mentioning in the discussion of recruiting participants is the complexity of this study's population, professional athletes. Many athletes, especially active players, request an appearance fee, or a large donation to their foundation, for any contact or communication made with the community. Since there was no funding available to cover such fees it is possible that hindered the participation of some athletes.

As stated before the participants in this study were all recruited through word of mouth and they did not request any form of payment or contribution. In order to meet eligibility requirements for this study a participant should:

1. self-report that they have a strong marriage
2. have been married for more than two years
3. have been together in a committed relationship during husbands' professional career if retired
4. live within 3 hours of Washington, D.C. or be willing to participate in a phone interview

There was a strong desire to have a heterogeneous sample including players from various leagues, different nationalities, and having varying career lengths. However the largest response was received from current and former professional football players. All the players in this study were professional football players. Also all the players were

African-American. This may not be so alarming considering that during the 1996-97 season African Americans accounted for 67% of the racial composition of the NFL (Benedict & Yaeger, 1998). The couples in this study all had children at the time of the interviews. Many of the couples did not have children during their husband's playing career. Limited time with couples was a real issue in this study so to maximize time fewer demographic questions were asked and more questions about the strength and quality of the marriage were included. More information about the composition of the couples can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Couple Composition

| Couple Name | Length of Pro. Career | Playing Status | Length of Courtship | Length of Marriage | Children During Career |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adams | 1 year 5 months | Inactive | 4 years | 4 years | No |
| Browns | 8 years | Active | 2 years | 2 years | Yes |
| Cross | 2 years | Inactive | 6 years | 4 years | No |
| Davidson | 16 years | Retired | 2 years | 17 years | Yes |
| Evans | 5 months | Inactive | 7.5 years | 3.5 years | No |

*Study Procedures*

The researcher contacted participants via email or phone to assess their interest. Potential participants were also sent a letter briefly explaining the study and requesting contact if they had continued interest in the study. A sample of the letter can be found in Appendix B. In the initial phone calls and emails the researcher briefly explained the purpose and intent of the study. All potential participants were then emailed a consent

form requesting background information as well as a few background questions regarding length of marriage, current playing status, and length of career in professional sports. A copy of the background consent form can be found in Appendix C and the background questions can be found in Appendix D. Those who met eligibility requirements and were still interested in participating were asked to schedule an interview. All respondents received a follow-up message either via email or phone, thanking them for their interest and explaining the procedures. Once participants had been selected to participate, the primary researcher discussed with the couple whether or not they would be able to participate in the interview jointly. I was aware that due to the hectic schedule of many athletes they might not be able to participate in the interview at the same time as their spouses. To accommodate for this, couples had the option of separate interviews however, all interviews were conducted with both partners present. This could be partially explained by the fact that the majority of the participants were no longer playing professional sports. Prior to scheduling the interview, couples were asked to sign an informed consent form, which can be found in Appendix E. Those who would not be able to conduct interviews in person were asked to fax the signed informed consent form to the researcher prior to the interview. Interviews lasted a minimum of 20 minutes and did not exceed 90 minutes. The length of the interview varied based upon the amount of time couples had available.

The location for interviews varied based upon location and availability of couples. Four of five interviews were conducted by phone, the fifth interview was conducted in the couple's home.

Participants were informed of the purpose as well as any possible harm that they may experience before beginning the interviews. The participants read the consent form and were made aware that they had the ability to withdraw from the study at any point in time without repercussions. The participants were also conscious of the fact that the interviews were being audio recorded. The participants were informed in the consent form that their information is kept highly confidential and that all audiotapes are kept in a locked cabinet to which only the primary researcher has a key. Also during the consent process the participants were told that their identities would be changed in the write up of this study in order to maintain confidentiality. Following the disclosure of the purpose of the study, discussion of any possible harm that they may experience, as well as security and confidentiality procedures the researcher obtained written consent from the participants.

Once the interview was concluded the researcher provided contact information and offered to provide referrals to couples if desired. No one requested referrals. The primary researcher was responsible for transcribing the interview tapes. The researcher began to transcribe interviews within one to two days after the interview. Each couple received a copy of their interview transcript and was given an opportunity to edit their transcript. This allowed the researcher and the couple to further ensure the accuracy of the couple's statements. Each couple was given a week to make any corrections they deemed necessary and return the edited interview transcript to the researcher via e-mail. All edits had to be highlighted so that the changes could be differentiated from the original transcript. Only one couple made minor grammatical edits to their transcript. Two of the five couples were contacted again to gain additional information regarding the length of their dating relationship, or courtship as shown in Table 1.

The ABCX model guided the line of questioning given during these interviews by helping to highlight ways in which the families of professional athletes cope with the stressors they face as a result of their husbands' career. The ABCX model also helped to bring out the way the athlete defines their stressors. The interview outline and questions care located in Appendix F. The interview contained questions aimed at the perceived amount of social support as well as adjustments made to maintain the health of the relationship.

*Data Analysis*

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Once the tapes were transcribed they were coded using an open coding system. The open coding system allowed for comparison of similar themes about strong marriages throughout the interviews. The definition of open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data (Patton, 2002). The first step in open coding is to break the down the data. Each interview was taken apart and given a name determined by the concept being discussed. Typical questions asked in the first step are: What is this? What does this represent? What does this relate to? Is this similar or different than the previous topic? The purpose of this initial stage was to simplify the interviews and try to make some sense of what had happened during the interviews. A coding scheme was developed during this initial stage. This coding scheme helped to identify, code, categorize, and classify the primary pattern in the data. The next step in the coding process was to compare theme with theme and place similar themes in the same category. The question that was asked of every topic is what is the major idea of this paragraph or sentence? This process was repeated for all transcripts and reoccurring

themes were placed in the same categories. The primary researcher was supervised by an advisor during the coding process. The advisor offered another vantage point from which to discover reoccurring themes. The advisor was able to distinguish codes that the researcher may have missed as well as check the accuracy of the codes found by researcher. The themes and patterns that emerged from coding are the basis for the results section. Also during this phase of analysis I was able to gather meaning from the data, as well as compare and interpret the content of the interviews. Once the opening coding section of data analysis was complete the next step was to use Axial coding in which the data is put back together in a different way using the connection between categories and to develop themes. During the coding process ATLAS TI, a coding software program, was used to help organize the codes.

# CHAPTER IV
# RESULTS

This study focuses on the characteristics and components contributing to the happy and healthy marriages of professional athletes. In this chapter, the theoretical framework used to organize the study (ABCX model) is used to guide the reporting of the results. After introducing the couples, themes emerged from stressors discussed by the participants are described (A). Next, resources which the participants described as being integral to their having strong marriages are presented (B). After that, strategies offered by couples in the way they define stressors are discussed (C). The outcome from these factors (X) in each case, was a strong marriage. Finally, the results section concludes with the participants' views about why some marriages of professional athletes fail and with advice they offer to rookie families.

## *Introduction of Couples*

Before diving into the themes I would like to briefly discuss the couples. There are certain assumptions about professional athletes and their families that do not apply to these participating families. It is important to discuss these elusive qualities that are not frequently mentioned. The following couple introductions are designed to represent the uniqueness of each couple's experience in their own words. Names and locations have been altered to protect the confidentiality of all participants.

Couple 1- Aaron and Angela Adams – Plan for a marriage

> Angela: *You know some people plan so much for a wedding that they don't plan for a marriage. … So we really and truly did a lot of planning for a marriage and we were very open about these are our expectations for a marriage and this is what's important to me and this is what's important to him. …making sure that we're always talking about that and being respectful of each other and what's important.*

Some say that opposites attract. That would not be the case with Aaron and Angela. They both came from two parent homes, and their parents had been married for more than 30 years. Aaron and Angela dated for years before they married. When Aaron was preparing to leave college and started making plans for his professional career, an elder in his community asked him his plans regarding Angela. Aaron and Angela had discussed marriage and it was not a strange thought, actually it was a familiar thought. The elder suggested that Aaron make things official between him and Angela if he intended for her to be around in the long run. That suggestion from a friendly church lady may have helped Aaron summon the courage to ask Angela for her hand in marriage. One thing is certain, the words of his elder caused him to take a closer look at the possibility of his future with Angela.

Aaron and Angela both understood that many people plan for a wedding and not a marriage. Angela felt that it was highly important that there was a plan for the marriage. Aaron completely agreed with her; they both felt that it was important to talk about things before they happened. Of equal importance to Aaron and Angela was their religion, which played a pivotal role in their relationship. Aaron and Angela combined the lessons

they learned from watching the marriages of their parents and from their religious values to be the first building blocks in their own marriage and the development of their "*true definition of marriage*".

Couple 2 –Barbara and Keith Brown – Inside Knowledge

> Barbara: … *I think it's pretty much what I expected I guess because I had worked with a sports agent. So I was pretty familiar with you know a lot of things that professional athletes do and how their off time is spent, just from dealing with our clients. … having known him for two years before we got married I was privileged in that aspect too.*

Barbara and Keith Brown had an experience that may be unique to only a handful of people. Barbara had worked with a sports agent before she and Keith married. Barbara entered the marriage with prior knowledge of the world of professional sports. She knew what athletes had to do in the off-season, and she understood how demanding their schedules are. Barbara's knowledge about the sports world helped their marriage because Keith did not have to explain things to her. For example, he did not have to explain how free-agency works; Barbara had first hand knowledge. Keith and Barbara dated almost two years before they married. During that time they got to know one another and enjoy their quality time together.

Keith and Barbara are a blended family. Keith entered the marriage with a child from a prior marriage. Shortly after their union Keith and Barbara's family grew to include two more children. Keith being an active player had to face a set of challenges with the growth of their family. The couple had to find babysitters, for an infant, a

toddler, and a kindergartener, so that they could maintain their quality time. Keith had to arrange time to spend with his wife and children for family time, in addition to balancing his hectic career demands. Keith had a laundry list of tasks. Barbara, a highly organized and efficient woman helped Keith tackle these tasks with the greatest of ease. Her organizational skills helped with scheduling family time and quality time just for the couple.

The instability in professional sports demands that players perform or be replaced. Keith views his playing professional football as a career, not as a game. Keith works hard at improving his game physically and mentally. He is dedicated to his career. That dedication is what enables Keith to focus on each game and remember the intensity that is needed to have a career in the NFL as opposed to playing a game of football. When asked the difference between viewing his position as a career versus playing a game, Keith cited the level of dedication as a key difference. Keith explained that if you sleep in team meetings or arrive late to practices it is a reflection on your commitment to your career and in turn your team. Keith matches the intensity and dedication to his career with compassion and caring for his family.

Couple 3- Zack and Keisha Cross – The joy of laughter

Zack: S*he could have bragging rights! Her man was in the league*

(Both laugh) …*well you know I was just joking*

Keisha: T*he greatest benefit …ummm…I don't know what the greatest benefit was*

(Both laugh), *I'm not going to say what I was going to say*

Zack: W*hat were you going to say my paycheck?*

Keisha: *No, I wasn't going to say that. I was going to be real sarcastic and say the greatest benefit of being a couple was that he wasn't around enough to pluck your nerves, naw I was joking* (laughter)

The ability to laugh with your spouse is a wonderfully positive asset in a marriage. Zack and Keisha possess the ability to laugh with one another. The humor and joy in their marriage is apparent whenever they open their mouths to speak. Zack and Keisha openly laugh and joke with one another. The humor between the two is evident, but their love for one another also resounds in their humor.

Keisha knew that Zack was her future husband the first time she met him. Keisha and Zack were friends first and then their relationship developed into something more beautiful. The first year of their marriage Zack and Keisha lived separately. They would regularly talk on the phone and Zack would visit Keisha whenever he got a break from football.

Zack and Keisha are even humorous when recalling stressful times in their marriage. They recall the beginning of their marriage as being one of the most stressful times because Keisha was doing her medical school residency. Keisha had to get accustomed to Zack being in town, and Zack had to get accustomed to the demanding hours of Keisha's residency. Soon Zack and Keisha were blessed with a baby girl, Emerald. Emerald's arrival and Keisha's residency made Zack a full time dad. During this time the love in their relationship increased and they continued to laugh together.

Couple 4 –Marcus and Debbie Davidson – A fan favorite

> Marcus:… *you know back when I was playing, they [other athletes] always felt like you've got to get on somebody always asking for autographs. I mean I'm just always nice to people, cause you never know ... sometimes Debbie, I'm with the kids, and she's goes, 'come on we got to go'. We get all these people asking me for autographs, well I just feel like, let me give this one. And even now people come to me and say, … they say you were never stuck up, … you know I remember when…, not remembering when you made this good block, but I just remember when nobody would give my little son, a little kid at that time, but you stopped; you gave him an autograph. You were with your family and they go through the whole nine, they remember everything*.

Marcus and Debbie have been married seventeen years. They married when Debbie was 28 and Marcus had been in the league a few years. Marcus continued to play and put in the time towards becoming a veteran and as his time in the league grew so did his family. Marcus played in the NFL for sixteen years. During eleven of those sixteen years Marcus and Debbie's family continued to grow and their precious babies began to transform into teenagers.

A skilled player, Marcus was valued by many teams. As he moved from location to location, his family usually relocated with him. He played for four different teams and his family went with him to every stop with the exception of one. At that particular place the family lived a few hours away and made regular commutes to spend time together.

Having been a league veteran, Marcus had many encounters with fans while out with his family. The couple was active in the community when Marcus was in the league and they continue those efforts now that he has retired from the NFL. Marcus seems to

appreciate being remembered for the quality of his character rather than the quantity of his plays.

Couple 5 –Robin and Dexter Evans – Training camp experience

> Robin: *Well I was busy with school and that helped to keep my mind off of things. …, because I was full time in my graduate program so I had a lot of work to do and that just kind of helped with the lonely nights on my part.*
>
> Dexter: … *at the same time on my part I think digging myself into football kind of helped me out those times where I was by myself and lonely or whatever the case. I could do football related things to take my mind away from it, try to go at it from that angle.*

There are many ways to handle being separated from the one you love. For Robin and Dexter they both gave more attention to their careers. Robin was still in graduate school when Dexter went away to training camp. Robin and Dexter had been dating for years. They were constant companions. Dexter's leaving for training camp was the first long separation the couple had to endure. Robin and Dexter missed one another terribly during this time. Robin began to study harder and longer to cope with Dexter's absence. Meanwhile Dexter gave all his energy to the team, that way he was too tired to realize how much he missed Robin.

Trust played a vital role in Robin and Dexter's relationship. The bond of trust between Robin and Dexter had been forged during much more challenging times. Dexter had some tough experiences while the couple was still in college. Robin was there

through the entire ordeal providing Dexter with support. More than anything Robin's support of Dexter showed her character.

Robin and Dexter viewed the trials they endured as strengths to their relationship. When the couple would overcome a situation they could see how their relationship had been strengthen by it. Separation did not deter Robin and Dexter's commitment to one another, nor did it affect their level of trust.

## *Stressors*

The athletes and their families spoke of numerous stressors in their lives, some specific to professional football and others were more general life stressors. They talked about the stress to perform well on the field as well as fulfill their roles as parents. The couples talked about ambitiously working towards their career in the world of professional sports. In the discussion of stressors, it became apparent that stressors are divided into different categories, one category for chasing "the dream", a category regarding the stress due to the athlete's career, another category addressing separation, and a final category for parenting. Each category of stressors is discussed in the following section.

### *Chasing "the dream"*

Three of the five couples discussed stress involved in chasing "the dream". "The dream" is having a successful, productive career in professional sports, and retiring in premium physical condition. Husbands talked about the dedication and determination that it takes to pursue a career in the in the NFL. Wives and husbands discussed the sacrifices that were made in order to chase "the dream", as well as the stress associated with the uncertainty in professional football. They talked about the challenge of remaining

grounded while chasing the dream. In the following quotes one couple discusses the challenges of chasing “the dream”. The selections from this couple are representative of the sentiments of the other couples and were chosen in an effort to prevent redundancy. Angela begins by explaining the biggest stress that results from chasing the dream. Aaron follows by discussing how pursuit of the dream can be influenced by others.

> Angela :“*On the one hand like I said it’s inspiring to see somebody chase the dream. But on the second hand there are some other dreams that as a couple you may want to do or things you just want to experience life together. And you can’t because of the schedule, and at any minute some one could call and say be here”*.
>
> Aaron: *“Cause there is a point where everything in your career is smooth but everything on the outside is on hold. And that’s what it is when you’re chasing a dream like this, everything else in on hold. For every person that is telling you think about your backup plan there are thousands of people saying you can still play and you’re good enough*”.

Keeping perspective and remaining grounded while pursuing “the dream”.

> Angela: *He’s seen someone that was drafted or about to be drafted in the first couple of rounds and blew their knee out working out for the scouts, to see that person, to see him when he broke down and said I’ve planned my whole life for football, I don’t have any other plan. What am I going to do now? To see that and stop and think*
>
> Aaron: *that was critical. …*
>
> Angela: *that was one of his closest friends and to see that and other people that he played with that are absolute great athletes, and it’s just assumed that they will*

*make it to the NFL, and then they don't make it. He was exposed to a lot of different things that kept him grounded. ... then all of the people that he knew from playing would come back and say 'yeah I'm making money that I couldn't make at a regular job but I'm not happy. I don't have all the things that you have right here in front of you. I would truly and rather have that.'... That made it really easy for all of us to stay grounded and say it's nothing but fame, don't chase the dream.*

The off-season can be a very unstable and stressful period of time for athletes and their families. When an athlete makes the transition from one level to another their lives can also be disrupted and become unstable. Aaron and Angela briefly discuss their stress and uncertainty during those less than stable times.

Aaron: *the unknown…, the transition from college to pro and being a student athlete you're always going to have a scholarship. You know you have the financial security, …I know where I'm living because I've got a scholarship check …When you're in a professional realm it's very difficult because you don't know. I mean it's not a guarantee, you just don't know. The summers you just don't know what's going to happen. You just don't know if you're going to make it, or if you're going to be around. Teams may get interested and call you then you get your hopes up and then you may fly in and then turn around and fly right back out. Or you may be talking to someone one day and then they sign someone later that night. It's the unknown. … you're living check to check and it's a check or money that's not guaranteed. That's the most stressful part because you're just waiting to see what's going to happen.*

Angela: *that's true, and it is very unstable. It's difficult to plan things … and there are so many things happening all at once. And while most times you can see the big picture and understand what's going on, sometimes you want to be able to get up and go do what you want to do*.

Aaron summed up his stressors the following way, "*The politics involved, the inconsistencies, the unknowing, that's very difficult, that's the most challenging part*".

Angela and Aaron's discussion of chasing "the dream" was a representation of a common experience of these couples. A strong desire to pursue the dream as well as see beyond the dream was important in establishing a balance in the marriage.

*Maintaining Excellence.* Men frequently reported that the biggest stressor during their playing career was the stress brought on by being a professional athlete. A number of the husbands discussed the stress of maintaining a level of competitive excellence. They did not speak of stress in the relationship, or give the impression that the relationship was stressful. If anything, the husbands spoke of their relationships as helpful in reducing the stress related to their careers, although this concept is discussed later in the chapter. In the following excerpts, the couples share their thoughts and feelings regarding the stress they experienced as a byproduct of their husbands' careers.

Some people viewed their professional football career in hindsight and remained steadfast in the belief that it was the most challenging experience of their life. Zack and Keisha offer a retrospective view of his career in professional football and the stress associated with it.

Zack: *I mean the most stress I had was playing.*

Keisha: P*laying, that's what I was going to say. That's where all your stress was!*

Zack: B*ecause you know that's a major job. You know you get paid to do a service … I tell you, I've told a lot of people, to me football is the most stressful thing I've ever done before. To play professionally, because you have to maintain a certain level of excellence. Compared to my job now if I don't want to go in that day, I don't have to go in. But football, to me playing professionally was the most stressful job I've had before.*

One couple shared the stress the wife experienced whenever her husband would return home after a game.

Marcus*: I just wanted a healthy career, I didn't want to be broken up. I think that was one of the stressors that Debbie, she didn't say it, but she felt it, she didn't want me to be coming in here all handicapped or anything like that*

Interviewer*: so she was concerned about your physical well being*

Marcus*: oh yes*

Debbie*: Oh yes! I would look out the window every time he would get out of the truck to come in the house to see how he was walking, to make sure he was okay*

The desire to have a certain future and a secure position on the team was a stressful, yet admirable, goal for some athletes. Clearly, a strong need to maintain excellence was a key principle associated with athletes' career stress.

*Sports related separation.* Every couple addressed the issue of separation and the strain that it can place on the relationship. They talked about the stress of the first lengthy separation. They spoke of the difficulty being apart from the family as well. One wife even mentions concerns about fidelity during these separations. The following quotes express each couple's experience of separation stress in their own words.

One husband expressed the difficulty he experienced during his first lengthy separation from his wife.

> Dexter: *Especially at the beginning being separated a lot, like when I had to go to training camp. At first when we were apart, even though Robin did come out to visit a few times, it was tough being away from each other because we never really had at that point*.

Keisha made a statement about her stress during separations, as well as shared her thoughts about the fidelity of her husband.

> "*The most stressful thing is having him away. Of course everyone's human so in the back of your mind you have to wonder is he faithful? Because you are putting a lot of trust in to thinking that they are but, you also don't know what's going on either*"

The only active player in the sample, Keith, talked about his demanding schedule and the challenge in frequently being away from his wife and children.

> *Well the biggest stress for me is during the season I'm never home on the weekend. Whether it's a road game or a game at home, I'm never home. I'm never home on Saturdays, Sundays, and Mondays I'm gone half the day, it*

*depends on if we win or lose, and Tuesday is actually my only day off during the regular season… So that's what's the hardest, being away from my family*.

One husband talked about the stress of living apart from his wife while she was pregnant. He talks about a particularly unnerving experience that happened during that pregnancy.

Marcus: …*Debbie's on her way to see me, she wasn't feeling good and she pulled over to the side of the road and she rested up. She got her composure back and drove on up to Pisco. You know in hindsight that, little things like that are stressful. Knowing that your wife is pregnant and you're up here.*

The athletes and their families experience concerns of infidelity, desires for more family time, as well as an overall desire to remain close to one another. Missing a spouse and desiring more time with them appear to be a few of the challenges associated with the separation of professional athletes and their families.

*Parenting, a balancing act.* A number of couples talked about the conflict between their role as a player and their role as a parent or spouse. One couple that did have children during the husband's playing career spoke of major adjustments when relocating with the children and then again when the children became teenagers, an adjustment that all parents can relate to whether they are athletes or not. Parents share their thoughts and feelings in the following passages.

One wife talked about how their children respond when her husband is away.

Barbara: …*the times when they're gone, like on weekends. It's hard with the kids and him having to be away and our daughter especially misses him then she acts out. And I think that's hard.*

Later Barbara elaborated on her role as a parent when she and her husband are separated.

> *I think that I have to be both parents when he's gone and you know the kids don't understand. My daughter's only a toddler and she doesn't understand what's going on. So you know you sort of have to be there as both parents and really try to let them know that daddy will be back. He's gone for a day or two …hopefully they can accept that and try to get on with something else.*

Marcus provided an example of his conflict between being an athlete and being a parent. He offers a comical view of the paradoxical relationship between the team organization and the family.

> *… that's one thing you know if you're kid is sick you've got to work around your profession first, cause they say coach Russell, and everybody knows Russell is a faithful God-fearing man, and he always says God, Family, and the Wolves. ha ha ha ha, but you know if I come to him and say my son has the flu, 'well okay somebody can take care of him till you get down here right?*'

Keith talked about the importance of continuing to be a good father and role model to his children while he is on the football field. He recognized the importance of maintaining a positive image for his children even when he is not in their immediate presence.

> *When I'm out there playing the game on Sundays and I see all these younger players, you know, do things that I know they shouldn't be doing and especially if it's on TV. My children are too young right now to actually realize what's going on but I know eventually they're going to be watching television and they might want to be like, those guys that are showing off might be the ones they want to emulate. And I don't want them to get a false sense of this is the way the game is supposed to be played. And there's a lot of bad language also involved in our*

*game and I also have to check my mouth. Because they are at that stage where they copy everything I say.*

The oldest of Marcus and Debbie's children reached adolescence before Marcus retired from the league. The tough job of parenting teenagers and trying to pass along the family values caused some parenting stress for them.

Marcus: *We still go through it with school. We try to get them the right classes or right teachers, make sure they get the right studying, and make sure if they need a tutor, you know staying on top of them, making sure the values are with them. We try to not just talk about it but live it and be about the whole situation. We're still trying to live the right way and you know the kids are getting older and they understand it more and more.*

For these couples parenting stress manifest in various forms, ranging from attempting to fulfill the roles of both parents at times to refraining from using foul language on the field. As the children grew so did the challenges, especially when encouraging values. For these couples parenting stress occurred at different stages of life, however, it is clear that once children entered the picture every family felt the effects of parenting stress.

## *Resources*

### *Foundation*

Foundation was a consistent theme and appeared in each conversation in some form. Many couples talked about their foundation and how they established a strong foundation as the cornerstone of their marriage. In times of peril the couples often spoke of relying on their foundation for strength. Each couple had a unique experience in creating the foundation of their relationship.

Keisha: *And so having that stable foundation all on its own is helping to build into your marriage now because you know that you have your ups and downs but overall if you truly love somebody, have good communication, and keep God centered then it's going to work out for the best.*

The importance of developing the foundation prior to entering the world of professional athletics was best described by Aaron with the following comment, "*It goes back to the foundation. Successful marriages in professional sports, the ones that make it are the ones that had a good foundation prior to professional sports entering the picture*". Zack echoed a similar sentiment regarding the best time to develop the marital foundation. "*The foundation helps when it's built when everything ain't great and perfect all the time. Okay? I think rough times is what built the foundation. Learning from those and learning and moving on*".

One of the wives shared her thoughts about how the foundation of her relationship developed.

Keisha: *But the other thing is that Zack and I were friends first. So I knew him on a friendly level, we just kind of hung out at first. So I don't know if maybe that whole,*

*maybe that may have started a good foundation from the beginning, just a good friendship. That's probably where I would start to say that it just worked.*

Foundation was an important component in every marriage, but it was not exactly the same in each marriage. Even though each couple mentioned the importance of having a strong foundation, each couple differed in the way they developed their foundation. The same building blocks appeared as each couple discussed the establishment of their foundation. As each couple discussed the creation and development of their foundation several key categories emerged. The most common categories, or foundation building blocks, were (a) communication, (b) shared values, (c) religion/faith, (d) family of origin, and (e) trust. A closer look at those components or foundation building blocks follows.

*Strong Communication.* All of the couples interviewed discussed the importance of communication as a principle ingredient in the foundation of a strong marriage. Several key ideas emerged under the category of communication. Participants talked about communication being key to building a friendship before marriage. They talked about the effort it sometimes takes for a man to talk openly and about the importance of approaching conflict maturely. The couples also emphasized the importance of keeping lines of communication open while maintaining a strong marriage when one partner travels frequently. Finally, they talked about how talking with their partner relieved stress at work. These ideas are illustrated in the following quotes:

Zack, emphasizes that communication is the key to having a good marriage:

> *You know communication is the number one importance of a marriage … you'd have to put that ranked number 1, because if you communicate well then that*

> *means…. You know the top three stressors of a marriage is communication, sex, and finances. But if you ain't communicating then the sex nor the finances is going to be right!*

For Marcus communicating to resolve problems is important:

> *If things come about that wasn't agreed upon, then at least we talked about it. And try not to just go crazy, especially over the kids or with each other. You know it's so many ways you can deal with certain things, but we just elect to deal with them as grown folks should.*

Barbara talked about the importance of maintaining open lines of communication, especially when her husband was away.

> *I think you just have to communicate really well because obviously when they're gone and you're handling situations and they don't know how you've handled it. So things come up again and they need to be aware of how you've handled the situation. So you have to be able to communicate really well. I think is the biggest thing.*

Communication has not always been easy for some of these couples. Keith and his wife Barbara talked about how they formed a friendship through open communication early in their relationship and how important communication is to them now, even if it's some times difficult for Keith.

> Barbara: … *we talked on the phone probably 3 months every day, before we went on our first date. And you know we'd talk for at least an hour everyday. And I think by developing that friendship beforehand we were able to build up that open line of communication.*

Keith: …*you know in the big picture we do listen to each other. We sit down, we talk to each other. And I admit that I am one of the ones, I have the hardest time doing that, but I know that actually sitting down and getting her to force me to open up to her helps me have better days at work and be able to perform when I have to perform because we communicate. You have to have that open line of communication.*

Finally, Dexter found that his wife was a good source of support after a hard day on the field. He stated, "*a lot of times with me, if I was stressed with football, talking to Robin, getting it out was good enough*".

Thus, although they focused on different aspects of communication, clearly communication was a key factor in each of these couples' strong marriages.

*Shared Values and Commitment.* Four of the five couples talked about having shared values. An important undercurrent of shared values seems to be commitment. Having a shared commitment to the relationship seemed to have a strong influence on some couples. They spoke of remaining committed to their values in the face of temptation and separation. Some of the couples talked about the importance of having shared values and goals as well as being committed to achieving those goals and maintaining those values. They also spoke about changes in values while maintaining unwavering commitment to the family. A few couples talked about the importance of having realistic expectations when determining the values and goals in their marriages. The subsequent quotes showcase the couples' beliefs about values, goals, and commitment:

> Angela: *And we have the same vision on what we want for ourselves and our family, our kids. And if you have the same morals, the same values, same goals, working towards the same things, to me that what is the true meaning of marriage.*
>
> Aaron: *I mean it's just the way it is, but the one thing that is always the same is that we have the same values, ideas on how it should be. That's never changed and how it's going to be, we control that and we're in it together. We both played a part in that. And if that remains the same you'll be happy for a long time. It's not that corny happy I mean you'll be completely satisfied with where you are.*

Values were used as a source of strength in the face of adversity. For Debbie commitment to her values in the face of temptation is an advantage.

*I would say values. Not everybody has the same values when it comes to family and marriage. I mean you know you could say you have the values but when temptations come up why can't you push them aside?*

Aaron and Angela discussed their commitment to the marriage even when they were upset.

Angela: *You can have an argument, know what it is you're mad about. I'm mad because of a, b, c, and you're mad because of d thru h, whatever, and that's fine. We can go ahead and be mad about those things without it being oh you always do that, you always say that. Not taking it way out of context and making it a bigger issue than it needs to be.*

Aaron: *At the end of the day we're still together man. You've got to know that. I know that from what I've witnessed and I've seen. Don't let it be a situation where*

Angela: *the marriage is over because we mad*

The addition of children tended to alter the values of these couples. The commitment to the family never seems to fade, however it appears that the values may change as the family changes. Zack and Keisha discuss the changes in their values as their family grew:

Zack: *Back in college where we may have valued time together going out to the movies, now we value sleep a little bit more. (laughter) You know, by the time you put the daughter to bed, it's like we can't get up and go out to the movies or go to somewhere. Now we value, our values are, let me do a little bit of work, then let us read our Bible or whatever, or let us get some sleep or whatever*.

*Religion/ faith*. Three of the five couples discussed the importance of religion or faith to their marriage. The researcher did not ask specifically about religion, however this theme repeated itself throughout the interviews. Couples talked about their faith shaping their values, their marriage, and their career path.

One husband talked about religion being the center of his marriage. "*oh that's a top priority! Extremely top, our religion is number one. That's what our marriage is based upon and centered around*", stated Zack.

Aaron mentioned the relationship between his faith and marital values. "*Understanding the true meaning of faith in God and knowing what's important and marital values*", he said. Later Aaron gave more specifics about the connection between his faith and his marriage.

*…it's also having faith in God, having a strong spiritual relationship, and when you're away, knowing that you can come to her and that you don't have to hold it in by yourself or trying to take it over by yourself*

Marcus and Debbie also talked about the role of religion and values in their marriage.

Marcus: *So you know we're definitely happy with what we're doing. And you know, like you said, the values are there and,*

Debbie: *and we have God, a strong relationship with God.*

Marcus: *absolutely.*

Angela recalled the influence of religion and faith during the time that Aaron decided to leave professional football.

> *And at some point you just realize that's not going to come, that's not how God's going to use me. I think He's used me to a certain extent in all these ways and now He's going to use me in another way and he (Aaron) just opened himself up to it.*

Aaron chose to recall his time playing football this way, "…, *its fun, it's always fun, you're blessed and fortunate to play it*".

Although religion and faith were not discussed in explicit detail, it appears that a most of these couples found strength in their religious faith. They also found value in their religion and used those values as a springboard upon which to develop the basis for some of their marital values. Some couples used their faith in God as an extension to having faith in their spouse.

*Families of origin as role models*. A number of couples talked about the importance of their families of origin. At various times couples would mention the lessons they learned from their families of origin as well as the values they picked up. For a few of the couples their parents were the role models for their marriage and a source of support for the marriage.

> Debbie: *I mean it's just what I expected in a marriage. I had family members that I looked up to that had good marriages and I just kind of bounced off my example. So I took a little bit here, a little bit there and I knew what I wanted*.

Two couples discussed using parents who had long-term marriages as examples. Aaron and his wife Angela both had parents who had lengthy successful marriages.

> Aaron: *I think it's our foundation. I think, you know, I know opposites attract and all that nonsense, but we come from similar backgrounds. We both come from two*

*parent homes, our parents have been married for thirty plus years, and I think they're successful families. So I think that's an aspect of it. I see how they function, and I'm sure she sees how her family functions, and we're open to talk about…Being able to listen, I get that from what I've seen in my foundation.*

Keisha also spoke of her parents and what she learned from her parent's marriage.

*First of all, your family serves as your role model. I have a mom and dad who have been married for over 30 some years so that's a role model all in itself. So you grew up in a family like that so know that there are going to be times when things aren't the smoothest but you get through them.*

*Trust.* Trust was another theme that reappeared numerous times during the interviews. All of the couples discussed the importance of trust. Trust appeared to be another mandatory building block in the foundation of these marriages. Husbands talked in appreciative tones about being able to trust their wives. Wives spoke about trusting their husbands while separated and relying on that trust. They spoke of the difficulty of finding trustworthy people in their environment. Every couple mentioned the importance of reciprocal trust in maintaining the relationship. The following quotes address the importance of trust in the couples own words.

Keith talked about how much he values trust, especially in an environment that does not provide many trustworthy people.

*Well it's being married and having a job like mine it's very tough to find a woman that you can put your trust in. To completely be with someone, because when you're out there, there are so many temptations, obstacles out there, and people*

*who are not very genuine. And when you find someone like that, it is something you have to hold on to, because there's a lot of traps that are out there.*

Keith also discussed the importance of trust in his marriage.

*When you say 'I do', or when you marry someone you got to have trust. Especially in my profession, you have to understand that my job is very time consuming, it is very demanding. And that's when you know the trust issue comes in. If she can't trust me then I really can't be with her, and vice versa.*

Keisha had similar feelings regarding the importance of trust in her marriage.

*Because you're busy and going with your day to day and like I said it's all about trust really. I trusted him and you miss them when they're not there but if you don't have trust then it's never going to work.*

Marcus discussed the relevance of reciprocal trust. He talked about the importance of trusting his wife when she went out with her friends and vice versa.

*A lot of times Debbie would go out with the girls and I would go out with the guys, but you know everybody might not be on the straight and narrow but you've definitely got to trust your spouse.*

Trust in the relationship and in the foundation has been essential in Dexter and Robin's marriage. They discussed the magnitude of trusting one another when they were separated.

Robin: *I guess trust played a big part. Cause you know with him being a professional football player a lot of ladies like that. I just really had a lot of trust in him, in our relationship. You know because you could really drive yourself*

*crazy with all the what if's. You've got to know what your relationship is based on, the foundation. And it's going to go from there.*

Dexter: *…it was definitely a lot of trust in one another. I mean I guess it's obvious with any relationship when two people are not together you have to have a certain level of trust. And share honestly with that person as well. So you know I think we were just like that.*

Keisha frequently spoke of her trust in Zack, for her trusting Zack allowed her to appreciate the time that they could share.

*It's about trust and I trusted him. Of course you're going to miss them cause you don't see them as often. You have to have a lot of communication just by phone, which is fine. But if you have trust then you just cherish the moments that you have together until the next time. But of course you miss him. It wasn't hard when you trust him too.*

Trust being an important part of the foundation and highly valuable in every marriage was discussed numerous times. It seems as though trust is important in maintaining the composure of the foundation.

There was substantial consistency in the characteristics used to create a strong foundation in the marriages of these couples. It is unclear which order the foundation building blocks appear in the course of development, however the recurrence of similar characteristics in each couple is remarkable.

*Social Support*

Social support was yet another resource that the couples talked about using during difficult times. Many of the couples addressed social support in terms of their family and

friends, however only one husband mentioned his team as an outlet for support. Quite a few of the couples referenced their spouse as a source of social support as well.

*From Family*. In addition to the values learned from their families of origin, the couples talked about the support they receive from their families. Some couples talked about help with babysitting while others truly valued the advice and wisdom they received from their families. Yet others talked about the pleasure of having their families near by when they had to relocate. The overarching notion appeared to be that family and their unbiased support was greatly valued and appreciated. The couples express their appreciation for their families in the next quotes.

Marcus and Dexter both made comments expressing their appreciation for their families help during times of need.

> Marcus: …*a lot of them help in different ways. Early on in our family we were very thankful for some of the babysitters that we were able to get. With toddlers and babies, that helped with us getting a group of sitters and people to come over when we would call them.*
>
> Dexter: …*family and friends to both of us there is really nothing higher. They have been there the whole step of the way. You know from when we met them in college through all our life before we got married, obviously during the marriage and now with our daughter. Our family has been so supportive and so helpful. They're the hands when we need them.*

One wife spoke of the added benefit of being located near family and receiving assistance from them.

> Robin:…, *when I was in school my family lived near my school, some outside family. So I have strong family background as well. And they would come and pitch in if we had any type of emergency.*

Marcus and Debbie moved around a bit during his career, at a few of those stops they had the pleasure of being close to either Debbie's family or Marcus's family.

> Marcus: *You know a lot of times while I was up in Pisco I grew closer to Debbie's family in that area. I grew closer to them. I came down there…, and that really drew me closer to Debbie because they knew, they were saying a whole lot of stuff about Debbie. You know I mean not bad, just stuff about growing up*.

Marcus made the following statement about living near his brother and his family during one of his relocations. "*I went to Gatesburg and my brother worked up there so the kids got to go to school with their cousins and you know that was a good situation"*.

*From Friends.* In the discussion of friends these couples spoke openly about the quality of their friends. All the couples talked about being aware of people that wanted their friendship due to their husband's status as a professional football player. Those friendships established prior to playing professional football were highly valued. It seemed the knowledge that a person is their friend because of their character rather than their career was very important. Friendships developed with other professional athletes seemed valuable as well, however not quite as valuable as the friendships established before their career.

Many of the couples talked about their friends as a source of support. Angela spoke about using her friends for support. She said, "… *also our support system as far as our friends, we have a very large close group of friends and we're all basically very open*

*and talk about everything*". Dexter echoed his appreciation of his friends support by saying, "*We're in a situation now where we don't really have a lot of family around us, but the friends that we do have they're tremendous. They really help out with everything*". It was interesting to note that a number of couples continued to find enjoyment in maintaining friendships.

> Debbie: *yeah well because one of our friends they live down the street and sometimes they'll come over here and eat dinner with us. Or sometimes we'll go over there and eat dinner with them. Sometimes we'll watch games together. It used to be that every Sunday that there is a home game we would watch it at my house. You know we look forward to that.*

Keith briefly mentioned the impact of finding genuine people unrelated to the world of professional sports that he could communicate with easily.

> *Just having people that are there and don't have any information in football whatsoever, it's very hard to find friends or people that you can talk to outside of your profession that are really genuine and you can naturally talk to. And having people like that it helps out a lot.*

Marcus gave an example of his family's relationships with some people that have been friends for years. Marcus also hints at why these friendships have lasted so long.

> *Debbie has a friend that she has a little baby and she's stepping in and being Aunt Debbie for the little one. And the kids have kind of grown to like her too, the little lady. …I have friend that likes to go fishing, and he doesn't have any boys and I have a couple boys, so he kind of likes to hang around with the boys and see their sports, trying to take them fishing also. It's just a whole different realm of*

*different types of friends that we have, that we wouldn't mind surrounding them with, with their kids also. So they can see different sides of everything. And all of them are willing to help when they can. Cause we kind of step out and help with our friends also. So I think that's why one hand washes the other*

Aaron is the only married person in his closest group of friends. Aaron briefly mentioned the way his friends view his marriage. He had the following to offer, *"… you know they have long term relationships but they're not married yet and they say they would like to get to that point to be like us. That's a strong confidence"*.

*Spousal Support*. These couples gained support from their spouses using various methods. Some couples talked about how great it is to have a spouse that helps keep them grounded. Others discussed the importance of remaining married to the same person they married, meaning that their spouse did not change from the time they first met. Yet others valued the communication and effort that their spouse put forward. One of the most common sentiments was feeling supported due to the sense of balance with the marriage. When asked how their spouse has contributed to the health and strength of the marriage Aaron and Angela talked openly about the importance of understanding and valuing one another.

Aaron: … *In a nutshell just understanding me, and not being afraid to work on her issues and help me with mine. Really we're growing together and challenging me and not trying to change me in some ways but let me grow in others. That's been it for me.*

Angela: *I think for me it's like I said we decided what was important to us and no matter how big or small it is if I said it was important to me it was*

*important to him. And I think that's huge because I mean there are certain traditions you want to start for your own family... It could be something simple and if it's important to me it's important to him …. He's going to put forth just as much, if not more, effort to keep our relationship growing as I am. I don't feel like I'm trying to do anything by myself. I don't feel like I'm pulling more weight than he's pulling…. And like I said it doesn't matter how stupid the request might be if it is important to me then it's important to him.*

Robin and Dexter endorsed similar feelings regarding what their spouse has done to make their marriage strong, especially in the realm of parenting.

Robin:…, *just by being compassionate, a good listener, and he's been very helpful with our daughter since she's been born. He helps out with cooking, and he'll help with cleaning, and washing the clothes, folding them. He's there to help with cleaning the household. He's there to help with our daughter. He' s there to talk and listen too. And that's what helped make our marriage as strong as it is. He's a very good listener, and very good husband*.

Dexter: *Wow, from saying all those good things. He he*

Robin: *um hum*

Dexter: *I would say from my point of view, supposedly when you have a marriage it's 50%, half and half. But I think that Robin has done more than her share thus far. You know she really keeps us, the household in line. I know its only me and her really, our daughter's too young, but she's kind of like the one that's making sure that things are done appropriately as far as finances. She's trying to make sure that we're doing what we need to do as far as in our jobs. …she kind of*

*motivates us to be the best we can be, so to say. … and definitely she plays the part of a great mom. That's something that just came up, here new, but just how she can pick that up. You would have thought she has two or three, however many kids! I mean this is her first one and she's so loving and caring. When she was like that towards me it was one thing, but when you actually see how she is towards someone else, it's kind of, kind of nice.*

Some couples also talked about the importance of their partner remaining the same. Marcus was greatly appreciative of the fact that Debbie did not change over the years and she remained the same person he fell in love with. The same qualities that lead to Marcus fall in love with Debbie were the qualities he cited when discussing how Debbie has contributed to the strength of their marriage.

Debbie: …, *by being understanding*.

Marcus: *well it's the same here for me*

Debbie: *and being a good listener*

Marcus: *being a generous person, being like I said from the get go [a] good, down to earth, loving person.…Cause she's still got it!*

Keith spoke of receiving marital support in terms of communication. Interestingly Barbara felt that one of the best things Keith has done for their marriage is be humble.

Keith: *personally I think that she's very demanding of me. If something is wrong she forces me to actually talk about it. And I used to have a habit of keeping things to myself. And I just keep it inside and it'll build up to a point to where I'm about to bust and I'd probably wind up doing something I would regret later. And I don't get to that point anymore. I mean she'll force me to sit down and she'll*

> *[be] poking at the problem and trying to persuade me to talk about it and eventually it comes out. And you know we'll talk about it and you know we try not to go to bed angry. That's the main goal for us. … she made me become a better communicator when it comes to actually expressing my feelings. I mean I still have problems with that but it's a lot better than it has been. And with out her I don't know where I'd be without Barbara so…*
>
> Barbara:…, *I think just he's a very considerate and caring person. I feel like that's not something you find a lot in his line of work. You know a lot of guys have egos that they're not very family oriented but I feel that he doesn't have that ego and that therefore he always seems to put family first. And that's something that is very special for us.*

Keisha and Zack reiterated the importance of trust and having a balance as they discussed what they feel their spouse has done to contribute to the strength of the marriage. Zack offers a response after showing his humorous side by telling Keisha she should respond first so that he could "prep" his answer based on her response.

> Keisha: … *first of all Zack is the same person that I met, what ten, twelve I can't even remember how many years ago now. He's the same person and the thing is that I never have to doubt. He's an excellent father, and excellent husband. And like I said the best thing, one is always maintain trust, it really does all go down to trust and communication. Because number one I trust him, I trust him with, it's kind of nerve racking when you're leaving a newborn with man who's never taken care of a baby, ha ha ha, and you're like stressing about work, but I trust him, like the same way I trusted him…one is the trust and that communication. He does*

*a good job for me in picking me up, …but that's part of his personality too, …he keeps me grounded which is kind of nice.*

Zack: *…I think the difference is we're a good balance for one another. For example, were I may be weak she may be strong and when she is weak I'm strong. …yeah, there is a good little balance. …Keisha can be my conscious sometimes. If there is something that I think that I might not want to do that may not be right, Keisha will be like well you know you shouldn't do that,*

*Support from team*. Only one husband discussed how important it was to have support from his team during stressful times. Overall many families did not share experiences of support received from their team organization. There were no questions aimed directly at the experience of team support. Experiences of support for family by the team organization seem to be the exception rather than the norm in professional football, according to the comments of other couples.

*I've been in organizations were they weren't has family oriented as they say they were. And it just made the environment not as smooth as you wanted, it made for a very cut-throat environment. This is the type of environment where they really are family oriented and put family first. You go to work with a smile on your face. You're able to take care of things and do what you want to do and not have any problems. Actually, helping my wife understand how family oriented this organization is helps her, gives her peace of mind. Cause she knows that if something goes wrong she can always call someone*.

Later Keith reiterates the importance of team support and his appreciation for his current team's family oriented structure.

> *Fortunately I'm with a team that actually is very family oriented. Meaning that if something goes wrong at home I am able to go take care of that emergency at a minute's notice. I don't have to wait until the practice is over or the meeting is over, they'll just let me know and I can get going. We had a couple of situations that came up like that and I respected the team wholeheartedly because they got a hold of me quickly and I was able to take care of the situation without any delay*.

*Boundaries*. Setting boundaries with friends was another topic of importance. Most of the couples appreciated the support they received from their friends, however due to their status they also place a high value on their privacy. In the flowing passages some couples clearly state what they would and would not share with friends.

> Keisha: *As far as friends I think friends are important too, but to a certain extent, because you don't let friends know your business. …, because I always tell my girlfriends, like you won't hear me talking about Zack to somebody else. If I have a problem I talk to him. Because the last thing you want is to have friends meddling into something. So your friends, you have to draw the line somewhere too.*

Angela had similar feelings on setting boundaries.

> *But we agree on the boundaries that need to be set for community. Like if I get mad at Aaron tomorrow it's not broadcast to the church, to my friends, to my family. We know what's in our house is in our house. We welcome in the folks that we want to welcome in for the occasions we want to welcome them in.*

Aaron was very upfront about the type of people he allows into his circle of friends.

*For me it's real simple man. Where I come from if you don't have our best interest keep it moving. I don't have time for you if you got negativity, drama, I'm too old for that, that's high school to me. I don't really keep you in my circle. If I feel like you trying to bring my relationship down, or hold us back, or if you're negative then I don't have any time for you. I'll speak to you. I'm not a malicious person, but I won't really deal with you. You won't be around me or my family or my friends. If I feel like you're a negative person, if you're gossiping, or you trying to keep stuff going then I don't have no time for you.*

### *Definition of Stressor*

When discussing various stressors and resources, the participants talked about how their definitions of the stressors they experienced reduced much of the potential threat of the stressors to their marriages and their lives. Some themes that emerged include, having clear expectations, recognizing that the situation is temporary and planning for the future, deciding to use stressful situations as motivation, finding the good in situations, as well as respect for each other's sacrifices while "chasing the dream".

#### *Stress as Motivation*

One husband talked about the option to view a situation as a stressor or as motivation

Marcus: *…, the stress that, you could look at it as stress, I chose not to. If you're not starting and then somebody takes your spot, you know some people would come to me …and say oh you know <inaudible>I just tell people this isn't the first*

*time this happened to me. I've been doing this since 8 years old. People been in front of me and I just work harder and here I am right back in there.*

*Finding the positive*

Another husband spoke about finding the good in situations as opposed to only viewing the negative.

Keith: *You could look at it like a two sided coin. You could look at it as I'm going here and look at the negative, but I wanted to go there. You know there are so many guys that they want this money and if I didn't get this money or I didn't get to go to this city or state then the world is over. And you're mad at world, and you take it out on your family…, there is not enough time to be negative in that sense. If you've got to take it, you take what's good and push on.*

*Clear Expectations*

One wife remembers a conversation she had with her husband prior to their wedding when she clearly stated her expectations of marriage.

Angela: …*we do have friends that play all across the country or in Europe and the wife doesn't go with them, the family doesn't go with them. I wasn't comfortable with that,… I will completely support you in whatever respects of you playing football but it's important to me for us to be married, for us to be together. I don't want the long distance marriage …I'm not going to get married to be a single parent, you need to be there. So that was a discussion that we had.*

Another wife discussed setting clear expectations with her husband early in their relationship as well.

> Debbie: … *before we started dating we sat down talked about what we wanted in you know in our dating, what our expectations were, what kind of relationship we wanted. So that was the start for us.*

*Recognition of temporary situation*

Some couples found comfort in recognizing the momentary status of the pending separation.

> Dexter: *I always say it's tough being away from each other but it wasn't like …because we're away from each other let's end it now. I mean you know we understood what was presented in front of us…, if I go do this, then this ordeal is going to strengthen our relationship or our marriage.*

Angela also discussed the importance of recognizing that separation was only temporary, as well as planning for quality time upon Aaron's return.

> *We made efforts to be together when we could. There was always an end in sight. It was even though we aren't together right now we still were always planning on when was the next time we could see each other. It wasn't just we're separated, you do your thing, I'm going to do mine and we'll get back together at some point*.

*Respect for sacrifice while chasing "the dream"*

Wives talked about their admiration of their husbands' dedication to "the dream".

> Angela*: Chase the dream but realize that even if you don't make it it doesn't mean you're a failure. you're successful in so many other ways and in so many other things that you still appreciate what you have.*

Angela provided comments on the dynamics necessary to chase the dream and maintain the relationship.

> *He was very considerate of the fact that it's not just him. It's not just him in this relationship, it's not just him chasing this dream…because he was being considerate of the sacrifices that were being made for him to be able to pursue his dream it wasn't that hard. Because it becomes difficult or a challenge when one or the other feels taken advantage of.*

Each couple set different parameters for stress in their relationships. It is worth noting that a number of the couples found value in discussing their expectations early in their relationships. Setting clear expectations of the marriage seemed to have an influential role in the way stress was perceived later on in the marriage.

### *General Thoughts*

The information gathered from these couples was quite rich. All that they had to share in an effort to enlighten others could not be easily contained. In the following section a few topics that were important to the couples are discussed. These topics share a common thread, the world of professional sports. These couples also shared their thoughts regarding the numerous failed marriages in the world of professional sports. Finally they offered recommendations to young couples entering the world of professional sports.

*Why other marriages fail*

A number of the couples offered their opinions on the failure of marriages in professional athletics. Many of the couples described a failure to properly develop a strong foundation in the relationship prior to entering the world of professional sports. They also suggested poor communication, having a greater commitment to the team than the family, and keeping information from your spouse as problems in those failed marriages. Athletes share their thoughts and opinions about why marriages fail in the subsequent quotes.

Having a greater dedication to the team and pursuing "the dream" than to the family is one perceived cause of failure in marriage.

> Keith: *There are a lot of people that I know personally, players and coaches…, let the game consume them. And when that happens you know something is going to give. And unfortunately it's the relationships with your family. After a while they're just ghosts, I mean I've seen coaches actually sleep on the air mattress during the week and never come home. I've seen players that actually act like they don't even have a family. They're so consumed about the game, thinking they can play forever. And this game is not guaranteed*.

One husband offered his opinion on the magnitude of establishing a strong foundation early and having clear expectations.

> Aaron: *Like I said the ones you read about and see on TV or Sportscenter or whatever that's struggling and having all these problems because they didn't have the foundation. They weren't clear, they had unrealistic expectations*.

Another couple felt that choosing to withhold things from one's partner while dating can contribute to the failure of the marriage.

> Marcus: *A lot of people they shelter some of their life away from their spouse…. If you go into a marriage hiding stuff and then when the real truth comes out, some spouses can handle it and some can't.*
>
> Debbie: *that's true*
>
> Marcus: *so the ones that can't they look at you as a liar. ..., a lot of people don't think people can change and that's a bad situation.*
>
> Debbie: *but still sometimes when you're dating some people overlook certain things when they should pay close attention to them*

Getting wrapped up in the game, forgetting about the family, having a weak foundation, and withholding information from your spouse were all hypothesized as contributors to failure in marriage. It is highly plausible that these factors could be detrimental to any relationship.

*Recommendations to "rookie families"*

Each couple was given the opportunity to pass along any information they felt was important to "rookie families". "Rookie families" were described as a young couple coming out of college and the husband is on the verge of beginning his career in professional sports. The couples pass along their helpful hints in the following quotes. Aaron and Angela had a long list of recommendations to strengthen the marriage.

> *Aaron: I'd tell them that honesty, … you know understanding for the athlete, …understand that you're not in this by yourself. … you can't make plans for a long time girlfriend or your wife when y'all first starting out if you're not going to*

*be businesslike or official about it. You have to be serious about it and you have to communicate, have a plan and understand each other needs. …you have to understand that it's going to take the two of y'all to make your career successful as well as your marriage successful.*

*Angela: I agree. And also for them to stay grounded…. Like I said whatever it is that is important for you and your relationship or you and your marriage, you and your family stick by that. You can't be willing to sacrifice that for anything. …, your word needs to be your word. Because as soon as you go back on it I think you just set yourself up for a lack of trust. You start breaking away at your foundation basically. As long as you can stay grounded and stay focused on your football goal as well as your other goals. …And not be so stuck on the materialistic, like I said don't spend all your time planning for a wedding and not plan anything for your marriage.*

Being mindful of the importance of loyalty to your friends and family and remaining grounded were recommended by other couples as well.

*Barbara:…, one I think they always need to remember that everything may seem great now or you could be making a nice salary but you always have to remember that it could be over tomorrow. And because the business is not very loyal and you know you could get hurt, it could be done. So because of that I think you need to really keep your priorities straight of what's important in life. I think you should remember that because your NFL stardom, or whatever professional sport you're in, could be taken away in a second. And then all you'll have to rely on is the people around you.*

*Keith: I also want to add that most of the time you have to pick and choose the people that you hang with very carefully. Because I mean …they might be around you because of what you do for a living. But as soon as you're done or you get hurt or something bad happens they're not going to come around. So I mean keep the communication with your friends and family that you had before you became a professional because those are they type of people that will help keep you grounded and help you look at things the way they should be done.*

Keisha recommends having religion as the center of the relationship, she also offers communication as a secondary suggestion for those who do not have a strong sense of religion. Zack on the other hand has three questions every young partner must ask. He suggests that knowing the answers to these questions can place a person on the right path to establishing balance in the relationship.

*Zack: …So the three things to know to survive in this world are: What is too much? What is too little? And what is just right? So if you can do those three things then you'll be successful in all your endeavors. …what that's saying is that you know what is too much, what is too little, and what is just right. You know what the fine balances in life are and that goes through with communication…. So you've got to know what is too much, what is too little, and what is just right. You've got to know what you're wife likes, what she doesn't like, and then what is just right.*

Marcus emphatically stressed the importance of remaining true to yourself and not being swayed by materialistic means. His wife Debbie emphasized the importance of being considerate.

*Debbie: …I would say be considerate of the other's feelings. In the beginning in a marriage sometimes you have to learn to be considerate of each other's feelings and space.*

*Marcus: You know you've got to understand that there is a lot of give and take, that somebody is going to win more, but you've got to be able to be alright with it. If you're dating and all you get to do is go out where the girl wants to eat, or eat where the man wants to eat. They get the say so on everything. When you get married don't expect things to change. Some people change …people change with money, or people change with a better job. … When things change they think that their family has to change. That should be the constant. …And just be for real. Don't be this other person. Whatever you go into it with, that's what you should be. Don't let the car change you, don't let the house change you, don't let the money change you, don't let your family member change you*

The suggestion to maintain open lines of communication was also supported by Robin and Dexter. Furthermore, they suggested the relevance of building trust early in the relationship.

*Dexter: They have to really be committed. They can't be halfway in and halfway out, a short-term commitment. You definitely have to build up trust, because there is going to be some separation there, and being away from one another, you obviously got to trust your partner. …and part of being separated is obviously a physical thing, so make sure that you still try to keep up a form of communication anyway you can. For us it was easy to pick up a phone and call one another. But other people might use email or instant messaging, however they communicate. If*

*possible just to show the other one that you're thinking about them, wish you were with them.*

*Robin: if they can try to be in the same place that would be better too. Try to be in the same city where your husband is playing then that would be helpful.*

Communication, remaining grounded, and having trust were just a few of the recommendations these happy and healthy couples had for the next generation of successful married couples. The suggestions of these couples stem from their life experiences, and the information attained from the sharing of those experiences is greatly appreciated.

### *Summary*

Each couple has shared the story of their strong marriage. These couples openly shared some of the lessons that they have learned as their marriage grew in the world of professional sports. They repeatedly discussed challenges and how they triumphed over those challenges.

It has been evidenced that these couples chose to discuss possible stressors before they presented themselves. The ability to communicate with one another has presented itself as an important component in these marriages. Numerous times and in various forms communication asserted its position as an influential factor in these strong marriages, whether to reduce stress on the field, maintain connection, or plan for the future.

These couples experienced stress in a range of areas. All the couples experienced parenting stress. The husbands experienced stress associated with maintaining a certain level of excellence in professional sports. A few of the wives experienced stress

stemming from separation from their husbands. All the couples viewed trust as a mandatory component in their marriage.

Frequently the couples mentioned the importance of creating and maintain a strong foundation in their relationship. Each couple created their marital foundation in a distinctive way. However every couple used the same building blocks of communication, shared values, religion/faith, family of origin, and trust to establish a strong foundation in their marriage. Having a strong foundation was one of the largest resources for these couples. Also, the components used to establish a strong foundation were frequently mentioned as recommendations to young couples entering the world of professional sports.

# CHAPTER V
# DISCUSSION

## *Introduction*

This study presents examples of professional athletes that have healthy and happy marriages. This study addresses and identifies the challenges which professional sports families encounter as well as how they overcome those challenges. The overall goal of this study was to learn how the healthy professional sports family copes and manages blending the world of high profile sports with home and family life.

Five couples participated in open-ended, semi-structured couple interviews. Interviews with couples offered perspectives from both partners. Open-ended questions were used to promote discussion between partners and encourage them to share the factors and experiences they found had the greatest effect on the marriage. The couples provided detailed experiences of creating a balance between the world of professional sports and their home life.

## *Findings*

The findings of this study may not differ greatly from strong marriages in general. One key difference is the importance of building trusting relationships. Athletes, as well as singers, actors and other performers in the public spotlight may have a difficult time establishing trusting relationships with others due to their status. Trust was found to be a key component in strong marriages, so it would be beneficial for all couples to create a trusting environment in their marriages. Also of significance for professional athletes is the need to create a stable foundation and explicitly discuss expectations prior to marriage and entering the world of professional sports.

*Stressors*

In accordance with the ABCX model the couples identified their major stressors, the A factor, as separation, dealing with the uncertainty associated with chasing "the dream", maintaining the level of excellence needed in professional football, and balancing the family and professional sports.

These couples used various methods to cope with separation. All of the couples discussed using communication to maintain spousal intimacy when separated. Similarly, Gardner and Cutrona (2004) found that support acts as a buffer to stress-related relationship deterioration. However some people chose to focus on their careers as an outlet for the tension they experience during their separation. Giving more energy to one's career during separation was similar to withdrawal due to the reduction of energy or emotion in the relationship. These findings are similar to those of married police officers in a study conducted by Roberts and Levenson (2001). In addition, this aligns with the findings of other studies examining stress and marital conflict (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Repetti, 1989).

Ortiz found that athletes experience stress from unexpected moves across country because of sudden trades, cuts, or free agency, as well as retirement at a relatively young age and transition into new careers, and occupational uncertainty as well as insecurity because of forced retirement, team politics, competition for positions on the team, or risk of injuries (Ortiz 2001). The athletes in this study also discussed experiencing stress related to the same circumstances and situations. Ortiz (2001) hypothesized that some wives of professional athletes consider not feeling a viable option to cope with certain difficult or painful emotions. Contrary to those findings the wives in this study found communicating with their spouse helped them handle their emotions during challenging

times. It is possible that the strength of their marriages helped them view communicating as a more viable option than constricting their feelings.

All of the couples discussed the adjustments that accompany children and their growth. The stresses that accompany parenting reached every one of these couples. The majority of couples cited their parenting stress in relation to balancing caring for their children with the other demands in their lives. These findings coincide with prior research that cited athletes' demanding schedules requiring athletes to be spend numerous hours at the stadium (Ortiz, 2001), thus leaving little time for athletes to spend with their children. Interestingly none of the couples mentioned parenting conflicts in disciplining the children. In future studies it may be interesting to see if the couples's establishment of a strong foundation had a mitigating effect on conflicts and conflict resolution.

The stress stemming from separation, fear of injury, and career uncertainty may also be experienced by the families of those whose careers are based upon their physical ability, or artistic expression. Artists, singers, actors, and performers are often on the road for performances, and they fear career-ending injuries as well. Soldiers are frequently away from their families for extended amounts of time and face life altering injuries in the course of their careers.

*Resources*

The B factor represents the strengths and resources couples used to respond to stress. These couples cited their marital foundation, consisting of trust, communication, faith/religion, and commitment to values among the resources they use to combat stress.

Establishing a strong foundation was highly important for these couples. Many of the couples discussed the importance of establishing a strong foundation prior to entering

the world of professional athletics. Even though each couple created the foundation of their marriage with distinguishing uniqueness, all couples use similar components to create a strong foundation. As previously stated the most common components, or foundation building blocks, were communication, shared values, religion/faith, family of origin, and trust. These couples stated that during stressful times they would rely on their foundation.

Certain components of the foundation such as communication and trust were frequently spoken of as significant strengths in the marriage. This use of communication was often used to engage the spouse, which is similar to findings in other research (Story & Bradbury, 2004). It is also important to note that many of the foundation building blocks are akin to the elements of successful marriages found by Fenell (1993). For example commitment to marriage, strong moral values, and faith in God or spiritual commitment were elements found in Fenell's study that were supported in this study. Additionally, these couples discussed nine out of ten of the elements of successful marriages found by Fenell. The lone element, willingness to forgive and be forgiven, was not specifically addressed during the conversations; however, this element could be important in the strength of these marriages as well.

The association between communication and foundation was interesting. Based upon the couples' statements it was quite difficult to determine which factor came first in the relationship. For some couples the foundation was established first and that encouraged increased, as well as, improved communication. Conversely, other couples used strong communication as a means of creating a strong foundation. Thus communication and foundation become the chicken and the egg as the debate continues

on which comes first. It is obvious that communication and having a strong foundation were important in the marriages of these athletes.

The relationship between trust and communication seemed to be reciprocal in these marriages. The couples discussed the importance of trusting one another and expressing that trust to one another. Communication also played a role in attaining elevated levels of trust within the marriage. This is similar to the findings of Johnson, Hobfoll, and Zalcberg-Linetzy (1993) who found that supportive communications foster feelings of closeness and contributes to positive evaluations of the relationship.

*Definition of stressor*

Next the C factor, what the couple views as stressful, was determined by the expectations the couple had early in the relationship. Couples that discussed possible stressors before they occurred reported being equipped to handle those situations if and when they occurred.

The retired athletes in this study organized their thoughts of themselves in terms of family. They fondly remembered their playing careers, but after retirement they organized their thoughts around their families. Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) proposed that athletes who see themselves as only an athlete encounter personal crisis when they face retirement, especially forced retirement. The athletes in this study did not define themselves primarily as athletes. They saw equal value in their roles as husbands, fathers, and athletes.

*Strong Marriages*

Finally the X factor describes how these couples developed their strong marriages. All of the couples testified to the significance of communication in their

relationships. They repeatedly stated using communication and having discussions as a method of maintaining spousal intimacy. Those families that did not relocate may have had a similar experience to that of military families that pull together during the absence of a solider. Military families experienced greater family cohesion during member absence (Greiff & Munter, 1980; Margolis, 1979), there could be a similar occurrence in the families of professional athletes with strong marriages.

The couples reported receiving adequate amounts of spousal support and they did not report high levels of conflicts. This coincides with prior research, which found couples that supported one another also reported that their marriages were less conflict ridden (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999; Gallo & Smith, 2001). This study also supports the findings of Dehle, Larsen, and Landers (2001), which suggested that the social support of a spouse takes precedence over the support given by others. Dehle and associates felt that precedence stemmed from the fact that the spouse is usually the first person sought during a crisis. During difficult times the couples who participated in this study often went to their spouse seeking comforting, encouragement, or reassurance.

### *Implications for Family Therapists*

Therapists should examine the building blocks of foundation when a professional athlete and his family enter your office for help. It will also be important to discover any weaknesses in the foundation. Therapists and mental health professionals should remain aware of the discomfort some professional athletes and their families may experience reaching out for help. This population is very guarded, they might have a difficult time establishing the trust necessary for a positive therapeutic bond.

Separation was a consistent source of distress in the marriages of professional athletes. Therapist should keep in mind that different couples have different responses to separation. When discussing the needs of the family during separation therapists should be mindful that these families will have to accommodate the schedule of the athlete. No major professional sports league is going to change their schedule to accommodate to the needs of players and their families. It will be important for these couples to establish open lines of communication that promote a clear and strong exchange of ideas.

### *Implications for Professional Athletes and their Families*

These couples with strong marriages consistently spoke of the marital bond in endearing terms. Their affection and support of one another was admirable. One of the strongest recommendations from athletes with strong marriages was pre-marital clarity. They frequently spoke of establishing clear expectations of the marriage with one another, prior to the marriage.

Professional athletes should consider the recommendations of these athletes as first hand accounts from people who have shared their specific circumstances. They suggest the creation of a strong foundation consisting of open communication, trust, shared values, and religion. Finally, professional athletes should not be intimidated of seeking counseling to help strengthen their marriage if it is not as sound as desired.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study has contributed to the literature discussing the positive aspects of the marriages of professional athletes. Despite the magnitude of the information attained this study did have limitations. First, all the players in this study were or had been

professional football players. Attempts were made to include athletes from various sports. The inclusion of various types of athletes may have provided different types of stressors needing different types of resources in their strong marriages. Regardless of various efforts to recruit diverse players, all the players in this study were also African American. As stated before this may not be so unusual considering that African Americans composed almost 70% of the National Football League during the 1996-97 season, and those numbers have risen in the last few years (Benedict and Yaeger, 1998). However, it is possible that characteristics of strong marriages may differ based on the ethnicity of the couple.

Another possible limitation of this study was the lack of playing time for some of the players. The athletes' career length ranged from 5 months to 17 years. A sample composed of athletes with extended careers or similar career lengths may have provided greater insight to the factors that contribute to the strength and happiness of professional sport marriages over an extended amount of time.

Finally, the length of interviews varied depending upon the needs of each couple. Additionally, follow-up interviews were not conducted in this study. Had follow-up interviews been conducted the researcher would have had the opportunity to examine themes more thoroughly with the couples. In the future having all couples participate in in-depth interviews the researcher may retain more valuable information.

It would have been interesting to look at the marriage of athletes that achieve a high level of fame in the world of professional sports. An ethnographic study might be more beneficial in helping to determine the strengths of these marriages. Similarly, a longitudinal study that followed couples for years after they entered professional sports

could possibly further assist in accurately determine what helps these couples have strong and happy marriages.

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Appendix A

September ?, 2005

Monica M. Smith, First Vice-President
Behind The Bench
PO Box 163
Ashland, MA 01721

Dear Mrs. Smith:

As the Vice-President of an organization that supports families of professional athletes, you have a unique understanding of the challenges facing these families. I am both a major fan of professional sports and a marriage and family therapy graduate student at Virginia Tech. When selecting my research topic for my thesis, I chose a topic that links both of my passions. I am sending this letter to offer you and your organization an opportunity to contribute to the public's understanding of the life of the professional athlete and his family. I will be studying factors that contribute to successful marriages in light of the many challenges that the professional athlete and his family encounter. This study is different from many others that focus on families of professional athletes in that it aims to showcase the strengths of these families. It seems unfair that the image of professional athletes and their families is often tainted with allegations of betrayal. This study offers the opportunity to show these professional athletes in a positive light. The purpose of this study is to learn more about those athletes and their wives that are able to maintain healthy marriages during the course of his career. Specifically we hope to identify the challenges that professional sports' families face as well as how they overcome those challenges.

I need help locating couples with strong marriages who live within 3 hours of Washington DC that would be willing to spend some time talking with me. I will

interview between 6 and 10 couples in a location that is most comfortable to them. I am interested in learning how these couples avoided the hurdles to which some high profile marriages succumb. I will also be asking them for advice that they may have to offer to young couples just beginning their life in the world of professional athletics.

I understand that athletes have very hectic schedules and may not have time to participate in such a study. For that reason I am willing to speak with husbands and wives separately if they are willing to participate. I am also willing to speak with couples with strong marriages in which a spouse is a retired professional athlete. I feel that any information retired players and spouses would like to add could only strengthen the quality of my study. Of course, all of the participants' comments will be confidential and in the publication of the results of my study their identities will be altered.

If you have questions regarding the study or if you have advice regarding how I might make contact with participants, please contact me at jdees@vt.edu. You may also contact my major professor, Dr. Sandra Stith sstith@vt.edu or you may call her at 703-538-8462 or send any correspondence to either of us to the address located at the top of this letter. I would appreciate hearing from you by November 1st so I can keep on schedule to graduate in May of 2006. I would like to thank you for your time and assistance in this matter. Your efforts are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

J.E.M.E.G. Dees
Master's Candidate

Appendix B

Dear Potential participant:

_____ has informed me that you may be interested in participating in a study that I am conducting as a part of my Master's program in marriage and family therapy at Virginia Tech. I would like to thank you very much for your interest in this study! The purpose of this study is to learn more about those athletes and their wives that are able to maintain healthy marriages during the course of the husbands' careers. I want to showcase successful marriages of professional athletes. I also hope to identify the challenges these families face as well as how they overcome those challenges.

If you are willing to participate in the study I will be sending you a form, which you can return to me with your name attached via e-mail, indicating that you voluntarily agree to complete the background form. At the same time I send the form, I will be sending you and your spouse a few background questions. The background questions, regarding your age, length of marriage, current playing status, and length of career in professional sports are designed to give me some information before we talk. Of course, you have the right to omit any questions you don't want to answer at any time during the study and you may withdraw from the study at anytime.

Once I have received the background information, I will contact you to schedule a time for an interview. The interview will last between 30 minutes and 120 minutes, depending upon the time you have available to spend with me. I will discuss the procedure for the interview and ask you to sign a consent form before I begin the interview. The interview will be held at a location that is convenient for you and your spouse. If an interview cannot be conducted in person, it can be conducted on the phone.

I would prefer to interview you and your spouse jointly. However I understand that there may be scheduling conflicts that prevent conducting the interview jointly, if that is true I will interview each of you separately at times that are more convenient for each of you.

All interviews will be audio recorded in order to ensure that I capture your responses accurately. Your names and any identifying information will be changed in the transcripts as a means of protecting your identity while still using the valuable information you have shared. All audio tapes will be erased at the completion of the study.

Please contact me as soon as possible if you would be willing to share how you have managed to establish a successful marriage in the world of professional sports. The best way to contact me is by e-mail jdees@vt.edu. You may also contact me by telephone at 703-538-8393. I look forward to answering any additional questions you might have and sending you the consent form and background questions. Again, I really appreciate your willingness to participate.

Sincerely,

J.E.M.E.G. Dees
Master's Candidate

Appendix C

Informed Consent for Background Information

**Project Title:** No longer a myth: A study of the happy and healthy marriages of professional athletes

**Researchers:** J.E.M.E.G. V. Dees, M.S. Candidate, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Sandra M. Stith, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

**What is the purpose of this study?** The purpose of this study is to learn more about those athletes and their wives that are able to maintain healthy marriages during the course of his career. Specifically we hope to identify the challenges that professional sports' families face as well as how they overcome those challenges.

**What will I be asked to do?** You and your spouse will be asked to answer a few background questions. The background questions, regarding age, length of marriage, current playing status, and length of career in professional sports are designed to give the researcher some information about your marriage before the interview. The questions will be emailed to you.

**Are my responses confidential?** Every effort will be made to keep all information you provide in the strictest confidence. Your name and any identifiable information will be altered as a means of protecting your confidentiality. Your responses will be kept in a locked cabinet for the duration of the project and access will only be allowed to the researcher.

**If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact:**

J.E.M.E.G. V. Dees, Principal Researcher
703-538-8393, jdees@vt.edu

Sandra M. Stith, Ph.D., Committee Chair
703-538-8362, sstith@vt.edu

Dr. David Moore, IRB Chair
540-231-4991, moored@vt.edu

**Participant's Permission**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project. I have read and understood the Informed Consent and the conditions of this project. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project by affixing my name on the line below. I realize that although I choose to participate right now, I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without any penalty.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D

Background Information

Name(s) : _____

1. How long have you been married?
2. Do you have any children? If so how many children do you have and what are their ages?
    a. Do they live with you? For retired players did they live with you during your career?
3. What professional league are you in (or were you in) and for how long?
4. For Retired players, how long have you been retired?

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

**Project Title:** No longer a myth: A study of the happy and healthy marriages of professional athletes

**Researchers:** J.E.M.E.G. V. Dees, M.S. Candidate, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Sandra M. Stith, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

**What is the purpose of this study?** The purpose of this study is to learn more about those athletes and their wives that are able to maintain healthy marriages during the course of his career. Specifically we hope to identify the challenges that professional sports' families face as well as how they overcome those challenges.

**What will I be asked to do?** You and your spouse will be asked to participate in an interview that will last from 30 to 120 minutes, depending on your availability. The interview can be conducted via telephone or in person. During this interview you will be asked about how you and your spouse have managed to have a healthy marriage, while dealing with the stressors of professional sports. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience at a mutually agreed upon location. The interview will be audiotaped to ensure the accuracy of your statements.

**Are there any risks to me?** This research study poses minimal risk to you. In order to gain an accurate understanding of how your marriage remained strong we will need to discuss how you and your spouse overcame your stressors. This discussion could be stressful. We will ensure that your information will be kept confidential.

**Are there benefits to me?** In contributing to this study, participants gain the benefit of knowing that they may help others that enter the world of professional sports, as well as the professionals that assist families in the world of professional sports. In similar prior research participants found that participating in this type of research offered them an opportunity for self-discovery and personal growth.

**Are my responses confidential?** Every effort will be made to keep all information you provide in the strictest confidence. Your responses will be kept in a locked cabinet for the duration of the project and access will only be allowed to the researcher. Your name and any identifiable information will be altered in the results of the study and in any future publications as a means of further protecting your identity while still using

the valuable information you have shared. Furthermore, a copy of your interview transcription will be sent to you via email once the data collection is complete and interviews are transcribed. If there are any portions of the interview you wish to change in order to protect your confidentiality, you may do so and send it back to the researcher by the date designated in the email. These changes can be highlighted and sent back to the researcher via email as well. You may also highlight any portion of your transcription that you do not wish to be quoted later when the research project data analysis is reported. If you do not respond to the interview transcription email by the designated date, the researcher will assume that you do not wish to make any changes. At the conclusion of the study audiotapes will be destroyed. Confidentiality must be breached if there is any disclosure of suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts, any intention to harm yourself or others, or any credible evidence of child molestation or abuse, or spousal abuse.

**Will I be compensated for my participation?** Your participation is completely voluntary and there will be no compensation other than the researcher's appreciation for your time and participation.

**Do I have the freedom to withdraw?** You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. You also have the right to refuse to answer any questions and you may drop out at anytime.

**Approval of Research (Pending):** This project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

**If you have any questions about this research project, please** feel free to contact:

J.E.M.E.G. V. Dees, Principal Researcher
703-538-8355, jdees@vt.edu

Sandra M. Stith, Ph.D., Committee Chair
703-538-8362, sstith@vt.edu

Dr. David Moore, IRB Chair
540-231-4991, moored@vt.edu

**Participant's Permission**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project. I have read and understood the Informed Consent ad the conditions of this project. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for

participation in this project by signing my name on the line below. I realize that although I choose to participate right now, I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without any penalty.

Printed Name:
_____

Signature:
_____

Date: _____

Appendix F

Interview Guide

- Opening Questions – Defining the marriage
  - *Wife*- What do you enjoy most about being married to a professional athlete? *Husband* – What do you enjoy the most about being a married professional athlete? *Retired Players* – What did you enjoy most about being a married athlete while you were still playing?
- Stressors in the marriage
  - *Couple* – What are the biggest stressors in your marriage? *Retired Players* – What were the biggest stressors in your marriage while you were playing? Has that changed since your retirement? *All* - How have the two of you as a couple managed the tough parts?
  - *Couple* – How is your marriage different from or similar to what you expected when you got married?
- Resources in the marriage
  - *Couple* -What are the kinds of adjustments/compromises you feel you must make (e.g. making decisions, handling parenting, emergencies)? How were you able to make those adjustments/compromises? *Retired Players* – Have those adjustments/compromises changed since your retirement?
  - *Couple* –How has your spouse helped to make this a good marriage?
  - *Couple* - When your partner is away and you have a problem what do you do?
  - *Couple* –How important has community been in your marriage? (family, friends, church members?)
- Final Thought

What recommendations might you have for managing family and professional career for "rookie" families?

Supplemental Section

- For Parents
  - *Wife*- How does your husband's career affect your role as a parent? *Husband* - How does your career affect your role as a parent? *Retired Players* – Before you retired how did your career influence your role as a parent?
  - *Couple* - How difficult is it for you to stay connected with children? What do you do? *Retired Players*- How did you stay connected with your children? What did you do?