

Diversity in Intercollegiate Athletics: The Perceptions of Student-Athletes

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**Diversity
Abstract 2009-247**

**May 30, 2009
4:00 PM**

**25 minute oral
(Richland B)**

There has been a growing internationalization of many sports leagues around the world. In Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, the National Hockey League, and numerous professional soccer leagues around the globe, athletes in increasing numbers are crossing national borders for the purposes of sport. The same trend toward increasing internationalization has been taking place at the collegiate level in the United States. According to an NCAA study (DeHass, 2008), international student-athletes comprised 6.2 percent of all athletes at the Division-I level in 2006-07, up from 2.4 percent eight years earlier (Wieberg, 2008). In certain sports, the number of international student-athletes is particularly striking. For example, 49.9 percent of women's tennis rosters and 38.4 percent of men's tennis rosters were comprised of foreign student-athletes in 2006-07 (DeHass, 2008).

This increase in the number of foreign student-athletes participating in collegiate sports poses a number of questions for sport management scholars to consider. Despite the growing number of foreign student-athletes involved in intercollegiate athletics, little research on the topic appears in the sport management literature. Previous research has been limited to understanding foreign student-athletes' motivations for coming to the United States (Bale, 1991; Berry, 1999; Jones, Koo, Kim, Andrew, & Hardin, 2008) and their adjustment to the American system (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a, 2000b). In fact, the researchers involved in the current study previously examined the motivations of international student-athletes in coming to the U.S. (Love, Kim, & DeSensi, 2008). The findings of the previous study indicated that the primary attraction for foreign student-athletes coming to the U.S. was the unique opportunity provided by the American system that allows individuals to study toward a college degree while continuing to participate in sport at a high level. Secondary motivations for international student-athletes coming to the U.S. included the opportunity to learn about and experience a new culture, become fluent in the English language (for non-native English speakers), and "grow up" or become more mature.

Given the rising number of international student-athletes and the relative lack of research on the topic, the current study has been designed to a) examine the perceptions of both domestic and international student-athletes about the current status of having international athletes in U.S. college sports and to b) compare and analyze the perceptions of the two groups on issues such as the perceived fairness of scholarship distribution and playing time.

Qualitative interviews with 12 student-athletes who participated in sports at NCAA Division-I institutions were conducted for the current study (six international student-athletes and six domestic athletes). The athletes came from a variety of sports, including baseball, golf, swimming, tennis, volleyball, and track and field, all of which are sports in which teams have aggressively recruited international student-athletes. All of the international student-athletes were either current juniors, seniors, or graduate students from Division-I programs and had been in the U.S. at least for two years. All of the domestic student athletes, meanwhile, had been teammates with at least three international student-athletes during their collegiate careers. The researchers met with each participant and conducted interviews ranging from 25 to 50 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers. The researchers attempted to ask open, probing questions, such as "Please tell me about your experience with international student-athletes" (for domestic students) and "Please talk about any cultural differences that you did not understand when you first met US student-athletes" (for international students). In the process of data analysis, the researchers used techniques such as analytic induction and comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to find common patterns present in the participants' responses. In general, both domestic and international student-athletes showed positive attitudes regarding the presence of international student-athletes in NCAA sports. Specifically, domestic student-athletes tended to have no problems with the situation other than early language barriers and cultural differences with which they were not initially familiar. Rather than looking at cultural differences as barriers, domestic students seemed to enjoy the environment provided by having international team members. As identified by the student-athletes in this study, positive outcomes resulting from the presence of international athletes on a team included cultural learning experiences, improved work ethic, maturity, and increased team competitiveness. Potential negative outcomes reported by student-athletes included decreased community support resulting from a lack of domestic or local athletes on a team and miscommunication among players due to cultural and language differences. On the issue of fairness regarding the distribution of scholarships between international and domestic student-athletes, both groups commonly perceived that the procedures employed by their coaches were fair and thought that international student-athletes, who are usually recruited because they are among the top performers on their team, deserved to receive scholarships over domestic student-athletes.

2009 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2009)

The results indicated that both domestic and international student-athletes held generally positive opinions regarding the presence of international athletes in college sports. Additionally, both groups perceived fairness regarding the distribution of scholarships and playing time given to international student-athletes so long as the decisions were based on each individual's contribution to the team – distributive justice (Deutsch, 1975) – and the procedures that coaches employed to make those decisions were fair to everyone – procedural justice (Folger & Konovsky, 1989). Given the growing number of international student-athletes participating in NCAA sports, there appears to be great potential for further research in this area. As previously noted, prior research on the topic has been primarily limited to the areas of foreign student-athletes' motivation for coming to the U.S. and their process of adjustment to the American system. The current study makes an addition to the literature by providing some insight regarding the perspectives of domestic and international student-athletes on the presence of foreign athletes on NCAA teams. Being the first study to examine issues of fairness from the perspective of domestic and foreign student-athletes, subsequent research may expand in this area by sampling a wider range and greater number of individuals. In addition, as most of the current research on the topic has focused on the experiences and perspectives of student-athletes, future research may expand to focus on the experiences and perspectives of coaches, administrators, and fans.