

**The Career Developments of Two World Champion Boxers:  
Interpretive Thematic Analysis of Media Stories**

by

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## **Abstract**

Athlete development can be described through transitions that mark turning phases throughout athletes' careers. Media data was utilized in this project to unpack the career developments of two prominent world champion boxers from their early lives to world championship status. Employing interpretive thematic analysis, five themes were identified: (1) weathering hardships of early life (subthemes: the rough life of an inner-city kid; abject poverty in war-torn Philippines), (2) entry into sport (subthemes: groomed to fight; boxing to escape poverty), (3) amateur experience (subthemes: Olympic medallist en route to the pros; struggling amateur with dreams of greatness), (4) launching a professional career (impressive American prospect; a charismatic unpolished slugger) and (5) capturing a world title (subthemes: the much-anticipated world champion; the unexpected world champion). This exploration augments our understanding of how two world-renowned boxers presented their career transitions to the world, with implications for boxers and those who work with them.

*Keywords:* boxing; brand; career development; career transition; athletic identity; media data; thematic analysis

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and providing me with room and board, to subsidizing much of my hefty medical expenses and tuition costs, to offering me emotional support and motivation when I required it most, she has been the person who has quite literally kept me going throughout this journey. I also thank other members of my family and close social circle for their positivity and your motivational words in trying to spur me on towards completion at times when I was beginning to lose hope.

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## Chapter One:

### Introduction

Professional boxing is a sport characterized by high drama, brutality, and controversy. A boxing match, also known as a bout, consists of two combatants, shirtless and gloved, pitted against one another in a contest of pugilistic skills, physical prowess, and attrition. Professional bouts are filled with spectacular violence, juxtaposed with an artful exhibition of skill and the beauty of the human form. The naked drama of boxing has long excited and inspired the societies in which it has been practiced. One of the oldest known sporting contests, artful depictions of boxing matches found on stone reliefs have been dated back to third millennium BC Mesopotamia and Egypt (Boddy, 2008; Woodward, 2014). Great writers of classical antiquity made frequent references to boxing, such as in Homer's *Iliad* (750 BC) and *Odyssey* (725 BC) and Virgil's *Aeneid* (19 BC) (Boddy, 2008). Boxing, especially its modern professional variant, continues to engender a cultural fascination, particularly in the Western world, evidenced in the still frequent depictions of boxing in media, including visual and literary arts (Woodward, 2014). Perhaps the most salient evidence of this fascination is found in the frequent release of major Hollywood films that feature a protagonist immersed in the world of professional boxing. Recent examples include: *Creed* (2015), *Southpaw* (2015), and *Hands of Stone* (2016).

Along with their cinematic counterparts, real-life professional boxers have also historically had an ability to capture the attention and admiration of both sports fans and the general public alike. In fact, many of the most iconic athletes in the history of modern sport emerged from boxing. Perhaps the most salient example is the late Muhammad Ali (born

Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr.), who, in 1999, was named “Sportsman of the Century” by *Sports Illustrated* and “Sports Personality of the Century” by the *BBC*. Ali and several other historic boxers, such as Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Ray Robinson, and Mike Tyson are sporting icons whose names have become synonymous with the sport of boxing. Through media portrayals of their remarkable successes and compelling stories, eminent boxers have had the ability to excite fans and capture the imagination of the public to become recognized worldwide as both great athletes and ambassadors of sport.

### **1.1 The Richest Prize in all of Sport**

Of all the accolades a boxer might accrue over the course of his career, perhaps the most recognizable and appreciated of achievements is the world boxing championship – or world title. Traditionally, a boxer wins a world boxing title by challenging and defeating the current world champion to become his successor: the *new* world champion. Though four major sanctioning bodies issuing world titles currently exist in professional boxing (i.e., WBA, WBC, IBF, WBO), a boxer who unifies the titles, or who upsets the reigning undisputed world champion, becomes regarded as the “lineal” world champion in his respective weight class. The lineal world champion represents the best boxer, and the recognized “king,” of his respective weight division, be he lightweight, middleweight, or heavyweight, etc. The prestige surrounding a world boxing championship has, historically, tended to be greater for the heavier weight divisions; the world heavyweight championship was, at one time, known by the epithet “the richest prize in all of sport.” That said, periods of drought with respect to talent and excitement in the heavyweight division have often coincided with periods of surging talent and excitement in the lighter divisions, allowing boxers in those lighter divisions, such as the welterweight and

middleweight divisions, to fall into greater favour and appreciation among sport fans.

What has not fluctuated with the changing times, however, is the profound meaning that a world championship title carries for those who have been talented and fortunate enough to win one. In the words of boxing writer, William Dettloff (1999):

For a fighter, there is no greater accomplishment than winning a world title. It represents the culmination of everything he was worked toward in a life dedicated to his art. It speaks to his talent, of course, but even more so to his sacrifice, his pain, and his dedication. It is recognition. (p. 27)

## **1.2 The Global Poor Man's Game**

Though the sport has taken on a somewhat nostalgic quality in the West where its popularity has dwindled over the past several decades, boxing's reach remains truly global with boxers hailing from an eclectic assortment of national, ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds – most often from disadvantaged homes. (Heiskanen, 2012). Athletes from all over the world take up boxing at a young age, and many of those who show promise eventually specialize in the sport to compete at an elite level. Boxers have often, though not always, come from humble beginnings, raised in financially challenged homes with little opportunity for sumptuous activities. Conditions of economic deprivation and social isolation can foster feelings of desperation in young would-be boxers, creating a strong desire to excel beyond their circumstances, fuelled by the promise of success, notoriety, and large monetary rewards (Schinke, 2004). Throughout its modern history, boxing has been utilized as a vehicle for upward social mobility (Heiskanen, 2012). It's been suggested that, since its revival during the English golden age (see Boddy, 2008), boxing has, perhaps more than any other sport, provided a social commentary on issues

of group identity (e.g., race, ethnicity) and class in society. The particular success of any identity group in the professional boxing ring seems to have historically correlated with that group's marginalization and economic deprivation within the societies they inhabited. In the British and American contexts, these groups have included the Irish, followed by the Jews, then the Italians, and most recently, African-American and Hispanic fighters (who are still overrepresented in the boxing ring today) (Woodward, 2014). Acting on the desire to transcend their class and the circumstances of their birth – what Wacquant (1995) called *ontological transcendence* – many young boxers, typically those who have achieved some level of success as amateurs, turn professional in the hopes of becoming professional world boxing champions and enjoying the notoriety and lavish lifestyle that are available to boxers of the most elite status. Tragically, very few boxing hopefuls are able to achieve such a transformation of status through a professional boxing career. Most make little money in the sport, have short careers, and retire into occupations commensurate with their level of education and social origins – either working-class or lower middle-class (Gems, 2014).

### **1.3 High Risk-High Reward**

At the highest levels of the sport, professional boxing is both lucrative and high-risk. Professional boxing operates as an unrestrained free market with no centralized regulatory body, and without the existence of boxers' unions or other special legal protections for boxers to ensure liveable wages, which allows for tremendous levels of inequality between boxers. Inequalities are present even at the onset of boxers' professional careers, in terms of the financial backing, experienced management, and expert professional assistance that is guaranteed to some boxers throughout their

transition into professional boxing but not to most. Athletes at the pinnacle of the professional boxing world possess the status to fill large stadiums with tens of thousands of paying spectators, as well as attract *Pay-per-view* television audiences in the millions to garner massive revenues (Fried, 2004; Tenorio, 2000). At the highest echelons of contemporary professional boxing, boxers have been known to fill stadiums and amass a paying television audience of millions, receiving pay in excess of \$20 million for a single bout (Tenorio, 2000); in highly anticipated matchups, boxing's true superstars have been able to generate revenues in excess of \$100 million for a single bout (Heiskanen, 2012). In stark contrast to the otherworldly earnings collected by boxing's biggest names, relatively unknown boxers competing in untelevised bouts often make as little as \$100 per round (before necessary deductions to trainers, managers, etc.) (Heiskanen, 2012). In this way, the professional boxing landscape resembles a steep hierarchical pyramid with a razor thin peak that flares out to form a very broad base – success is rare and extravagant, failure is commonplace and grim.

The degree to which a professional boxer is able to climb the ladder of success in his sport is mediated not only by his talent and effectiveness in the ring but also by his marketability. Given the sport's current structure, high profile (i.e., televised) bouts that lead to exposure and recognition are offered to boxers with public appeal – both talented and highly marketable. A boxer's public appeal is directly linked to his reputation in the sport, which is built over the course of a career and is strongly correlated with the quality of his performances in last several bouts, as well the magnetism of his publicized media persona or "brand." It is only boxers who are both effective in the boxing ring and at attracting viewership that reach a state of eminence in boxing. Although a boxer's

earnings are typically guaranteed to the boxer before a bout, the boxer's performance in each bout can have a significant impact on his future earnings and security in the sport (Hauser, 1986). Moreover, setbacks in professional boxing can come at a great cost as a single poor performance can damage a boxer's credibility, lowering his status and public appeal, thus making him less marketable to boxing promoters (Schinke, 2004; Tenorio, 2000). In addition, losses in the boxing ring can also come at a tremendous physical (Zazryn, McCrory, & Cameron, 2009) and psychological (Uphill & Dray, 2009) cost to the boxer. While credibility and public appeal may be at least partially rejuvenated with one or more great performances, opportunities to compete in monumental bouts can diminish as a consequence of a prior poor performance.

#### **1.4 The Boxer's Career**

The boxer's career is unique in several respects. One salient feature of professional boxing not yet mentioned, distinguishing it from most other professional sports, is the frequency in which the athlete competes. Professional boxers who are well managed have their bouts scheduled in accordance with an individualized development plan designed by their support-staff, which often includes a nutritionist, strength and conditioning coach, mental training coach, an assistant technical coach, head coach, as well as more general management (Schinke, 2004). Bouts are physically and psychologically draining, requiring ample time for athlete recovery; they cannot be fought on a weekly basis. Instead bouts are staggered with time between successive bouts ranging from six weeks, near the beginning of the boxer's career, to six months or more for experienced professionals. Professional boxers near the pinnacle of the sport nearly always have win-loss records that demonstrate over 30 wins, relatively few to no losses,

and have often (though not necessarily) won a significant percentage of their bouts by way of knockout (Schinke, et al., 2012). The professional boxing career also differs greatly from the amateur boxing career in terms of rules, regulations, competition frequency and structure (i.e., tournament vs. single bout) so that talented amateur boxers do not necessarily make good professional boxers, just as not all successful professional boxers were stand out amateurs. This implies an especially demanding transition from amateur to professional boxing.

For any avid fan of professional boxing, it is apparent that the careers of elite boxers can be seen as comprising several developmental stages through which the athlete must transition in order to progress forward in his career. It is suggested that the career development of a professional boxer can be understood according to the boxer's ability to progress through transitional challenges encountered throughout his career path. Schinke and Ramsay, (2009) and Schinke, et al. (2012), both demonstrate that part of what separates successful boxers from unsuccessful boxers is the willingness and ability to learn from each bout and enter into subsequent bouts with an enhanced understanding and control.

### **1.5 Purpose**

The purpose of the current project is to further the literature on athlete career developments into the context of elite professional boxing by examining storied media accounts of the careers of two world-renowned professional boxers, from their earliest involvements in boxing to the first monumental achievement of their professional careers – namely, winning a world boxing title. To do so, I explored media portrayals of the career developments of two iconic professional boxers, and the factors presented as

contributing to each boxer's ascension from obscurity to become world boxing champions. My hope was that a thorough examination of media data chronicling the parallel personal and athletic developments of two world champion boxers, with distinct biographies, would be useful in helping to better understand the shared experiences and idiosyncrasies presented as contributing to the career developments of the most elite professional boxers. The intent of this project was to further current knowledge of career development in the context of elite professional boxing, as *represented* in the storied media accounts of two prominent professional world champions.

### **1.6 Significance**

Research in sport psychology has yet to focus on the career developments of boxers over a multiyear timeline, from childhood to winning a world boxing title. Stambulova, Alfermann, Stalter, and Côté (2009) suggested that the existing models of athletes' careers provide a general outline and description of the athletic career that apply universally to elite athletes of different cultures, sports, and genders, etc. However, in order to gain a more in-depth and detailed understanding of career development in a specific athlete population (i.e., elite professional boxers), it is necessary that researchers narrow their focus to study these athletes exclusively in greater detail. Studying the career development of professional boxers, from total obscurity to world champion status, through storied media accounts was intriguing for three main reasons. Firstly, professional boxing is a unique sport context in ways that invite an investigation into the career development of elite professional boxers. These include professional boxing's free market structure, in which a boxer's success rests not only on their performances in the ring, but also on their ability to construct a marketable brand that appeals to the public;

the decreasing frequency of competition as boxers reach higher levels their careers; the enormous inequality between professional boxers, in terms of financial backing and expert professional assistance, even as they embark upon their careers; and professional boxing's high risk nature. Secondly, it provides further insight into the career developments of two prominent elite professional boxers, as *represented* through storied media accounts, and the factors put forth as influencing how boxers constitute their career paths towards a professional world boxing championship. The exploration of these sport media narratives offers both coaches and athletes insight into how the careers two world-renowned professional boxers were storied in the media and the factors put forth in media *representations* as contributing to the boxers' success in navigating transition challenges to reach world champion status. Boxers, sport psychology practitioners and support staffs may draw from this project's findings to inform their approach in guiding the careers of professional boxers, and assist these athletes in their developments through career transitions to ensure that athletes possesses the resources coping strategies necessary reach their potential in the sport. Finally, understanding the manner in which athletes present themselves and their experiences through media channels may prove helpful for current and prospective professional boxers, and their support staff, to understanding how to project their personal and athletic narratives to the public through sport media in a manner that reflects a strong athletic identity and helps to construct a compelling "brand."

### **1.7 Operational Definitions**

**Athletic career.** A succession of stages and transitions that includes the athlete's initiation into and continued participation in organized competitive sport and that is

terminated with the (in)voluntary but definitive discontinuation of participation in organized competitive sport (Wyllman, Theeboom, & Lavallee, 2004, p. 511).

**Career stage.** Temporal stage of an athlete's career, encapsulating a distinct period of an athlete's development in their chosen sport(s). Each career stage is associated with the athlete facing different demands and relying upon different resources (see Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush and Samela, 2002).

**Career transitions.** Transitional phases occurring over the course of an athletic career, from its beginning to its culmination, proposing challenges to the athlete, who must successfully adapt in order to progress (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). The challenges or stressors associated with professional career transition can be normative or non-normative in nature.

**Deliberate practice.** Deliberate practice refers to systematic and effortful engagement in activities that have been specially designed for the purpose of improving current levels of performance within a specific domain (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

**Eminence.** A personal attribute characterized by an individual's high degree of public acknowledgement, attained as a result of their significant achievements within a particular vocational or performance domain (e.g., sport, music, science, philanthropy) (Simonton, 1999, 2006).

**Media data.** A unique and multifarious source of data that has recently begun to see increasing use in the sport psychology literature. Media data can be approached from a positivist or post-positivist epistemology that treats the words found in media as representative of reality, or of the perspectival "realities" of the individual to

whom the words belong, and that something can be learned about individuals on the basis of words attributed to them in media portrayals (see Schinke, et al., 2012). Media data can also be approached from a social constructivist epistemology that sees the represented words of individuals as constructions that what can be learned from these data is how media constructs identities and forwards certain narratives at the subversion of others (see McGannon, Hoffmann, Metz, & Schinke, 2012). Media data can consist of digital and mass media (Millington & Wilson, 2016), which includes print publications, audio/video recordings (i.e., documentary films, miniseries, and television interviews), as well as posts on social media that are often informal, yet contain rich information useful in examining issues that might be difficult to explore using conventional data sources.

**Non-normative transition.** A transitional period that arises spontaneously during the athletic career, and is therefore less predictable, making it difficult for athletes to prepare for the transition in advance (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009).

**Normative transition.** A transitional period that occurs inherently as part of the athlete's career, allowing athletes to prepare in advance of the by anticipating the associated stressors in order to facilitate a successful transition (Stambulova et al., 2009).

**Professional boxing.** Also referred to as prizefighting, is a professional sport in which athletes fight with gloved fists over a number of predetermined rounds (max 12) for a monetary reward. A panel of judges determines the winner, however, a fight, or bout, can end prematurely in a stoppage, where one boxer is knocked out, deemed unable to continue, or disqualified.

**Quasi-normative transition.** A transitional period or event in athletes' careers that is predictable and can be prepared for in advance, but only for a identifiable subset of

athletes (e.g., National Team athletes competing in a world championships). (Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier, & Oghene, 2015)

**Thematic analysis.** A widely used qualitative research method analysis where researchers identify patterns within a data set, called themes that serve to address the specified research questions. This type of analysis, discussed by Braun and Clarke (2012), offers researchers flexibility in their approach to data analysis and does not necessitate any particular conceptual or theoretical framework: researchers may take an experiential or critical approach to qualitative data, coding of data can proceed inductively or deductively, and can either describe data in terms of its semantic meaning or can interpret latent meaning found in data.

**World-title bout.** A championship bout in professional boxing contested for possession of a world-title. The world titleholder (champion) attempts to defeat a challenger thereby defending and retaining his title. Conversely, the challenger seeks victory in dethroning the champion to become the new world titleholder.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Review of Literature**

Within this chapter, the reader will find a detailed review of the literature relevant to the examination of the career development of elite professional boxers. This will include a review of the general literature on talent development, research on the athletic career and its temporal stages, career transition literature, media data in sport psychology, psychological examinations of elite professional boxers, followed by a discussion of contentious issues that remain and the research questions that guided the current project.

#### **2.1 Athletic Career Development**

Research on career development in sport can be seen as having been an outgrowth of literature examining the acquisition of genius or talent in exceptional individuals throughout several spheres of achievement, including athletics. These researchers considered the development of talent in elite athletes as a series of stages leading to the acquisition of expert performance. Talent development researchers, most notably Bloom (1985), Ericsson (1996), and Côté (1999), studied athletes' development up until they reached their highest level of performance. The athletic career has been conceptualized as comprising a series of successive stages through which an athlete must transition in order to proceed forward in an athletic development. Transitions have since been acknowledged as occurring throughout and beyond the athletic career, in the form of transitional phases rather than single, discrete events, and are believed to involve the interaction of several different spheres of parallel development within the athlete's life (see Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), with athletes required to adapt to overcome

transitional demands encountered when attempting to graduate to a successive career stage.

### **2.1.1 Talent research and the identification of stages in athletes'**

**development.** The roots of research on athletic career development can be traced back to a literature examining talent in extraordinary achievers. Scholars and intellectuals have long conjectured and pontificated about the nature of remarkable talent and its determinants in eminent individuals; Sir Francis Galton's *Hereditary Genius* (1869) is widely credited as the first rigorous exploration of human ability from a hereditarianism perspective. Empirical talent development research examining the acquisition of performance excellence has greatly expanded over the last four decades (Stambulova, 2016). Early talent development researchers examined eminence (i.e., renowned ability) primarily in cognitive skill/knowledge-based domains such as chess (Chase & Simon, 1973), though later research expanded to explore talent in perceptual and motor skill-based domains like athletics (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2014). One of the pioneering researchers in athlete talent development was Bloom (1985) who studied the acquisition of superior functioning in several different fields of achievement, including athletics. Bloom sought to determine how and why certain exceptional individuals are able to acquire such a supreme level of talent in a given field. He conducted in-depth interviews with 120 eminent Americans, including Olympic swimmers, star tennis players, concert pianists, sculptors, mathematicians, and neurologists. In these interviews, the participants discussed their early beginnings through to their highest level of achievement. The results of this study indicate that talent development in these extraordinary individuals requires a

minimum of twelve years of dedication to learning and improvement in their chosen field.

Bloom (1985) was also able to identify distinct developmental stages through which all these exceptional people appeared to progress on the road toward excellence: the early years (initiation), the middle years (development), and the late years (mastery), followed by a discontinuation phase. The *early years* are characterized by fun, playful activities, with athletes often participating in more than one sporting activity and relying heavily on adults (i.e., parents and coaches) for support and guidance throughout this stage. The *middle years* describe the stage when athletes, with the moral and financial support of parents/guardians, become more dedicated to their sport and performance-orientated by increasing their level of specialization and training volume in one or two sports, withdrawing from or minimizing participation in others. These years correspond with a shift in identity as athletes begin self-identifying as “swimmers” or “tennis players,” rather than as individuals who merely participate in those activities. Finally, athletes reach the *late years* when they attain their highest level of athletic excellence. At this stage, athletes are highly motivated to perform at their absolute best, taking primary control of their own athletic improvement; coaches assume a more managerial role whereas parents are even less involved. Bloom (1985) emphasized that in all of the participants, the quality and amount of social support and guidance they received, particularly as children, from parents and teachers/coaches played a central role in their successful development.

Bloom was not the only researcher to study the development of talent in exceptional performers. Many researchers carried Bloom’s work forward with elite

athletes. Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993), building on Bloom's research, investigated the development of exceptional performers and proposed a general requirement of 10000 hours of "deliberate practice" in the acquisition of expert performance. Deliberate practice refers to effortful engagement in activities that have been specially designed for the purpose of improving current levels of performance within a specific domain (Ericsson, et al., 1993). Though the 10000-hour rule was ascertained primarily from studies of expert musicians, Ericsson's research suggested that the required amount of deliberate practice in a given domain corresponds to approximately 10 years of structured development within that domain – similar to the 12-year minimum suggested by Bloom. Focusing exclusively on athletes, Côté (1999) also examined how elite athletes developed talent throughout their careers to achieve excellence in their sport, proposing a developmental model of expertise. Similar to Bloom, Côté uncovered a series of developmental stages that appeared to comprise an athlete's career up to their highest level of achievement. Côté identified the stages of *sampling* – analogous to Bloom's initiation stage, followed by *specializing* – resembling Bloom's development stage, and finally *investment* – which corresponds to Bloom's mastery stage, except that Côté's stages are more specific to the context of sport, having studied the development of athletes exclusively. Also of particular interest to Côté was the influence of family in contributing to talent development, which he viewed as instrumental and changing over the course of an athlete's development.

Extending beyond the stage of investment, Durand-Bush and Samela (2002) studied returning Olympic and World Champion athletes, augmenting Côté's work with the introduction of a fourth stage called maintenance, wherein the athlete has reached the

highest level of expertise in their sport yet continues to train and compete with a focus on improving performances in order to remain at the pinnacle of their sport. Durand-Bush and Samela found that athletes in the maintenance stage were required to be creative and innovative, developing new tactics and skills in order to prevent performance stagnation and keep an edge on competitors. They also found that while some factors relevant to athletes' development varied in their expression between individual athletes, others were consistent, including: the positive influence on athletes of the sport context in which they were immersed, the importance of several social resources (e.g., parents, coaches, other athletes), the reduced role of parental figures in later states of athletes' development. Together, the work of the aforementioned talent development researchers stressed that the development of exceptionally talented individuals, including athletes, begins early in their lives and is a product of focused, structured practice over many years; in addition to strong social support and guidance from family, coaches, mentors, and peers, whose roles in relation to the athletes evolve as the athletes proceed in their development.

**2.1.2 The athletic career and career transitions.** Alfermann and Stambulova (2007) defined the athletic career as “a succession of stages and transitions that includes the athlete’s initiation into and continued participation in organized competitive sport” (p. 713). These transitions are seen as turning phases in which athletes are faced with several demands, challenging the athlete to respond with effective coping strategies in order to overcome these demands (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011). Sport psychology researchers investigating the struggles associated with career termination were among the first to consider career transitions in sport (e.g., Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). What followed was a

shift in perspective on athlete retirement as researchers began interpreting career termination as a complex transitional process, as opposed to a discrete stressful event in an athlete's life. With the view of athlete career termination as a transitional process, sport psychology researchers, during the 1990s, began to investigate other significant transitions occurring over the span of athletes' careers (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004).

Stambulova (1994) studied the transitions occurring in the careers of over 200 elite Russian athletes and developed an original stage model of the athletic career. Stambulova identifies six "critical points", a term used to describe the predictable transitional phases in the athletic career that were found to be associated with defined difficulties, important for athletes to overcome. These transitional phases that emerged from her research were: (1) the beginning of sports specialization, (2) the transition to special intensive training in the chosen sport, (3) the transition from junior mass popular sports to senior high achievement sports, (4) the transition from amateur sports to professional sports, (5) the transition from the culmination to the end of the athletic career, and (6) the end of the athletic career. The identification of these critical points and corresponding transitions helped to broaden the focus of career transition research from a fixation on career termination to the entire athletic career and beyond, demonstrating that athletes experience the athletic career as a series of transitions that are intrinsic to their athletic development.

Initiating a shift toward a more holistic perspective towards athletic career development, Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) put forth a model exploring how developmental stages occurring in different spheres of athletes' lives (i.e., athletic,

psychological, psychosocial, and academic/vocational) interact to influence their progress in sport. Through their developmental model of the athletic career, Wylleman and colleagues emphasized a more broadened whole person/whole career approach, which acknowledges that important non-athletic transitions occur in an athlete's life that may interact constructively or destructively with transitions in the athlete's career to determine the course of their athletic development (Wylleman et al., 2004). Researchers taking this holistic lifespan consider the athletic career is both an important part of, and resource for, an individual's broader life. The frameworks proposed by the aforementioned athletic career development researchers come to the overarching conclusion that the athletic career of elite athletes exists as a series of career stages and that athletes must progress through a transitional phase in order to succeed to the next stage of their development. The knowledge brought forth in the athletic career development literature informed the current project's broad focus in exploring the career development and transitions of two eminent professional boxers as they were *represented* through media stories. In particular, the chosen scope of the project – from the boxers' early life and sport initiation to their first world title victories – was broad enough to identify a number of important transitions of interest. In addition, the shift in literature towards a holistic perspective influenced the consideration of factors outside the athletic career.

## **2.2 Media Data in Athletic Career Transitions Research**

Some sport psychology researchers have, in recent years, directed increased attention to sport media, in its various forms. Sport media encompasses *mass media*, including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc. and *digital media*, which includes user generated content on social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) (Millington &

Wilson, 2016). While research utilizing sport media has typically been the practice of sport sociologists (e.g., Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008; Crolley & Teso, 2007; Capranica, et al., 2005) and sport studies scholars, sport psychology researchers have turned to sport media both as a cultural site that represents athletes and sport in meaningful ways (McGannon & McMahon, 2016) and as a channel providing rich access to the words of elite amateur and professional athletes (Battochio et al., 2013).

Sport psychology researchers have utilized media data as a tool with which to explore athletes' career experiences through their *represented* words. Media data has been employed in several qualitative studies exploring the internal and external adaptation processes of athletes in relation to transition stressors encountered in their careers. Schinke, Gauthier, Dubuc, and Crowder (2007) and Battochio, Schinke, Battochio, Halliwell, and Tenenbaum (2010) utilized media data to explore the adaptation processes of NHL athletes to stressors encountered as rookies – corresponding to the career stage of “investment” and transition from amateur to professional sport – and later as veterans – corresponding to the career stage of “maintenance” and the transition from culmination to end of the athletic career. A similar approach was taken by Schinke, et al. (2008) in a study of Canadian Olympians' adaptation processes as they prepared in lead up to the Olympic tournament, as either promotion athletes (first time Olympian qualifiers) or retention athletes (Olympic veterans). In these studies, contextual experts were enlisted as co-researchers to assist in interpreting and clarifying the words of the athletes *represented* in sport media; a number of themes were found in the represented words of athletes that signify adaptation strategies exhibited by athletes, which corresponded to their career stage. The work of these sport psychology researchers

helped to establish that media data can act as a viable tool through which to gain insight into the experiences of athletes as they encounter stressors in relation to career transitions.

Researchers with an interest in sport media have also considered the role of media in promoting certain identities and narratives to the subversion of others, and its power to shape attitudes and culture (Millington & Wilson, 2016). To study sport media, a number of researchers have adopted a social-constructionist perspective and view media as a cultural site that is involved in: the forwarding of narratives that help shape the sociocultural context of elite sport, and in the construction of athlete identities (McGannon, Hoffman, Metz, & Schinke, 2012). As McGannon and McMahon (2016) note, research of this kind fits within the emerging genre of cultural sport psychology, in which athletic identities are “conceptualized as the product of individual, social, and cultural narratives which interact to create particular meanings concerning cultural identities” (p. 44). Sport psychology researchers who utilize media data to study athlete career transitions have more recently demonstrated a greater appreciation of sport media as a cultural site that plays a significant role in constructing and shaping athletes’ identities, and the understanding that career transitions cannot be understood outside the cultural context in which the athlete is immersed (Cosh, Crabb, & Tully, 2015). Schinke, et al. (2012) examined the transition processes of professional boxers competing in Showtime’s Super Six World Boxing Classic and found that a boxers’ success or failure to adapt to tournament demands could be understood in terms of how boxers’ identities were constructed through media portrayals. Research has carried on in this direction of examining media representations of athletes’ transition experiences with recent examples

including Cosh, et al. (2015) in their exploration of the transition to retirement of two Australian Olympic Swimmers, and McGannon, McMahon, Schinke, and Gonsalves (2017) in their study of professional tennis player Kim Clijsters' transition back into sport following childbirth to win the 2009 U.S. Open. This research has been significant to further understandings of sport media as having a role in the construction of athlete identities, with media influencing the way athletes are perceived by the public as well as the way athletes view themselves.

### **2.3 The Context and Contentious Issues**

One elite sport that has received relatively little attention in the career development literature up to this point is professional boxing. The sport of professional boxing is a compelling venue in which to study career development due to the high-stakes nature of the sport, characterized by the pressures to excel and the dire consequences for failure (Schinke et al., 2012). Schinke and Ramsay (2009) noted that an important part of success as a professional boxer is the ability to learn from each previous bout and systematically implement these lessons during training in order to approach each subsequent bout with an enhanced level of understanding and control. Schinke and Ramsay suggested that in the early stages of the professional boxing career, the athlete's use of either adaptive or mal-adaptive strategies, in response to their performance stress, is a key contributor to how the athletes will perform when they face opponents who are equally matched. This implies that in order to be successful and improve beyond this period, it's necessary that athletes continue to utilize effective strategies in dealing with the challenges faced throughout their career developments. Athletes committed to this

approach give themselves a greater chance of both reaching and maintaining marquee status in the world of professional boxing.

One of the significant challenges faced by professional boxers is encountered when the boxer turns professional, namely his transition from amateur to professional boxing; one of the six normative athletic career transitions identified by Stambulova (1994, 2000). The transition from amateur to professional sport requires adaptation to the specific demands and regulations of professional sport. According to Stambulova (1994), these demands and regulations include competing against equally matched opponents, the necessity to win but to do so in a way that is exciting and beautiful to appeal to spectators, and the necessity for individual or independent training. Stambulova also noted that additional problems may appear if, for example, an athlete signs a contract with a foreign club or league, which may require adaptation to the social and cultural norms of another country as well as gaining proficiency in a new language (Battocchio, et al., 2013). Due to the vastness of the divide between amateur and professional variants of boxing, this transition can be an especially challenging one for many boxers. The foregoing literature has provided researchers with the opportunities to uncover a great deal about how athletic career developments, how they differ between athletes of different sports and skill level, and the consequences of successful and unsuccessful transitions to the athlete. Yet despite the advances in this line of research over the last decade, several issues remain unexplored. These issues include 1) a limited understanding of career development in the context of elite professional boxing, which is warranted given the many particularities (Stambulova, 2009). While transitions have been explored over the course of a novel professional boxing tournament (Schinke, et al., 2012)

and the Olympic boxing cycle (Schinke, et al., 2015), researchers have not until now examined the career developments of boxers from their early lives up until their first world title victory. Given boxing's place as a global sport wherein elite professional bouts often generate tens of millions of dollars or more revenue (Tenorio, 2000), new understandings garnered from the exploration of boxers' career development over the timeline in question could have widespread appeal and be of value to sport researchers, professional boxers, and those who work with them. And 2) a lack of research investigating the differential career paths and experiences of professional boxers through storied media accounts in a culturally informed and holistic approach, considering contextual factors such as the influence of sociocultural norms and values. This project was undertaken to explore the internal and external factors credited as necessary to reaching the pinnacle of professional boxing, and in the construction of boxers' athletic identities and public brands as presented through storied media accounts.

While success will be considered in relation to the athlete's career as a professional boxer, it is assumed that athletes draw upon resources extending beyond sport and into other domains of their lives. Empirical evidence of this holistic nature of adaptation in elite athletes is found in research by Schinke, Battocchio, and colleagues examining adaptation in elite amateur and professional athletes (e.g., Battocchio et al., 2010; Schinke et al., 2008, 2007). The two athletes to be examined in current study have reached a state of eminence as the most accomplished and iconic professional boxers of their time. It is suggested here that an in-depth examination of these eminent boxers' careers can help to delineate these athletes' career paths and the factors represented as attributing to their success in attaining a world boxing title. This information may also

prove extremely useful to current and prospective professional boxers, as well as their coaching staff, by allowing them to draw lessons from the media stories of these two world-renowned professional boxers' career developments, and carry those lessons forward into their own careers.

#### **2.4 Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) What career developments were *represented* (i.e., storied by members of the media based on their interpretations of the boxers' words) through sports media in relation to two world-renowned boxers, as they progressed from childhood to world champions?
- (2) What stories offered from boxers, in relation to their sport and personal lives, did the media *represent* as contributing to their world championship status?

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Methodology**

The current chapter outlines the methodology of the current project, beginning with a section describing the context of professional boxing in relation to the design of the research, which includes an introduction to the athletes under study and to myself as the researcher. The chapter continues with a section on media data, outlining why the use of media data was in line with the purpose of this study, and includes examples in the literature where this type of data has proved invaluable. Finally, this chapter concludes with sections describing the methods of data collection and the interpretative thematic analysis that were employed. This study featured the words of two world champion professional boxers, their support staff, and boxing writers, collected through various sport media sources. The analysis of this media data entailed a qualitative approach, via an interpretive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) to identify themes that emerged from the athletes' media stories relevant to their career developments.

#### **3.1 Context Setting**

Professional boxing is a sport characterized by a violent and furious fistful exchange between two boxers. Contests involve two gloved, shirtless athletes, each attempting to better their opponent in a battle of skill, physical prowess, and attrition. Research on professional boxing suggests that it is a compelling context in which to study athlete career development and transitions. Professional boxers face a number of challenges associated with career transition, the consequences of which are both physical (Zazryn, McCrory, & Cameron, 2009) and psychological (Uphill & Dray, 2009). The path to world championship status in professional boxing is one that requires many years

of dedication and careful navigation through a number of transitional phases, each posing its own challenges. As demonstrated by Schinke et al. (2012), reaching championship status requires athletes to be able to utilize effective strategies before, during, and after crucial performances or performance events (i.e., tournament). Misguided strategies led to undesirable performances and negative consequences for boxers, regardless of their level of talent. Very few boxers who embark upon a professional boxing career are able to reach world championship status or accrue any level of fame or notoriety. A tiny minority of boxers, however, do flourish over the course of their development to capture world boxing titles, thereby reaching the pinnacle of their sport.

**3.1.1 The athletes.** The athletes chosen as ideal for the purposes of this project were two world-renowned professional boxers, Floyd Mayweather Jr. (USA) and Manny Pacquiao (Philippines). I chose these athletes because 1) they are unquestionably the most eminent and recognizable boxers of the last decade and thus have enormous represented in sport media. Two other factors that made the examination of these particular boxers' careers through media data especially interesting were 2) the parallel nature of their careers, with the athletes being born a year apart, and both turning professional and winning their first world boxing titles at roughly the same time; and 3) each athlete originating from vastly different cultural contexts and with different national sporting systems and norms. These factors allowed for a fascinating analysis of the athletes' careers, as they emerged from contrasting cultural backgrounds and national origins to progress along coinciding timelines toward the same destination (a world boxing championship). *Floyd Mayweather, Jr.* is an undefeated American boxing champion. An Olympic silver medalist in 1996, Mayweather went on to win 15 world

titles in five different weight divisions and has been the “lineal” (i.e. undisputed, universally recognized) champion in four of those five weight divisions. Mayweather has received a number of accolades including being named ‘Fighter the Year’ multiple times, by *Ring* magazine and the Boxing Writers Association of America (BWAA), and, up until his recent retirement, was rated as the number one pound-for-pound fighter in the world by several major boxing and sport media giants (e.g. *Ring* magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, ESPN, etc.). He is also widely regarded as one of the greatest defensive boxers of all time. *Manny Pacquiao* is a world champion boxer from the Philippines. His accomplishments include being the first and only eight-division world champion, becoming the lineal champion in five of those divisions – the first to achieve this feat as well. Pacquiao was named “Fighter of the Decade” (2000-2009) by the BWAA, the World Boxing Council (WBC), and World Boxing Organization (WBO). Like Mayweather, Pacquiao was also considered the pound-for-pound best fighter in the world for several years. The mean age of these boxers is 39 years. Their combined boxing record is 109 wins in 118 bouts, 7 losses, and 2 draws with 65 wins by knockout.

**3.1.2 Situating myself as the researcher.** The study of the career development in the context of elite professional boxing was of great personal interest to me, due to my background as an elite amateur boxer and as an avid fan of professional boxing. My initial acquaintance with boxing began in childhood when I developed a fascination with professional heavyweight boxing after having viewed a live bout on television. This fascination eventually inspired me to join a local boxing club in 2004 and embark upon an amateur boxing career of my own. I did so under the tutelage of a former National Team coach with Olympic/World Championship experience, and with experience as a

professional boxing trainer. After competing as an amateur boxer for roughly 8 years, I amassed over 50 bouts and represented Canada on more than one occasion, including, most notably, at the 2009 Jeux de la Francophonie (Francophone Games) in Beirut, Lebanon where I received a bronze medal. On a number of instances, I had the opportunity to train and spar with professional boxers at various levels, including national titleholders. Over the course of my amateur career, I gained a substantial amount of practice in interacting with local media, including newspaper reporters and journalists. In addition to competing as an athlete, I adopted the role of a coaching assistant, which often entailed running recreational boxing classes wherein I would orchestrate training sessions, supervising and instructing more novice athletes, and in 2011 I completed a NCCP level 1 coaching clinic with Boxing Ontario. After finishing my undergraduate education, which culminated with an honours thesis on the biomechanics of the boxer's punch, I entered graduate school and began studying psychological adaptation to transitions in elite professional boxing.

I approached the current project from the perspective of a former amateur boxer with a long-standing interest in high-level professional boxing. My background as an elite amateur boxer, together with my knowledge of professional boxing, afforded me a contextual familiarity with boxing subculture that greatly assisted in this research, and was necessary for me to contextualize the words of athletes, coaching staff, and boxing writers and interpreting their meanings in relation to the research questions.

Throughout this project, I was granted the oversight of my graduate supervisor, Dr. Robert Schinke. Dr. Schinke is a sport psychology researcher and professional consultant with over 20 years of experience working with professional boxers at various

stages of their careers, from embarking upon a professional career to defending their world title on a major television broadcast (e.g., HBO, Showtime). He has, therefore, gained experience in consulting with, and offering psychological assistance to, athletes facing or in the midst of career transition. Dr. Schinke's supervision allowed me to carry out this project from a position of contextual expertise, given our combined understanding of elite boxing's subculture and accumulated experience working media in our respective capacities.

### **3.2 Media Data.**

In order to further understandings of how professional boxers navigate through challenges to constitute their individual career paths, I employed a unique and underutilized data source: media data. The type of media data utilized for this project is known as mass sport media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, books, audio/video recordings) (Millington & Wilson, 2016). Sport media provided me with access to the words of two world champion professional boxers and their handlers through media *representations*, which allowed me to investigate the boxers' development over a significant duration of their careers: from early life to winning a professional world boxing title. The use of media data has been adopted in recent years by sport psychology researchers interested in how media portrayals play a role in constructing athletes' identities and shaping cultural expectations of athletes (McGannon, et al., 2012; McGannon, et al., 2017). In the current project, media data was utilized to gain access to the words of two world champion professional boxers and their support networks, which provided storied media accounts of these athletes' career development, to better understand the factors put forth as contributing to their success through each developmental stage.

In their study examining psychological adaptation of professional boxers through the Super Six World Boxing Classic, Schinke et al. (2012) successfully utilized media data to delineate the adaptation/maladaptation processes of these boxers over the course of the tournament. Given the contextual similarities of the study by Schinke and colleagues in terms of the sport context (professional boxing), the athletes (elite professional boxers), and the phenomenon of interest (career transition experiences), I, with the direction of my graduate supervisor, determined that the use of media data was most appropriate for this project. In particular, media data allowed me to collect boxer narratives at different stages of these boxers' careers. In the current project, media data consisted of published media narratives taken from print magazines (*Ring & Sports Illustrated*), documentary films and miniseries, television interviews, online newspaper articles, and boxing information websites, relevant to the career development experiences of the two boxers chosen for investigation. Although the time period considered in this project culminates with each athletes' first world title wins in 1998, the media data I collected spanned years 1996-2015. This was important because the athletes were granted modest representation in sport media until well after their first world title victories. Incorporating more recent media data into the analysis, together with media data from the period in question, featured the words of the athletes reflecting on their careers retrospectively, as well as commenting contemporaneously in the lead up to or following significant performances, which provided me with a much larger and more robust data set. These data resembled athlete responses from semi-structured or conversational interviews.

**3.2.1 Print publications.** Print sources comprised magazine and journal that contained articles on the boxers Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Manny Pacquiao. The two primary print sources were *Ring* magazine and *Sports Illustrated*. *Ring* magazine was launched on Feb 15, 1922 as the first-ever publication dedicated to the sport of boxing. Due to the magazine's long history and continued dedication to covering the top stories in professional boxing, it has acquired the appellation: "the bible of boxing." Upon *Ring*'s creation, the guiding principles set forth for the magazine were: to speak for, fight for, foster, build-up, and perpetuate the sport of boxing. This monthly publication grew from a newsletter-like pamphlet to become a full-fledged magazine with international distribution, eventually published in both English and Spanish. The *Ring* is held in high regard within the boxing community. The publication even awards its own championship belts to professional boxers who it deems have proven to be the undisputed, linear champions of their respective weight division. In fact, many of the top professional boxers prefer to showcase their *Ring* magazine belt during public appearances (e.g., press conferences) as opposed to the belt(s) issues by the major sanctioning bodies, due to the status the *Ring* belt implies. The *Ring* also provides rankings for boxers in each weight class and awards such as fighter of the year, fight of the year, upset of the year, and knockout of the year. I chose *Ring* magazine as the print publication most suitable for this study because 1) it is undoubtedly the world's most prominent and respected boxing magazine, 2) it focuses exclusively on boxing and therefore contained more in-depth coverage of the boxers chosen for investigation as opposed to a publication covering a variety of sports, and 3) it provided a more in-depth look at development in the career of

the athlete through long form profile pieces, more than what can be found in daily newspaper accounts.

The other primary print source was *Sports Illustrated* magazine. First launched on August 16, 1954, *Sports Illustrated* is one of the most popular weekly magazines of any kind in North America with over three million subscribers and 23 million weekly readers. Though *Sport Illustrated* covers a variety of popular North American sports, professional boxing is regularly included in its coverage. The magazine offers in-depth sports reporting from some of the most prominent sportswriters and has been honoured with several awards, including the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Magazine Coverage Overall and the National Magazine Award for General Excellence. Professional boxing is a sport that has received significant coverage in *Sports Illustrated* since the magazine's inception with 134 issues with a boxing-related cover story between years 1954 and 2009. I determined *Sports Illustrated* to be an appropriate print source for the purpose of this project due to 1) the magazine's high editorial quality, 2) excellent reputation regarding its boxing coverage, 3) and considerable coverage of the two athletes examined in this study.

**3.2.2 Video and web-based media data.** The current project also included data from other media including recorded television interviews, documentary films (e.g., Manny) and miniseries (e.g., 24/7, All Access), online newspaper articles (retrieved from cbssports.com, latimes.com, inquirer.net, dailymail.co.uk, espn.go.com), and online boxing databases and encyclopaedias (e.g., boxrec.com). I accessed the aforementioned sport media in video format, such as the televised interviews and documentaries, through online purchase or viewed them through free video streaming websites such as YouTube,

when available. Articles from online versions of newspapers and biographical information from web-based boxing encyclopaedias were accessed online at their respective web addresses. This data, together with print sources, was essential to cultivating a rich and robust dataset, and was very useful in acquiring additional information about each boxer, including biographical details, boxer win-loss records, and information relevant to the athletes' boxing careers before achieving sufficient media recognition and coverage. These data served to augment and support those collected through print and digital media sources in order to deepen the understanding of each boxer's career and their unique backgrounds.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Data were pulled from articles published in print publications, located and accessed utilizing library and online resources. Video and web-based digital media were retrieved online, including online editions of newspaper articles and boxing encyclopaedias (e.g., boxrec.com), as well as television interviews, documentaries, and documentary series that I either purchased online through iTunes or viewed using video streaming websites (e.g., YouTube). The data collection procedure I followed can be detailed in six steps. First, I performed a search through the Laurentian University online library databases (accessed through <http://laurentian.ca/library>) to identify print sources featuring the athletes under study. This included issues of *Ring* magazine and *Sports Illustrated* that contained articles on either of the athletes under investigation. From the library home page, I navigated to the SPORTDiscus database (Library Databases>Human Kinetics>SPORTDiscus), providing user name and password information to pass through the proxy. Once in the SPORTDiscus database the names of Floyd Mayweather OR

Manny Pacquiao along with the International Standard Serial Number of the *Ring* magazine (0035-5410) and *Sports Illustrated* (0038-822X) were entered into the search fields before selecting the search button. Second, a document containing a list of all the articles (including volume, issue, page number) returned by the searches was generated using MS Word. This included articles as far back as 1996 and as recent as 2015, for reasons provided in the above section on media data. Third, these articles listed were located in person, photocopied, and skimmed through to assess their content's relevancy to the current project. I retrieved the articles available at the JN Desmarais library of Laurentian University, which included articles issues of *Sports Illustrated*, while remaining articles were retrieved at Toronto Reference Library, including all articles in issues of *Ring* magazine. After skimming through all retrieved articles, I determined which of them contained content germane to the aims of the project. Fourth, photocopies of the relevant articles were read through carefully and emergent quotations from athletes, coaching and support staff, and boxing writers were transcribed into a Word document. Fifth, I performed a series of web searches containing athletes' names to identify and locate various available recordings of television interviews, documentaries and documentaries miniseries, as well as online-version newspaper articles that featured either of the two athletes discussing their careers. Most of the video sport media returned by the searches were freely accessible through YouTube and other video streaming websites, while one of the documentaries (i.e., Manny) needed to be purchased online through iTunes. In addition, websites were sourced to obtain additional biographical information on each athlete and the details of their professional record (i.e., bout dates, win-loss info, etc.). Sixth, all video and web data I retrieved through this series of

searches was read or viewed, depending on the format, several times and all seemingly relevant text or audio was transcribed into a separate Word document – noting the source of the data. These transcriptions formed the basis of a rich dataset that included numerous print articles (Mayweather - n = 48; Pacquiao - n = 51), videos (Mayweather - n = 38; Pacquiao - n = 33), and supplementary online articles (Mayweather - n = 3; Pacquiao - n = 5).

### **3.4 Thematic Analysis**

Media data were subjected to an interpretive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (i.e., themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and has been in use by qualitative researchers in some form since at least the 1970s. This type of analysis is helpful in organizing and describing data in rich detail insuring that the analysis integrates themes that were discussed frequently, as well as those discussed less frequently (Schinke, et al., 2012). TA is simply a method of data analysis and does not necessitate adherence to any one particular theoretical perspective or ontology/epistemology, and thus TA offers researchers the advantages of both accessibility and flexibility in their analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Using TA, I developed themes and subthemes from the data to form a thematic map comprised of quotations and excerpts that spoke to larger meanings (themes) relevant to the research questions.

The analysis proceeded in accordance with a more latent or interpretive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke, going beyond surface level meanings of text, interpreting and organizing data into codes in themes in relation to the deeper, latent meaning expressed. Terry, Hayfield, Braun, and Clarke (2017) described the six-step (or “six-

phase”) approach to thematic analysis in comprehensive detail, which guided the analysis in a theoretically and methodologically sound fashion. The analytic process is not strictly linear, it is instead iterative and recursive, meaning that the researcher moves back and forth between different phases of the analysis (Terry et al., 2017). The first phase of the analysis is known as *familiarization* and involved collecting relevant quotations from the boxers, coaching staff, and boxing writers to form a dataset. I accomplished this by reading through the quotations and excerpts several times to familiarize myself with the words of the boxers, their social/professional support networks, and the narratives put forth by journalists. This familiarization required reading in a way in which I was actively engaging with the data; noticing patterns or peculiarities, asking questions, and making rough summary notes of anything I felt was significant. The second phase involved *generating codes*. To complete this phase, I identified features of the data that conveyed a meaning relevant to the research questions. When these meaningful segments of the data were identified, I attached a code in the form of a pithy phrase or label that effectively encapsulated the meaning of the coded data. Third, I reviewed the codes to identify the central organizing concept expressed across similar codes. This involved considering codes in relation to one another and to the research questions, and grouping similar codes (i.e., codes that appear to express the same central concept) together in a process of *constructing themes*. The resulting themes were constructed to tell a coherent and relevant story about the data. Fourth, in *reviewing* the themes, I considered the relationships between themes, ensuring themes make sense in relation to the coded data, the broader dataset, and the research questions. Themes were aligned into a thematic map with themes organized temporally to represent a chronology of the athletes’ careers,

ensuring that themes told a meaningful story that adequately addressed the research questions. Fifth, in *defining and naming themes*, I generated clear theme names and definitions to accurately describe each theme, capturing their full diversity of meaning. Sixth, came the final phase of *producing the report*. To do this, I reviewed the data for a number of compelling excerpts that assisted in tying the analysis back to the original research questions and existing sport psychology literature on athletic career development. Once the analysis had been completed, the results of the analysis were written up. In doing so, I interpreted the data in relation to what is already known about career development of high-profile professional athletes, weaving together data, analysis, and connections to literature. During this process, some areas of the analysis required further refinements, which were later incorporated into the results.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Manuscript**

*This article is an invited piece to the journal Sport in Society as part of a special issue on “Transitions in Sport Life” aimed at (a) bringing together original transition research contributing to better understanding of various transitions in sport life (e.g. normative, non-normative and quasi-normative) and also of different athletic populations (e.g. able-bodied and athletes with disabilities, male and female athletes, coaches, referees, and sport managers), (b) advancing theoretical and methodological contributions to the Transitions in Sport Life theme and (c) stimulating a dialogue and exchanges of ideas between transition researchers representing different sport sciences (mainly psychology and sociology).*

#### **4.1 Introduction**

A world boxing title represents the most coveted prize in professional boxing, alluding to the titleholder’s supreme talent and years of sacrifice. For decades, researchers have attempted to determine how and when extraordinary performers’ development diverges from their contemporaries (Stambulova, 2016). Career models map athletic careers through a series of transitions. Presently, sport psychology practitioners consider transitions as processes (Stambulova, 2016) wherein successful transitions require athletes’ adaptation to changing contextual demands to advance along their career path. For example, Stambulova (1994) outlined elite careers through six “critical points.” These points included the beginning of sport specialization, the transition to more intensive training in the chosen sport, from junior to senior/high achievement sport, amateur to professional sports, peak to the final stage and to the post-career. Elite

athletes' careers are accentuated by high-performance events, such as World Championships or Olympic Games. These kinds of transitions are considered 'quasi-normative' because they are experienced by only a small subset of elite athletes. Success through these transitions is related to athletes' preparedness for the contextual demands associated with the event (Schinke et al., 2015). Wylleman, DeKnop, and Reints (2011) highlighted that athletes experience transitions across psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational and athletic domains. The interactive, concurrent and often reciprocal nature of athletes' development in these four domains has directed researchers towards a more holistic understanding of athlete development. This broader 'whole career/whole person' exploration into athletes has allowed for a richer understanding of career development.

Consequently, Stambulova, Alfermann, Stalter, and Côté (2009) suggested that career transition scholarship warrants specific understandings in relation to individual sport contexts and particular athlete populations. For example, Collins and MacNamara (2012) noted that a disproportionately high incidence of trauma is found among the histories of elite athletes. The authors asserted that low points during athletes' formative years can result in a refocusing, wherein challenges were interpreted as opportunities for positive growth. For these athletes, experiences from their lives outside of sport fostered internal resources that supported their adaptation through sport transitions. Layering athletes' transitions from their sport and personal lives uncovers parallel pathways to elite status. This idiosyncratic lens highlights the interplay between athlete's transitions and their sociocultural environment that manifest as a contextualized career pathway.

## **Professional Boxing**

Professional boxing is a sport characterized by a dramatic and violent contest between two gloved and shirtless athletes. The athletes drawn to this sport are often from inner cities and single parent households, with culturally diverse backgrounds, spanning race, ethnicity, nationality and limited formal education (Schinke et al., 2015). These athletes' modes of expression often reveal slang and solecism. Hence, what is often known about these athletes is second hand, retold through films and media interviews. The unique demands of professional boxing make it a compelling context in which to study athlete career developments (Schinke et al., 2012). Professional boxing is uniquely high risk. Wins propel a boxer forward towards notoriety and lucrative earnings, whereas losses can damage a boxer in terms of marketability and future opportunities (Schinke et al., 2012). Schinke et al. (2012) utilized sport media to examine the internal adaptation processes of six top professional boxers as they proceeded through a novel professional boxing tournament. The boxers' experiences in this context were idiosyncratic in relation to other career and life experiences, such as number of fights amassed, quality of previous opposition, age, financial status and marital status. Boxers' success or failure moving through the tournament was understood in the way athletes' identities were storied within the high-performance context. Although this extended our understanding of professional boxers' career development, researchers have yet to investigate the "forging" of the highest profile professional boxers from childhood to world championship status, offering potential pathways through career challenges. Our aim was to examine the storied media accounts of two iconic world champion boxers, Floyd Mayweather, Jr. and Manny Pacquiao, from their earliest boxing

involvement through to their first world title victories. Examining athletes' represented stories (i.e., stories represented by the media and interpreted by the researchers) along this timeline provided insight into how iconic sport accomplishments, such as a boxer's first world championship title, are nurtured holistically within a professional sport context. Additionally, examining media portrayals of these athletes' over a multiyear timeline provided insight into how these professional athletes' personal and athletic stories were layered to project a marketable public identity tailored for professional boxing.

#### **4.2 Research Questions**

- (3) What career developments were *represented* (i.e., storied by members of the media based on their interpretations of the boxers' words) through sports media in relation to two world-renowned boxers, as they progressed from childhood to world champions?
- (4) What stories offered from boxers, in relation to their sport and personal lives, did the media *represent* as contributing to their world championship status?

#### **4.3 Methodology**

##### **The Athletes**

*Floyd Mayweather Jr.* is an undefeated American boxing icon. An Olympic bronze medalist in 1996, Mayweather won his first world title in 1998 and has since won 15 world titles in 5 different weight divisions. He has been the lineal (i.e., undisputed) champion in four of those five weight divisions. Mayweather was regarded as the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world from 2005 to 2007, and again from 2012 to 2015. *Manny Pacquiao* was a world champion boxer from the Philippines. Pacquiao captured

his first world title in 1998. He is the only boxer to win world titles in 8 of professional boxing's 17 weight classes and has been the lineal champion in four weight divisions – the first to achieve this feat. Pacquiao was considered the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world from 2008 to 2011. These athletes were selected for three reasons. First, both athletes achieved similar status and remain the two most iconic names in contemporary professional boxing with salient representation in sport media. Secondly, the parallel career timelines of the athletes – with the boxers born a year apart, turning professional a year apart, and winning their first world title in the same year – allowed for an interesting comparison of their respective career trajectories. Thirdly, the boxers' distinct cultural origins permitted consideration of unique cultural narratives presented in the athletes' storied media accounts. At the time of these writings, the mean age of these boxers was 40 years with a combined record of 109 wins in 118 bouts, with 65 wins by knockout.

### **Media Data**

Utilizing media data in the present study helped piece together and represent storied media accounts pertaining to a ~20-year timeline in the athletes' early lives/careers. Examining storied accounts of Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Manny Pacquiao's careers necessitated the use of media data; particularly mechanical mass media (Millington and Wilson, 2016). Sport psychology researchers have recently utilized media data to access the represented words of elite amateur and professional sport stars (Battochio et al., 2013) and to explore the role of media portrayals in constructing athletes' identities (e.g. McGannon et al., 2012). Within this project, understanding media representations of athletes' personal narratives showcases how their

identities were constructed in relation to their sport subculture and broader cultural norms.

### **Data Collection**

The data were obtained from magazines, online news publications and video sport media. Ring magazine, the world's premier professional boxing publication, and Sports Illustrated, one of North America's most prominent sport-oriented magazines, were chosen as primary print sources. Video sources comprised television interviews and video documentaries available for purchase, or accessible through online streaming services (e.g., YouTube) and major media outlets' websites. Supplementary data included articles from online media sources (cbssports.com, latimes.com, inquirer.net, dailymail.co.uk, espn.go.com) and online boxing encyclopaedias (e.g., boxrec.com). A web search was performed utilizing the SPORTDiscus research database to identify articles in either of the two primary print sources containing the keywords "Mayweather OR Pacquiao", while video sources and supplementary online publications were identified through separate Google searches. Relevant data included in-depth athlete profiles, examining boxers' lives in and out of the ring, which contained quotations from the athletes, their staff, and family members and friends; pre- and post-bout interviews with athletes and their staff; and athlete biographical data. Print articles (Mayweather – n = 48; Pacquiao – n = 51), videos (Mayweather – n = 38; Pacquiao – n = 33) and supplementary online articles (Mayweather – n = 3; Pacquiao – n = 5) were transcribed into separate Word documents, noting the original sources of all data. These data featured the words of Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao, their social support networks (e.g., coaches, family members) and sports journalists, either reflecting on these athletes' boxing careers and

broader lives retrospectively, or commenting contemporaneously in the lead up to or following significant performances; resembling conversational interviews.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2012). The analysis proceeded according to the six steps described by Braun and Clarke. First, the transcribed media data were collected and read through several times, actively engaging with the data (i.e., noticing patterns, asking questions, writing summary notes), to become intimately familiar with the words of the athletes, their social/professional support networks, and narratives as represented by journalists and subsequently interpreted second hand by the authors. Second, features of these data were identified in relation to the research questions and relevant words were assigned codes to denote the meaning conveyed through the coded excerpts. Third, codes were reviewed for deeper meanings, considering codes in relation to one another and to the research questions, and data were grouped based on code similarity to construct themes. Fourth, the relationships between and within themes were considered and organized temporally to represent a chronology of the athletes' career development. Each theme was split into subthemes to capture the athletes' idiosyncratic stories (e.g., “weathering hardships of early life” was split into subthemes: “the rough life of an inner-city kid” and “abject poverty in war-torn Philippines”). Fifth, names of themes and subthemes were generated and defined to convey the essence of each theme, and to capture their full diversity of meaning. Finally, the data were reviewed and compelling excerpts that tied the analysis back to the research questions were selected around which to write up the results, representing a coherent story of the athletes' development. In preparing the

current manuscript for journal submission, a second author (a PhD student and elite coach, knowledgeable in athlete development), as well as a third author (a sport psychology researcher with 20-year experience working in professional boxing), and a fourth author (a recognized expert in career scholarship) contextualized the results.

#### **4.4 Results**

The athletes' career developments, from their early life to winning their first world boxing title, are presented in five temporal themes: (1) weathering hardships of early life (subthemes: the rough life of an inner city kid, abject poverty in war-torn Philippines), (2) entry into sport (subthemes: groomed to fight, boxing to escape poverty), (3) amateur experience (subthemes: Olympic medalist on route to the pros, struggling amateur with dreams of greatness), (4) launching a professional career (subthemes: impressive American prospect, a charismatic unpolished slugger) and (5) capturing a world title (subthemes: the much-anticipated world champion, the unexpected world champion). Themes and subthemes describe the athletic career and broader life, as portrayed through sport media.

##### **Theme I: Weathering Hardships of Early Life**

Mayweather and Pacquiao described enduring hardships throughout their formative years. While details of each athlete's origins are unique, they share characteristics of poverty, instability and violence. The athletes credited these difficult experiences with igniting a deep-seeded motivation to better their circumstances. Within this theme, their upbringings serve as a prologue, providing the contextual backdrop to both athletes early involvement in boxing. Mayweather retold his life as a poor innercity kid, while Pacquiao reflected on a childhood of abject poverty in war-torn Philippines.

**The rough life of an innercity kid.** Floyd Mayweather Jr. was born 24 February 1977 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA to Floyd Mayweather Sr., a then professional boxer and Deborah Sinclair. Mayweather described low socio-economic living conditions. His parents were both alleged to have had involvement with illegal drugs: his father as a drug trafficker, his mother with drug addiction. These ill-fated activities of Mayweather's parents reportedly contributed to an unstable home environment, requiring a young Mayweather's living arrangements to change frequently. A transient, Mayweather spent time living with his mother, his father and his paternal grandmother during childhood and adolescence. Mayweather recalled moving away from, and later back to, his hometown of Grand Rapids, and commented on the privations of growing up in a low-income household: "I stayed with my dad for a certain period of time, then eventually I moved with my mother to Jersey. There were seven people staying in a one-bedroom apartment, no heat, sometimes no lights" (Bernstein, 2012). Mayweather expressed the pain he endured witnessing his mother's battle with drug addiction and his father's enabling of her habits:

My mother, she was on crack at one particular time, and eventually I moved back to Grand Rapids, Michigan with my father. ... And she eventually moved back to Grand Rapids, Michigan, and I was happy when she moved back, but she was back on drugs. I seen my dad sell my mother drugs. (Bernstein, 2012)

At 16, Mayweather's father was arrested and imprisoned for drug trafficking, compounding Mayweather's domestic instability: "That's where I come from, a hard, rough life. A mother on drugs, a father a former drug dealer, went to prison" (Bernstein, 2012). Faced with the vacuum created by his father's incarceration, Mayweather

described being tempted by the criminal lifestyle he witnessed in his upbringing: “My dad had just went to prison and my best friend was like ... we talked about getting into the drug game. We talked about it ... something told me, ‘no’” (Bernstein, 2012).

Following his conscience away from the temptations of inner city “street life”, Mayweather described committing himself to boxing, despite the physical absence of his father, and presented the hardships he faced throughout early life as essential to later success as a professional boxer: “I’ve always been fighting through obstacles, going back to when I was a little kid, and the difficulties my mother and father had. Every time people said I couldn’t do it, I fought through it. That’s what made me a champion” (Mayo, 2008, p. 35). With this represented statement, Mayweather expressed the importance of having been challenged throughout his youth, nurturing resilience as an internal resource integral to meeting the transitional demands faced along his path to world championship status.

**Abject poverty in war-torn Philippines.** Manny Pacquiao was born December 17, 1978 in Kibawe, Bukidnon, Philippines to Rosalio Pacquiao and Dionisia Dapidran-Pacquiao. Media accounts of Pacquiao’s youth tell of extreme poverty, danger and a struggle for survival. Pacquiao’s family was desperately poor and lived in a small, one-room hut in the small farming village of Tango, Philippines: “All I can remember is that we were very poor. Our home was a small hut. The roof and walls were made from leaves of a coconut tree” (Mayer et al., 2014). During this period, Pacquiao’s father worked as a farm hand, climbing trees to harvest coconuts, to provide Pacquiao’s family with enough to survive. Even as a child, Pacquiao contributed to the family income: “My mom took care of us because my father wasn’t around. All of my siblings worked and

looked for jobs so we could survive. Sometimes we would go days without eating” (Mayer et al., 2014).

Civil war ravaged the Philippines during Pacquiao’s childhood. His stories told of conflicts between opposing forces in proximity to his home inducing feelings of imminent danger, complicating his grim living conditions. Pacquiao’s narrations portrayed exposure to violence at a very young age that eventually prompted the family to flee their village. He recalled one instance in which he witnessed a captive from the rebellion forces decapitated:

One time, this happened between the rebel and the army. The rebel, first they ask for water. ... And then, after twenty minutes, the group of the army passed by our house. They asked for our mother, the group of people with arms. And my mother is like, ‘No, we didn’t see the group.’ The army left, and after maybe twenty to thirty minutes, 500 meters from our house I saw the army cut the head of the rebel. I was five years old. (Mayer et al., 2014)

Fleeing Tango for General Santos, Pacquiao’s family distanced themselves from the violence of war, but not from the hardships of poverty. Pacquiao, following his parents’ separation and his father’s departure from the family, reportedly quit school in the sixth grade to seek out full-time work to feed his family. Vocational attempts included welding, stitching clothes and selling flowers and donuts on busy roadways.

Prayer and spirituality were central to stories from the Pacquiao home, manifesting through devout Catholic observance: “At the crack of dawn, our mother would wake us up to say the rosary. We would pray to the Lord. What kind of life will we have when we grow up?” (Mayer et al., 2014). The hardships endured by the

Pacquiao family were in accordance with a religious worldview: “We suffered being poor and we work hard, we keep dreaming, I keep dreaming and live honestly. And have faith in God” (Mayer et al., 2014). Pacquiao’s represented words suggested strong internal resources and a deep motivation to improve his family’s circumstances with hard work and continued faith.

## **Theme II: Entry Into Sport**

The presentations of Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao’s origins in boxing are quite distinct. Mayweather was born into a boxing family and immersed in boxing culture from infancy, where he was groomed to fight from a very young age. Pacquiao, in contrast, discovered boxing as a preteen and developed a passion for the sport, which he viewed as a means to lift his family out of poverty.

**Groomed to fight.** Born into the Mayweather boxing family, Floyd Mayweather was immersed in boxing culture from an early age. Mayweather’s father was a professional boxer of repute, and two of his uncles were also professional boxers. Mayweather’s father assumed a father/coach role and began to teach Mayweather to box from the time he was a toddler: “That’s the first thing I ever knew about was boxing. Before I knew about anything else in life, I knew about a boxing gym. I knew how to throw punches” (USA Today, 2013). Mayweather’s father was deeply invested in his development as a boxer, through immersion and strict coaching practices. Boxing reportedly consumed Mayweather’s youth, which precluded him from activities enjoyed by his peers. Mayweather’s cousin expressed that Mayweather had been deprived of his childhood: “He never really had a chance to be a kid like us. His daddy expected so much

from him. He just missed out on so much” (Bernstein and Greenburg 2007). Boxing was represented as how Mayweather connected with his father:

My dad was only there for the boxing gym, to come get me to take me to the boxing gym. But when I think back on it, me and my dad has never been to a movie, just me and him, me and my dad has never been bowling, me and my dad has been to dinner and sit down and talk father and son. Me and my dad relationship has always just been boxing. Nothing else, just boxing. (Bernstein, 2012)

Justifying his parental tactics, Floyd Sr. suggested that Mayweather’s success was a product of the rigorous training methods he imposed: “I’ve heard so many people say, ‘your dad treated you like you were in a boot camp.’ Well, you know what? Look at him today” (Bernstein and Greenburg, 2007). Floyd Sr.’s dictatorial coaching and parenting developed Mayweather’s talent, but not a conducive, healthy father–son relationship.

**Boxing to escape poverty.** Pacquiao’s story tells of his early curiosity with boxing. His mother recalled: “His teacher told me, ‘We often catch your son outside the class punching thin air,’ Then I said, ‘I’m sorry, it’s a habit of his. He’s thinking of becoming a boxer when he turns 14’” ([Boxing Unlimited], 2015). Following the separation of Pacquiao’s parents and his father’s departure from the family, he and remaining family stayed with his uncle. The family at this time could not afford sending Pacquiao to school, effectively halting his formal education in the sixth grade. Mejia, his uncle, contended that he introduced a 12-year-old Pacquiao to boxing, viewing it as an avenue to earn money. He recalled that Pacquiao demonstrated a passion for the sport: “Manny was the first person I trained. Even without shoes, he jogged. And I saw in him

his passion. I also saw they didn't have money to send him to school. That's why I trained him" (Mayer et al., 2014). Contemporaneously, Pacquiao was reported to have befriended a budding amateur boxer, Abner Cordero. Abner, who was trained by his father, Dizon, recalls Pacquiao's infatuation with boxing: "Manny would wear gloves and play around like other kids. He asked me, 'Do you have a punching bag?' I said, 'yes.' The next day he came over to our house" ([Boxing Unlimited], 2015). Reports suggest that Dizon became Pacquiao's next coach, followed by local boxing matches and small purses:

One Sunday, he registered me for a boxing match at the park. Thank God I won the fight. I made 100 pesos which is about \$2. I kept on fighting and I was always winning. There was a tournament, the Mindanao Open. For one week I fought every day. I won on Monday, then came Tuesday, I won again. Then on Wednesday I fought for the bronze medal. Thursday, I won for the silver, then, on Saturday, I won the Gold medal. (Mayer et al., 2014)

Pacquiao provided context to illustrate the significance of these earnings: "When I boxed, I earned 100 pesos per fight. At the time, a kilo of rice cost 3 to 4 pesos so it was a big deal" ([Boxing Unlimited], 2015). Becoming aware of the ability to feed his family was represented as having fortified Pacquiao's boxing passion.

### **Theme III: Amateur Experience**

Contained within this theme are the distinct presentations of Mayweather and Pacquiao as amateur boxers. While details of these amateur careers contrast, both athletes relied on success as amateur boxers to position themselves for a professional career.

**Olympic medalist en route to the pros.** Mayweather's success as an amateur boxer culminated at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Mayweather was a highly decorated amateur boxer in the USA, having won three national Golden Gloves championships. As a member of the '96 USA Olympic team, Mayweather was impressive in the 57-kg division of the boxing tournament, winning his preliminary bouts decisively. During the quarterfinals, he narrowly defeated Cuba's Lorenzo Aragon to become the first American boxer to defeat a Cuban boxer in 20 years, advancing to the tournament's semi-finals. Mayweather received a bronze medal after a highly controversial decision in his semi-final bout. Following his elimination at the Olympics, Mayweather reportedly grew disillusioned with amateur boxing, and expressed his eagerness to become a professional: "We all know I got ripped off. It's time for me to turn professional. I can't deal with amateur boxing anymore" (Fitzsimmons, 2015). While obviously frustrated and disappointed with the outcome of the Olympics, Mayweather's represented words suggested a self-understanding that his style would be better suited to professional boxing. When reflecting on his Olympic experience, Mayweather explained: "In the '96 Olympic Games, I'm happy with how the results went. Because that made me strive and work hard to get to where I'm at today" (Fitzsimmons, 2015). Mayweather gave *post hoc* meaning to his Olympic experience as motivating him towards a professional career where decisions would be less dubious.

**Struggling amateur with dreams of greatness.** Many storied details of Pacquiao's career as an amateur boxer remain obscure. According to media sources, representatives of the Philippines' amateur boxing association (ABAP) recruited Pacquiao as part of the association's "Go For Gold" talent search programme, which

assembled promising young boxers from across the Philippines to train and compete out of a central training centre in Manila. Pacquiao, together with friend Abner Cordero and eight other young boxers, relocated to Manila to further their boxing careers. The move entailed further hardships for Pacquiao, who was not provided with proper overnight accommodations, reportedly living out of the boxing facility where he trained: “I didn’t have any relatives to live with in Manila, so I slept in the ring at night” (Mayer et al., 2014). Pacquiao was not granted many opportunities to compete in the months after relocating, stifling his sole means to generate income. He was compelled to seek employment, where he found work as a metal scraper in a junkyard, to subsidize his living expenses and to send remittances back to his family. Abner Cordero recalled, “I thought we’d be boxing but we ended up working. We didn’t have a fight for 7 months” ([Boxing Unlimited], 2015).

Rather than discouraging Pacquiao, the difficulties he faced after relocating reportedly emboldened him. Beyond earning enough income to provide a better life for his family, expressions of Pacquiao’s ambitions became more grandiose. As reported by one boxing writer: “[Pacquiao became] enthralled with the possibilities of a career in boxing. ‘I dreamed of another level of boxing,’ [said] Pacquiao. ‘I wanted titles. I wanted money’” (Mannix, 2011, p. 96). These dreams of professional fame and fortune seemingly propelled Pacquiao towards a professional career, despite being younger than the required age:

I wanted to become a professional boxer. So, I went to sign up for a boxing license. They told me that the required age is 18 but I was only 16. So I lied and told them I was 18 years old. At that time I weighed 98 lb, which was 10 lb under

the minimum weight. So, in order to make weight, I put heavy objects in my pockets to make me heavier. (Mayer et al., 2014)

Although never competing internationally as part of his country's national team, or amassing any noteworthy amateur accomplishments, Pacquiao is reported to have competed in 64 bouts – earning an amateur record of 60–4. This regional success as a junior amateur seemed to serve as cursory preparation for his move into professional boxing.

#### **Theme IV: Launching A Professional Career**

Mayweather and Pacquiao first began to attract coverage in major boxing and sport news publications as young prospects in their respective weight divisions. This theme reveals accounts of these athletes' stories during their ascent through their professional careers. In the early years after turning professional, both athletes compiled a string of impressive wins. Mayweather gained attention in the U.S. professional boxing circuit as an impressive American prospect, while Pacquiao competed in the relative obscurity of the Philippines as an unpolished slugger.

**Impressive American prospect.** Floyd Mayweather turned professional in 1996 at age 19, immediately following his appearance at the Olympic Games. Upon turning professional, Mayweather signed with Bob Arum's Top Rank, one of the foremost boxing promoters. Mayweather's uncle Roger acted as chief trainer, while his father served as Mayweather's manager and personal mentor. Together, Mayweather's uncle and father possessed a wealth of professional expertise. Uncle Roger provided Mayweather with specialized training and expert supervision, while Floyd Sr. offered counsel and guidance from the confines of prison. Being a decorated amateur boxer and

Olympic medalist from the United States with the representation of a prominent promotional company, Mayweather was afforded a carefully planned transition into professional boxing, aimed at showcasing his superior talent. His first several bouts came against novice and heavily overmatched opponents, then against opponents of increasingly greater calibre, in a systematic fashion. Commenting on Mayweather's readiness for the transition into professional boxing, marked by an adjustment to competing in bouts with a greater number of scheduled rounds, Mayweather's father affirmed: "Floyd has been around boxing for so long it was not even an adjustment for him to turn pro, or go fight from six to 10 rounds" (Mladinich, 1998, p. 56). Mayweather drew attention for his impressive ring performances, dominating and outclassing opponents in one-sided victories, with media praising him as a future great. Navigating this stage of his career, Mayweather expressed confidence in his abilities, tremendous work ethic and an unwavering focus on his boxing career:

I can go 10 rounds or 15 round or 20 rounds if I have to. I run in the mountains every morning and box at least 11 rounds a day. Boxing is the sole focus of my life, my bread and butter. I'm 20 years old and all I think about is boxing. I don't think about distractions. (Mladinich, 1998, p. 56)

Storied media accounts place boxing as the driving force in Mayweather's life, with him avoiding any activities that might jeopardize his becoming a world champion. The intense singular focus was compatible with this early stage of Mayweather's professional career, given the frequency with which he was able to compete. Mayweather's talent and dedication, coupled with external resources of expert training, management and representation, permitted a quick ascent.

**A charismatic, unpolished slugger.** Pacquiao is reported to have turned professional at 16 by falsely indicating that he was 18 on his application for a boxing licence. Coinciding with this move into professional boxing, he entered into a business relationship with Rod Nazario, owner of the LM Gym in Manila, who acted as Pacquiao's business manager/promoter. After watching him train, Nazario, along with producers from a nationally syndicated Filipino television programme Blow By Blow, facilitated Pacquiao's transition into professional boxing. At such a young age and without any noteworthy amateur achievements, Pacquiao was not afforded a gentle transition into the professional ranks. Pacquiao faced a varied calibre of opposition in his early professional career, not according to a predictable pattern of increasing difficulty (as seen in Mayweather's early career). His first 20 opponents seem to have been a mixture of soft opponents, journeymen and other young prospects, most of whom appeared larger and more physically matured than Pacquiao. Rather than acting as exhibitions to showcase Pacquiao's prowess, his early bouts were rugged. Pacquiao was able to garner attention and endearment from fans for his aggressive, all-action style: "The thing that made Manny such a popular figure in the ring was his exciting style. He was very explosive. Every time Manny stepped inside that ring, the fans could expect a wonderful victory or a glorious defeat" ([Boxing Unlimited], 2015).

Despite Pacquiao's charisma and exciting ring performances, discerning observers noted that he lacked the finesse and technical boxing skills attributed to professional boxers. Pacquiao's unpolished style and lack of sophisticated boxing craft during this stage of his professional career were symptomatic of a lack of a qualified professional boxing trainer, and of an elite-level amateur background. Judging by his

performances during this stage, boxing analysts portrayed Pacquiao as an exciting club fighter and doubted he would become a world champion. Filipino sports broadcaster Ronnie Nathanielsz noted:

I never thought he was going to be a world champion when I saw him on Blow by Blow, but he had two things going for him. One, his courage was indomitable. The other was his power. But his style was terrible, he just threw punches, he just came at you. He didn't have the finesse necessary to become a world champion. He went after his opponents from the opening bell, non-stop. ([Boxing Unlimited], 2015)

During this first stage of his professional career, Pacquiao's storied media account tells of tenacity and raw talent. Compensating for his lack of refined boxing skills, Pacquiao seemed to overwhelm his opponents with barrages of punches, blinding hand speed and punching power. The rugged bouts that made up Pacquiao's early professional career are represented as having hardened him, and having carried him forward into challenging bouts against stiffer opposition. Additionally, exposure to growing crowds and a television audience can be seen to have cultivated Pacquiao's love of showmanship.

### **Theme V: Capturing A World Title**

After success as young professional prospects, Mayweather and Pacquiao earned the opportunity to fight for their world titles. Winning a world boxing title is a landmark accomplishment for a professional boxer, instantly placing the boxer at the top of their weight division, accompanied by increased recognition and potential earnings.

Mayweather and Pacquiao won impressively in their first world title bouts, each earning a stoppage victory over an experienced world champion to capture super featherweight,

and flyweight, world titles, respectively. Mayweather realized his place atop the featherweight division becoming an anticipated world champion, whereas Pacquiao earned a title shot to become an unexpected champion. Media stories of both athletes leading up to and during their first world title bouts are presented in this theme.

**The much-anticipated world champion.** Mayweather earned his first title shot against WBC and lineal featherweight champion, Genaro Hernandez, which took place in Las Vegas, USA on October 3, 1998. Hernandez held an admirable record of 38–1-1, with 17 of his 38 wins by knockout. Though not known for possessing outstanding speed or punching power, Hernandez was a tall (5'11") and rangy champion with respected skills. The bout was negotiated following Mayweather's 17th consecutive victory as a professional, only two years after his professional debut. In the months leading up to the bout with Hernandez, Floyd Sr. had finished serving his five-year prison sentence. Shortly thereafter, he overtook the duties of training Mayweather, transitioning back into his role as Mayweather's head coach. While members of the boxing media had long considered Mayweather as an inevitable world champion, some questioned Mayweather's readiness for a world title shot. Floyd Sr. expressed confidence in his son, affirming, "If he wasn't ready for Genaro Hernandez, I'd be the first one to jump and say we don't need that fight right now" (Raskin, 1998, p. 40). Mayweather's promoter Bob Arum also addressed questions concerning Mayweather's short tenure as a professional in advance of the title shot. Arum insisted that Mayweather should not be held back, given his immense talent, "A potential superstar like Floyd always has great ambition, and as a promoter, I can't hold him back" (Raskin, 1998, p. 59). Mayweather exuded confidence in bout preparations, and expressed advantages in age, physical strength and versatility,

“I know I can go the distance easy. I’m younger, I’m stronger. I can be the aggressor or fight on the move, go forward or backward. I got the total package.” (Raskin, 1998, p. 42).

Mayweather’s demeanour suggested that he carried that confidence into the bout and, according to the commentary of sports broadcasters at ringside, appeared in control from the first round onwards. Mayweather is described as having manoeuvred swiftly away from attacks mounted by Hernandez, and responded with accurate and well-timed counter attacks. Mayweather is portrayed to have increasingly dominated the bout with each passing round, eventually prompting Hernandez’s coaching staff to forfeit the bout before the beginning of the ninth round. Mayweather became the first of his Olympic teammates to win a world boxing title. After the bout, Mayweather commented on his performance, “It took me a couple rounds to feel him out. But after the second round, I started using my jab, and then I took control of the fight” (Pugmire, 2015). Mayweather’s represented words reveal the importance of asserting control over his opponent, and over the outcome of the bout. This world title victory stood as a monumental step towards the fulfilment of the prophecy put forth by boxing experts: that he would become a boxing superstar.

**The unexpected world champion.** Pacquiao earned an opportunity to fight in his first world title bout on 4 December 1998 in Putthamonthon, Thailand against WBC and lineal flyweight champion, Thailand’s Chatchai Sasakul. Sasakul was defending his title for the fourth time in his bout against Pacquiao and held an impressive professional record of 32–1–1 with 21 of his wins via knockout. Contrasting with Pacquiao, Sasakul was a decorated amateur known for being a highly skilled boxer and was a quarter-

finalist at the 1988 Olympic Games. Pacquiao elevated his status and earned the eligibility to fight for a world title through a string of exciting wins by knockout, for which he was able to hire a formal boxing trainer. Benedicto Delgado, who claims to have been Pacquiao's first legitimate professional boxing trainer, began working with Pacquiao following his 18th bout, and recalled Pacquiao's initiative, obedience and expedient learning curve: "What's good about Manny is that he has initiative. You don't have to repeat yourself during training ... He's sensitive to the training. No matter what you tell him, he will obey you without question" (Lugay, 2015). Pacquiao's structured preparation and coaching correlated with his sharpened boxing skills, and seemingly improved his ring tactics. In his fourth bout after winning and once defending a lesser-known Asian boxing title, Pacquiao fought for his first world boxing title.

For the first six rounds of this bout, according to the boxing commentators, Pacquiao was heavily outclassed. Sasakul was credited with having displayed superior boxing skills and controlling the bout, scoring with sharp blows and defending himself against most of Pacquiao's spirited attacks. Descriptions of the bout note that, despite being outclassed; Pacquiao moved forward and pressured Sasakul. The seventh round was a turning point; commentators emphasized a jolting straight left punch delivered by Pacquiao that noticeably shook Sasakul. Commentary from ringside described Pacquiao as having pressured Sasakul throughout round seven and into round eight until, with 20 s left in the round, Pacquiao landed a straight left punch that knocked his opponent out.

Being overmatched in a bout was familiar territory for Pacquiao, having triumphed over opponents who possessed physical advantages (e.g., in size, strength) and/or more elite experience. Pacquiao reflected on his high level of motivation and intense physical

preparation: “I was so motivated to win that fight, I trained hard and the outcome was so rewarding. I knocked him out in the eighth round” (Lozada, 2015). With this represented statement, Pacquiao reveals the importance of overcoming his lack of finesse and technical skill with a determined and strategic use of his explosive punching power and hand speed. The win propelled Pacquiao to world status, surprising his pundits.

#### **4.5 Discussion**

Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao’s careers, from early life to their first World title, spanned roughly 20 years. During this time, the athletes experienced idiosyncratic careers in relation to their sociocultural contexts. We were guided by two questions: (1) what career developments were represented through the authors’ interpretations of sports media in relation to two world-renowned boxers, as they progressed from formative development to world champions? and (2) what stories offered from boxers, in relation to their sport and personal lives did the media represent as contributing to their world championship status? The boxers’ media stories highlighted cultural considerations throughout their athletic careers and subcultural considerations about building their brands as professional boxers.

#### **Cultural Considerations**

Researchers have highlighted the importance of culturally informed career transition scholarship (Stambulova et al., 2009). Mayweather and Pacquiao’s media stories offered culturally informed accounts of their career developments, including their motivations and personal foci, and distinct career paths in relation to each boxer’s sociocultural context, national sporting system and available athletic opportunities. Utilizing this cultural lens illuminated their individualized world championship pathways.

The athletes' cultural contexts influenced their endured hardships and their roles in relation to family, necessitating strong internal resources and unique foci as the athletes' careers developed. The boxers' individualist and collectivist cultural backgrounds (Kontos and Breland-Noble, 2002) were expressed throughout their publicized personas. Aligning with North American ideals, Mayweather was presented as a self-made rising star, boasting of his attributes, while Pacquiao was portrayed as a charismatic fighter for the people, whose stories spoke of a commitment to family and religion, resembling collectivist values. Schinke et al. (2012) identified athletes who present their holistic identities, including internal resources such as religious faith, as sources of strength within a sport context are more successful through transitions. Whereas, Schinke et al. considered this phenomenon through a single tournament; Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers suggest that successful boxers' holistic identities, including their cultural heritages, are projected into their broader sport contexts. The boxers' storied careers showcase how professional athletes can pull their holistic identities forwards into their professional sporting contexts.

Additionally, media analysis of the boxers' careers provided culturally informed considerations of the athletes' career development regarding boxing regulations and available athletic opportunities in each athlete's country of origin. Mayweather's development in the American boxing system afforded him a decorated amateur career before turning professional. Pacquiao's career was comparatively expedited. His early professional experience stood in place of an elite amateur career. Some countries allow boxers to turn professional as young as age 15, or unreliably enforce minimum ages. This highlights the temporal variance possible in boxers' development (Stambulova, 2016),

wherein athletes may experience their transition to professional sports prior to reaching adulthood (Wylleman, DeKnop, and Reints, 2011). Comparing these two boxers' careers suggests that sport transitions are non-linear (Stambulova, 1994) but are temporally idiosyncratic in accordance with context-dependent variables that influence their career chronology. Cultural factors can push athletes forward through sport transitions at variable stages in their psychosocial development. Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers augment our understanding of variances in holistic athlete development in different countries. These findings further promote the need for culturally informed investigations of career transitions, especially outside of Western sporting systems.

### **Building an effective 'brand'**

As much as career paths can be culturally differentiated, sport subculture also impacts athletes' careers (Stambulova et al., 2009). Athletes' media identities are central to professional sports. Considering the boxers' life stories through a holistic lens provided insight into how media sources layer athletes' identities in relation to their sport and promoted further consideration of the bidirectional relationship between athletes' public and self-identities (McGannon et al., 2012). Viewing Mayweather and Pacquiao's represented career stories broadly, including their sport and non-sport experiences, augments our understanding of how the media layers athletes' lives to construct media personas. For example, both athletes' stories told of childhood trials pertinent to their success. Aligning with Collins and MacNamara (2012), Mayweather and Pacquiao's memories of hardships have been framed as sources of strength. As world champions, the athlete's stories expressed attributes such as resiliency and being 'saved' through a strong commitment to boxing. Stambulova (2016) highlighted that athletes' successful

transitions are attributed to a balance between athletes' contextual demands and available resources. Athletes foster the resources for successful transition holistically. The media analysis of Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers alluded to how the media frames tumultuous experiences as key events that armed the athletes with the resources to meet the contextual demands of their athletic careers. For example, these represented stories suggested that the internal resources nurtured through trauma in the athletes' early lives supported them through challenging career transitions, such as Mayweather's upset at the Olympic Games or Pacquiao's abrupt professional boxing debut. Additionally, external resources (e.g., family members, coaches, promoters) were represented in athletes' stories as supporting their development, with quality of support influencing the relative stability (or turbulence) of their differential career paths, as in Mayweather's smooth transition into professional boxing or Pacquiao's raucous early professional career. In this way, athletes' contrasting sport experiences – either in dominant performances over handpicked opposition, or in upset victories as an underdog – can be seen to have uniquely prepared them for their eventual transition to world championship status. However, it is important to note these insights present post hoc valuations of the athletes' career experiences. We wonder if such appraisals would have sustained if the athletes' careers had culminated without significant status, whereupon struggles could have been viewed as insurmountable transition barriers.

Although the relationship between athletes' self-perceptions and their publicized identities has been acknowledged (McGannon et al., 2012), practitioners have yet to consider how they could use the media as a tool to assist athletes through transitions. Consideration of represented media accounts of Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers

suggests that practitioners could utilize scripted media stories to help their athletes internalize characteristics conducive to successful transitions. For example, Mayweather and Pacquiao intimated their identification as world champions while competing as amateurs, inspiring their transitions into professional boxing. By their early professional careers, Mayweather was projecting himself as an inevitable world champion, whereas Pacquiao expressed unwavering determination and faith in his eventual good fortune. Given that a strong athletic identity can help support athletes through transitions, especially during the elite amateur or professional career (Stambulova et al., 2009), Mayweather and Pacquiao may have reinforced behaviours conducive to boxing greatness by publicly professing their commitment. Moreover, the athletes' espoused athletic identities foreshadowed their success within a world-championship context. Mayweather was hailed as an inevitable boxing star, while Pacquiao's persona was that of a routinely victorious underdog. Schinke et al. (2015) identified that athletes are more successful through quasi-normative transitions, such as world title bouts, if they are informed about their context. The boxers' publicized personas were tested and validated through their careers in contexts that mirrored the challenges of a world championship bout. These foreshadowing personas, aligning with Schinke et al. (2015), can be seen to have cultivated contextual familiarity for the boxers through their quasi-normative transition. Considering the media as a tool suggests that if practitioners craft a strategic persona, they may be able to better support athletes through transitions to fulfil their prophesied successes.

## 4.6 Conclusions

Media data has been utilized to reveal the accounts of two world champion boxers. Most often, career development scholarship in relation to elite performers has been focused on the athletes' experiences and how they do (and sometimes do not) move forward in relation to a career path. The current project reveals a different tact. First, the athletes' progressions are derived from media data, suggesting that they are accounts recast by sports journalists. Professional boxers tend to present themselves to the media in deliberate ways, consistent with the identities they wish to project, such as being a warrior, or surmounting the trials of a criminogenic background to make something of oneself. What these stories might offer is how the highest profile professional boxers were projected through the boxing media in relation to their career paths. Second, the data are purposefully focused on the whole athlete, as opposed to a narrowed focus on training and competition. These athletes' stories included the tribulations of family life, a lack of financial resources and physical danger. This broadened lens permits richer storied accounts of why they presented themselves as they did, either as responsible citizens, maintaining their faith or having tenuous relationships with parents that were inconsistent influences, all layering into complex personas brought to the ring.

## Chapter Five:

### Conclusion

This conclusion chapter will comprise a general summary of the project, followed by a discussion of the findings, as well implications for applied practitioners, boxers, and support staff, directions for future research, and final remarks. The careers of two world-renowned boxers, Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao, were examined through media data as each athlete progressed along an approximate 20-year timeline, from early life to winning a world boxing championship. Interpretive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was employed to analyze media portrayals of boxers' careers, and those narratives relevant to each athlete's career development. This research presented the opportunity to explore athlete career development in the context of elite professional boxing. In addition, the chosen scope of the study allowed for a longitudinal perspective of career development from early involvement in boxing, to winning a professional world title. Finally, the parallel journeys of the athletes, from different national origins, allowed for an examination of how the career paths of boxers can be influenced by cultural factors. The aims of this research were distilled into two guiding research questions:

- (5) What career developments were *represented* through sports media in relation to two world-renowned boxers, as they progressed from childhood to world champions?
- (6) What stories offered from boxers, in relation to their sport and personal lives, did the media *represent* as contributing to their world championship status?

The project yielded intriguing findings that assist in further establishing professional boxing as a compelling context through which to study athletic career transitions. Among

these were the differing career development pathways available to boxers, as influenced by the cultural context from which they originated, and the importance of boxers' constructed media personas or "brands" in reaching world champion status. The results were presented in accordance with five temporal themes: (1) weathering hardships (subthemes: the rough life of an inner city kid, abject poverty in war-torn Philippines), (2) origins in boxing (subthemes: groomed to box, boxing to escape poverty), (3) amateur experience (subthemes: Olympic medalist en route to the pros, struggling amateur with dreams of greatness), (4) launching a professional career (subthemes: impressive American prospect, a charismatic unpolished slugger), and (5) capturing a world title (subthemes: the much-anticipated world champion, the unexpected world champion). These themes and subthemes represented salient media narratives of the athletes' careers and broader lives relevant to their career developments. These narratives comprised the storied accounts of Mayweather and Pacquiao's rise from humble beginnings to world championship boxers, as represented in sport media.

The career developments identified, as broadly outlined in the resultant themes, included Mayweather's and Pacquiao's introductions to and early participation in boxing, amid the unique circumstances and larger cultural context of each athlete's country of birth, followed by their contrasting journeys through the amateur boxing system and transition into professional boxing, their early professional careers, and finally, their successful campaigns for a world boxing championship. The examination of the storied media accounts of Mayweather and Pacquiao's career development pathways revealed contrasting nuances in their transition experiences, despite both boxers' being very close in age and achieving world championship status along a similar timeframe. These

differences were understood by considering the wider context of athletes' presented career development career experiences, which included adopting a culturally informed view (see Stambulova & Ryba, 2014)

### **5.1 Understanding Boxers' Developments in Context**

The unique cultural contexts, in which the athletes' careers developed, entailed national differences in sporting systems and available opportunities for athletes, in addition to differing cultural norms regarding assumed roles in relation to family and society. These factors influenced the specific trajectory of athletes' career development, as well as their personal foci and motivations in relation to their boxing careers, which informed each boxer's espoused persona represented in sport media.

Looking at career trajectory, cultural factors were seen to influence how the boxers constituted their unique career paths. Both athletes initiated their formal involvement in boxing during childhood, subsequent to differential antecedents. Mayweather, raised in a family of accomplished boxers, began his amateur career with his first bout at age 10, after having been involved in boxing training throughout early childhood. Media retellings of his childhood suggest that Mayweather underwent early specialization in boxing, under the stern tutelage of his father, gradually transitioning to more intensive training over the course of his upbringing. Mayweather's early career development is presented as being increasingly rigid and compelled, though beginning far enough back in childhood to afford him ample preparation for his initiation into an amateur boxing career. Pacquiao's was formally introduced to boxing at ~age 12 after demonstrating a curiosity towards the sport, and began competing as an amateur shortly thereafter. Pacquiao's amateur career was presented as being initiated organically, driven

by his own interest without forcible influence from others, which aligns more closely with current recommendations for athlete development (Martindale, Collins, and Daubney, 2005). As Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers progressed, the athletes expanded their networks of social support to form new professional relationships with individuals to assist in their professional career development (i.e., professional trainers, managers, promoters, etc.). These evolving social support networks provided the athletes with the guidance and preparation commensurate with the demands of transitions experienced through the development of their athletic careers. These boxers' developmental trajectories are further understood in terms of the cultural norms that shaped their motivations and personal foci, and their national sporting systems and available opportunities as young athletes.

**5.1.1 Cultural norms inform motivations and personal foci.** The influence of cultural norms, including social roles in relation to family, was understood to have shaped each athlete's personal development and motivations towards success in professional boxing. Media narratives that detail Pacquiao's early life and career underline a deeply felt responsibility to his family, which required his departure from school in order to help feed his mother and siblings. The desire to lift his family out of poverty and better his community are presented as motivating Pacquiao toward a professional boxing career. This is in keeping with a cultural orientation in his native Philippines that emphasizes collectivism. In contrast, Mayweather's motivations are portrayed as being more self-centred in nature, namely a desire to carve out a lasting legacy as a boxing legend. This strong focus on personal achievement for its own sake is consistent with a culture of individualism, more commonly seen in mainstream North

American athletes (Kontos & Breland Noble, 2002). These contrasting cultural orientations prompted different foci as the athletes embarked on their career paths, as reflected in their espoused media personas. What was important is that both athletes developed a deep motivation and profound sense of duty to achieve success, regardless of how these motivations were expressed.

### **5.1.2 National sporting systems and available athletic opportunities.**

Mayweather's development as a boxer took place within the context of a North American boxing system, which led, in his case, to a decorated amateur career, affording him several years to hone his craft as an elite amateur before transitioning into the professional boxing. Approaching a professional career in this manner positioned Mayweather as promising professional prospect, garnering him the business of prominent promoters and support staff to facilitate his transition into professional boxing. These professional relationships afforded Mayweather greater financial security, marketing efforts, and a more controlled ascent through the lower boxing ranks. Pacquiao's career was comparatively expedited, turning professional at age 16 with a relatively tenuous amateur career. This early transition into professional boxing is not unusual, globally speaking, where, in some regions, the minimum age to become a professional boxer is 15 years (e.g., Mexico). With far fewer resources available for aspiring athletes in the Philippines, and relatively undeveloped amateur boxing system, opportunities to gain elite experience as an amateur boxer were slim to none for Pacquiao. Thus, Pacquiao's early professional experience effectively stood in place of an elite amateur career, entailing a steeper learning curve as a young professional. The career development pathway exemplified by Pacquiao highlighted a unique feature of career transitions

specific to boxing: that athletes can graduate to a professional boxing career during adolescence without having ever competed as an elite senior amateur. Both Mayweather and Pacquiao were able to elevate their careers to world championship status, though the developmental path that each traversed to reach the same destination was greatly influenced by circumstances unique to each athlete, which were understood by taking a culturally-informed view of the athletes' career developments. The career transition experiences of athletes cannot be understood separately from the contexts in which the athletes are immersed; National sporting systems and available athletic opportunities, together with sociocultural norms and values, and personal histories and circumstances interacted to shape Mayweather and Pacquiao's developmental trajectories, and resulted in their differential career paths. These career paths of Mayweather and Pacquiao represent two of the more common career paths available to aspiring professional boxers and demonstrate the versatility possible in the career developmental trajectories of professional boxers.

## **5.2 Building an Effective 'Brand'**

Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers, as represented through sport media, augment our understanding of professional sport personas by illuminating how athletes' personal histories, sport performances, and media portrayals are layered to create a public athletic persona or "brand." Mayweather and Pacquiao's personal histories and developmental experiences are portrayed as having uniquely prepared them for the challenges inherent in their career paths towards a world boxing championship. Examining media biographies of both athletes provided insight into how their experiences of career developments were recast as post hoc explanations of athletic achievements to help build compelling and

effective brands that both: (1) made sense of prior athletic successes and/or failures; and (2) positioned the athlete towards success in the future, both in the eyes of the public and in mind of the athlete.

**5.2.1 Hardships of early life presented as strengths.** Media narratives present Mayweather and Pacquiao as having cultivated the internal qualities to facilitate their success throughout their early lives and career developments. Their memories of hardships, which included poverty, unstable home environments, and the departure of their fathers, have been consistently cited as sources of strength. Collins and MacNamara (2012) noted that a disproportionately high incidence of trauma is historically common among elite athletes. The authors asserted that for highly resilient athletes, “influential low points” during these athletes’ formative years often result in a refocusing and increasing of efforts, wherein challenges or traumas endured are interpreted as opportunities for positive growth. Consistent with Collins and MacNamara’s writings, the biographies of Mayweather and Pacquiao are replete with exposure to trauma. In storied media accounts, both athletes assert that the hardships they faced as children and adolescents were essential to fostering the psychological characteristics critical to their success. The overcoming of early trauma and being hardened, when continually expressed in the boxers’ media portrayals, enabled media to construct a compelling redemption narrative, which supplied meaning to the athletes’ successes. These narratives then became a fundamental part of Mayweather’s and Pacquiao’s respective brands. In this way, the athletes were portrayed as being psychologically prepared to endure and not be broken by any novel challenges encountered in the boxing ring. Mayweather and Pacquiao demonstrate that professional boxers can put forth details of their personal

histories to feed media narratives that are positive/adaptive in nature and can help to build a compelling brand, which follows boxers into every career challenge.

**5.2.2 Athletic identities align with context of professional boxing.** Mayweather and Pacquiao exemplified how their behaviours matched with the unique context of professional boxing. Both boxers had an espoused persona that was reflected in media portrayals. Mayweather was portrayed as a self-proclaimed superstar and inevitable world champion, who boasted of his athletic attributes and past accomplishments. Pacquiao was promoted as a charismatic fighter for the people whose stories spoke of his commitment to his family and religion, and who expressed his unwavering determination to succeed as a professional boxer against the odds. Schinke et al. (2012) identified that athletes whose individual narratives match with broader narratives from their sport culture are more successful through transitions. It's also understood that media representations of athletes, while shaping public perception, influence how athletes view themselves (McGannon et al., 2012). Although Schinke et al. (2012) considered this phenomenon in the context of a single tournament, Mayweather and Pacquiao's broader careers exemplify the success obtainable when athletes' identities align with the demands of their sport context. From early on in their careers, both athletes positioned boxing as the central focus and driving force in their lives. They competed frequently early in their professional careers, insulating themselves from distractions. Similar to the boxers examined by Schinke et al. (2012), Mayweather and Pacquiao's behaviours aligned with the demands of their professional boxing context to foster their successes.

Mayweather and Pacquiao both passed through a monumental checkpoint towards eminence by winning a world championship title, and, in doing so, successfully

navigating a paramount quasi-normative transition. These transitions encountered throughout athletic development entail remarkable stress for athletes, not yet certain of their place in their post-transition context, despite having anticipated their respective pathways (Stambulova, et al., 2009). Schinke et al. (2015) found that preparing for the Olympic games, another quasi-normative transition, necessitated targeted information about the Olympic context, which helped athletes to feel more prepared to tackle their upcoming transition. Similarly, both Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers uniquely prepared them for the stressors accompanying their world championship bouts. Throughout Mayweather's career, he was inundated with praise and prognostications of his inevitable world champion status. In the lead up to his world title bout, Mayweather was portrayed in the media as a rising star on the verge of the biggest win of his young career. Consequently, he possessed a keen awareness of his attributes (e.g., speed, defensive ability, and conditioning) that gave him confidence that he had the requisite skills entering into his world championship opportunity. Contrastingly, going into world title bout, Pacquiao was portrayed as a courageous underdog with only a puncher's chance. Pacquiao, though, was routinely victorious in situations where he was perceived as the underdog. Pacquiao's determination to succeed in bouts where he was deemed overmatched psychologically prepared him to endure a difficult several rounds of punishment without discouragement in order to implement a strategy that would bring him towards victory despite his obvious shortcomings as a boxer. What proved important for both athletes was the self-efficacy to implement effective strategies in the ring that played to their relative strengths (for Mayweather, his speed and agility; for Pacquiao, his

explosive punching power) and, at least in Pacquiao's case, the mental toughness to endure setbacks (e.g., losing a round) and proceed forward adaptively.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Applied Practitioners, Boxers, and Support Staff**

The results of this project carry a number of implications for applied practitioners in sport psychology working with boxers, boxers, and their support staffs. Central to these recommendations is the need for practitioners who work with professional boxers to adequately familiarize themselves with boxing subculture and contextual subtleties that underpin athletes career developments and career paths (Schinke & McGannon, 2015). This familiarity with the contextual nuances of boxing subculture should be coupled with a comprehensive understanding of athletic career development and career transitions literature, as well as an appreciation of broader cultural influences on boxers' career developments.

Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers present unique considerations for practitioners working with professional athletes. Both athletes present themselves as having succeeded "against the odds." Mayweather came from a family with a criminogenic background and a father-coach whose methods were draconian, whereas Pacquiao developed amidst the trials and tribulations of growing up poor in a third world country ravaged by civil war. It's implied in media portrayals that without exposure to these "stressors" of their early lives and careers, Mayweather and Pacquiao may have lacked the critical coping resources they utilized to attain their highest successes. Though it must be pondered whether these appraisals would have maintained if the athletes' careers culminated with a lesser stature, or whether their early childhood struggles would have instead been presented as barriers to their developments. Practitioners may be able

to help athletes develop critical psychological characteristics by publically reframing past experiences in alignment with current contextual demands (McGannon et al., 2012).

Considering the relationship between media representations and athletes' identities, McGannon and McMahon (2016) recently highlighted that practitioners working with professional athletes may encounter difficulties if they employ narrowly focused individual solutions that overlook broader cultural influences from the media. Mayweather's and Pacquiao's professional identities portrayed congruence between their cultural backgrounds and their storied media representations, showcasing how athletes' cultural identities can be respected within their media personas. One challenge for practitioners working with athletes through major events, such as a world title bout, is that these events do not happen frequently. Athletes may only have one opportunity throughout a career to experience such a monumental high-performance context. Practitioners working with athletes through these quasi-normative transitions (e.g., Olympic Games, professional world title bout, etc.) can improve athletes' preparedness by drawing similarities between the athletes' past experiences and their "novel" post-transition context. Although researchers generally acknowledge that transitions are facilitated when athletes are informed about their post-transition context (Stambulova et al., 2009), Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers highlight how practitioners can pull from experiences throughout a career pathway to create familiarity in potentially "once in a lifetime" opportunities. Practitioners working with athletes through normative and quasi-normative career transitions can support athletes by re-framing post-transition contexts in alignment with their past experiences.

Beyond reframing past experiences in alignment with contextual demands, practitioners and support staff should be mindful of boxers' personal and career histories to help inform important future decisions regarding boxers' careers, including matchmaking and more general career planning. When a boxer's management and promotional teams receive bout offers from a potential opponent's representatives, those personnel must help decide whether the bout on offer is in the best interest of their boxer before entering negotiations. These decisions regarding opponent selection and bout scheduling are of great importance in shaping the athlete's career, for better or worse. Thus, in addition to several important considerations, practitioners may also wish to consider each bout offer in light of the athlete's career with regards to their history of facing and rebounding from disappointments. For instance, athletes who have previously faced difficult opposition, and consistently shown an ability to rebound for setbacks, may be better suited to accept bout proposals that offer high risk-high reward. In contrast, athletes who have been carefully protected throughout their professional campaigns, and not consistently demonstrated the capacity to overcome novel challenges, may be better suited by a bout selection designed to incrementally introduce challenges of greater difficulty over a longer period to ensure a certain level of psychological preparedness before accepting potential "make or break" bouts.

Results of this study provide some insight into the importance of practitioners and support staff in helping an athlete to reinforce and project a strong athletic identity that will be represented in the media portrayals and help to constitute a boxer's brand. It is important to acknowledge that in professional boxing, an athlete's career potential is not only determined by athletic accomplishments, but also the ability to generate revenue in

the form of ticket sales. Both boxers were presented to their fans through enticing media personas. Mayweather's audiences could anticipate a boxing match wrought with technical prowess and skill whereas Pacquiao's audiences could count on an action packed bout that promised "big blows" and a dramatic finish, in keeping with how they were branded. As much as career paths can be culturally differentiated on a broad scale, practitioners once again need to be aware of contextualized underpinnings within their sport subcultures (Schinke & McGannon, 2015). Mayweather and Pacquiao's storied media personas augments our understanding that practitioners in professional sport contexts need to consider their client's marketability alongside their sport specific development.

Media plays an enormous role in constructing an athlete's identity and public persona, and therefore it is media professionals who make determinations about how any athlete should be portrayed and what information about them should be presented, based on what those professionals believe will garner their media corporations greatest readership/viewership – whether flattering or unflattering to the athlete. Athletes though, have the power to choose what they do (and do not) present to media professionals. Professional boxers should use this power to present themselves in a way that will likely appeal to the public, in terms of garnering interest (and potential fans) and putting forth narratives that evoke images of strength and success. These narratives may be endearing to audiences, though need not be. As an illustration, Floyd Mayweather was not considered to be an exciting fighter outside of boxing purists, and was not especially charismatic. Despite many casual sports fans finding his style of boxing to be tedious and frustrating to watch, Mayweather projected himself as a sure-of-himself boxing master

whose ability could not be matched – a public persona (or brand) that appealed to masses, even if they were tuning in in hopes to see him lose.

Finally, for practitioners, considering the boxers' life stories through a broad lens, including both their sport and personal experiences, provided insight into how media sources layer athlete identities in relation to their sport context. Athletes working through transitions in their development will benefit if practitioners pull from many facets of the athlete's stories to create an athlete "brand" conducive to their subscribed sport.

McGannon and McMahon (2016) stated that through "...data derived from media sources, sport psychology researchers might learn not only how the athlete's identity is constituted, but how that constitution consequently affects the athlete and who he/she must train alongside" (p 45). To our knowledge, although the relationship between athletes' self-perceptions and their publicised identities has been recognized (McGannon et al., 2012), practitioners have yet to consider how they could use the media as a tool to develop their athletes. The media analysis of Mayweather and Pacquiao's careers suggest that, if managed effectively, practitioners may be able to harness the power of a holistically aligned media identity.

#### **5.4 Directions for Future Research**

The current study represents a step forward in understanding career developments in the context of elite professional boxing, and brings to mind some potential directions for future research. Career developments were examined through media portrayals up until each athlete captured a world boxing championship title. Although the world boxing title represents the most coveted prize in boxing, the vast majority of these boxers have fleeting careers at the top, often losing their title within one or two title defenses

(Schinke, 2004; Schinke & Ramsay, 2009). What is far less common is for boxers to maintain their status as world champions over many years to reach a state of true eminence in the sport. Both Mayweather and Pacquiao achieved this feat in their own careers, going on to win numerous world titles in different weight divisions and building themselves into iconic athletes whose fame and recognition transcended boxing into the greater public consciousness. Future research may wish to examine the career developments of these, or other iconic athletes, as they progress beyond initial professional triumphs and continue to elevate their stature to approach eminence or iconic status as they near the culmination of their careers. Media data could be vital to researchers interested in exploring career development as athletes ascend towards eminence. Since eminence is as much a measure of public recognition as it is of achievement, research could examine athletes' evolving identities and brands – represented through sport media – as they work to remain at the pinnacle of their sport.

As this research has helped to illuminate the importance of both boxers building an effective brand, it is not unreasonable to infer that constructed media identities and an athlete's brand would be of paramount importance to understanding these athletes' continued development towards greatness. Furthermore, examining how an athlete's brand and espoused athletic identity changes and evolves beyond a world championship victory and towards potentially greater recognition and eventual retirement. Exploring constructed athletic identities and brands is especially interesting in the context of elite professional boxing, given the sport's unique economic structure. Bout viewership drives ticket sales (at the box office and through pay-per-view services) and boxers are, in effect, marketed as products for consumption. In this way, "success" as a professional

boxer, in terms of popularity, opportunities, earning potential, longevity, etc., is not a pure meritocracy dependent only on an athlete's skills and successes in the ring. Rather, it is to some significant degree based on the effectiveness of a boxer's brand in attracting an audience for his bouts and building a fan base. Researchers may be interested in further exploring athletes' constructed "brands." In particular, research could be aimed at identifying the factors that may differentiate between the effective brands of boxers who've reached eminence, and the less effective brands of professional boxers who, despite tremendous talent and success in the boxing ring, have been unable to penetrate mainstream boxing audiences and reach eminence.

### **5.5 Final Remarks**

The current project explored storied media narratives representing the career developments of two world champion boxers, from their earliest involvements in boxing towards winning their first world boxing championship titles. Media narratives offered a whole-person presentation of both athletes that, rather than requiring a narrow focus on training and competition experiences, made it possible to consider athletes more broadly as people. This exploration revealed interesting nuances in athletes' career paths, including differentiated transitions into a professional career, influenced by contextual and circumstantial idiosyncrasies, which were understood through adopting a culturally informed view. While it must be acknowledged that media data contained narratives of athlete experiences as selected and recast by boxing writers, the utilization of media data both made this project possible, and provided insight into the interplay between athletes' personal biographies, projected identities, and media portrayals to construct a coherent athlete "brand." This project helps to position professional boxing as fascinating context

within which future research may wish to further explore athletic career developments and the role of sport media shaping in athletes' professional careers.

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**Appendix A – Exemption Form from the Laurentian University REB**



**Laurentian University Research Ethics Board**

***The role of career transitions in reaching athletic eminence: A qualitative study of two iconic professional boxers 2012-11-04***

This is to certify that Justin Bonhomme has submitted this proposal to the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board on November 9, 2012.

Considering

- The project does not involve direct participation of human subjects
- The data will be collected from resources freely available to the public where the boxers of interest to the researcher would have no expectation of privacy

the project has been declared by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board to not be subject to ethics review at this time.

Any modification of the purpose of the project will immediately require a new REB application.

Signed 

Chair

**Date: November 12, 2012**

**Appendix B – Contrasting Mayweather and Pacquiao’s Career Paths**

	<i>Floyd Mayweather Jr.</i>	<i>Manny Pacquiao</i>
<b>Date of Birth</b>	1977-02-24	1978-12-17
<b>National Origin</b>	United States of America	Philippines
<b>Family Boxing Legacy</b>	Yes	No
<b>Family Income Status</b>	Poverty / Near poverty	Extreme poverty
<b>Sociocultural Orientation</b>	Relatively individualistic	Relatively collectivistic
<b>Early Boxing Participation</b>	Unelected; Relatively parent-directed	Elected; Relatively self-directed
<b>Amateur Sporting System</b>	Well-funded	Poorly-funded
<b>Amateur Status Attained</b> Olympic bronze medalist, 3x National champion	Highly decorated; Regional amateur experience, No notable accolades	Non-decorated;
<b>Entry Into Professional Boxing</b>	Age 19	Age 16
<b>Motivation to Succeed</b>	Primarily selfish; Carve out personal legacy	Primarily selfless; Lift family out of poverty
<b>Professional Representation</b>	Outstanding; Highly qualified, Large financial backing	Mediocre; Lesser qualified, Modest financial backing
<b>Quality of Opponents</b>	Relatively linear progression; Increasing quality of opponents	Relatively non-linear progression; Variable quality of opponents
<b>Early Professional Reputation</b>	Boxing prodigy; Impressive young prospect, Extraordinary skill	Tough club fighter; Exciting charismatic slugger, Remarkable grit
<b>World Title Victory</b>	Long-anticipated by pundits	Unanticipated by pundits

## Appendix C – Thematic Map

Career development  
from childhood to  
world boxing title

### **Theme I: Weathering Hardships of Early Life**

*Subthemes:* (1) The rough life of an inner city kid, (2) Abject poverty in war torn Philippines

*Summary:* Mayweather and Pacquiao described enduring hardships throughout their formative years, sharing the characteristics of poverty, instability and violence. The athletes credited these difficult experiences with igniting a deep-seeded motivation to better their circumstances.

### **Theme II: Entry Into Sport**

*Subthemes:* (1) Groomed to fight, (2) Boxing to escape poverty

*Summary:* Mayweather was born into a boxing family and immersed in boxing culture from infancy, where he was groomed to fight from a very young age. Pacquiao, in contrast, discovered boxing as a preteen and developed a passion for the sport, which he viewed as a means to lift his family out of poverty.

### **Theme III: Amateur Experience**

*Subthemes:* (1) Olympic medallist en route to pros, (2) Struggling amateur with dreams of greatness

*Summary:* Mayweather achieved national and international success as an amateur, while Pacquiao competed as a junior amateur in the Philippines with regional success. While details of these amateur careers contrast, both athletes relied on success as amateur boxers to position themselves for a professional career.

### **Theme IV: Launching a Professional Career**

*Subthemes:* (1) Impressive American prospect, (2) A charismatic, unpolished slugger

*Summary:* Both athletes compiled a string of impressive wins as young professionals. Mayweather gained attention in the U.S. pro boxing circuit as an impressive American prospect, while Pacquiao competed in the relative obscurity of the Philippines garnering a reputation as an unpolished slugger.

### **Theme V: Capturing a World Title**

*Subthemes:* (1) The much-anticipated world champion, (2) The unexpected world champion

*Summary:* Mayweather and Pacquiao both earned a world title shot and won impressively in their first world title bouts, each earning a stoppage victory over an experienced world champion to capture super featherweight, and flyweight, world titles, respectively.