Life After Hockey: An Examination of the National Hockey League’s Career Transition Program

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For professional athletes, the end of a career typically results in a significant period of change, and involves transitioning away from activities which previously required a great commitment of time, energy, and role identification (Baillie & Danish, 1992). Schlossberg (1981) contended that a transition occurs “if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). Having the potential to result in personal growth or self-deterioration (Moos & Tsu, 1976), transitions, such as those faced by professional athletes at retirement, have often been found to be fraught with difficulties (psychological, social, occupational, organizational, or physical in nature; Lavallee, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Edge, 2000). For those athletes who have been independently incapable of overcoming such difficulties, or for those who have simply required some form of transition-related assistance, a variety of interventions have been made available.

Included among such interventions have been athletic career transition programs. These programs (managed primarily by national sport governing bodies, National Olympic Committees, sport-specific federations, academic institutions, and independent organizations linked to sport), varying in format, have generally allowed for participants to learn about personal management skills, vocational and professional occupations, managing social relationships, balancing one’s lifestyle, and other aspects relevant to career termination (Anderson & Morris, 2000). The existent body of athletic career retirement literature, laden with studies regarding athletes and the process by which they transitioned from either professional or elite amateur/scholastic sport (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000), has, however, been scant of studies regarding such programs. The paucity of inquiry in this regard led Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee (2004) to call for further evaluative research: a clear need remains to examine the effectiveness of the service provided by these programs in terms of outcomes (e.g. job placements made) or changing behavior, not only in view of furthering our understanding on how best to help personal development and performance of athletes through the provision of sports career transition services, but also in view of accountability (p. 17).

Attending to this gap in the athletic career retirement literature, the intent of the present study was to assess the impact of one program’s interventions and services on retirement adjustment/alumni quality of life; the particular program being that of the National Hockey League (NHL; North American men’s professional ice hockey), the Life After Hockey program.

Loosely framed by the stakeholder approach to assessing organizational effectiveness (effectiveness being tied to the state/perceptions of the individual program participant; Connolly, Conlon, & Deutsch, 1980), the study was divided into two phases of inquiry. In the first of these two phases, multiple data collection methods (interview [with program representatives], document analysis, and non-participatory participant observations) were employed to generate a description of the program’s services and general processes (what Patton, 2002, termed as the “bedrock” for program evaluation, p. 438). Much of this description was formed from 62 single-spaced pages of transcript data that resulted from a single semi-structured interview with Dr. Dale Jasinski, the program’s Executive Director, and Mr. Duncan Fletcher, the program’s Manager. In the second phase of the study, retired professional hockey players/program alumni (the primary/lone stakeholder group of interest) were sought out to not only provide a personally meaningful review of their athletic career transitions, but also assist the researcher in realizing how these transitions were affected by the Life After Hockey program. In all, 17 NHL/program alumni participated in single, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the results of which were 411 single-spaced pages of transcript data.

Data analysis began shortly after the completion of the first interview, and involved an iterative process of: conducting, transcribing, verifying, and interpreting interviews; pursuing new insights; collecting additional data; and challenging, rejecting, affirming, and refining emerging themes. Incorporating qualitative research strategies promoted by both Strauss (1987) and Patton (2002), several rounds of data coding were undertaken. Sensitizing concepts (e.g., causes of retirement, factors affecting the transition process, the effect of the Life After Hockey program) were incorporated to guide this process, and the particular codes and themes utilized were inspired either by the existent retirement literature or the responses of participants (i.e., in vivo codes). Data coding ultimately allowed for both a reduction in the amount of data, and the categorization of that which remained into various themes.

The aforementioned process of analysis revealed, in the view of interviewees, that the Life After Hockey program was largely successful in not only its delivery of various services, but also in its efforts to positively affect the athletic career transitions/quality of life of NHL alumni. In particular, the study participants credited the program for: generating new occupational opportunities, assisting in the acquisition of new skills, enhancing self-confidence, and providing a system of...
continuous support. Undermining an overwhelmingly positively review was, however, a selection of shortcomings; the most common of which pertained to perceived deficiencies in networking capacity, and oversights in marketing-specific training.

Taking into account these findings, and in an effort to better serve the needs and interests of NHL players and alumni, several initiatives were proposed, by the author, to the Life After Hockey program. Generally, these initiatives centered on: addressing the networking-related concerns of past program participants, modifying the existent curriculum, further engaging both current and former NHL players, and providing new services. The program representatives’ perceptions of the proposed initiatives were, however, at the time of this abstract’s submission, unknown.

The implications of this research, within the field of sport management, were not merely limited to a single program. Relatively new career transition programs (e.g., the National Football League’s [NFL] Career Transition Program, Merriman, 2010; the National Basketball Association’s [NBA] Transition Assistance Program, Beck, 2009), for example, may utilize the Life After Hockey program as a referent, particularly with regard to service provision and interorganizational relationship management. Through such application, findings from this study may (directly or indirectly) benefit not only the players and alumni of the NHL, but also those of other professional sport leagues.