Athlete Philanthropy: Motives, Drivers and Intentions

Seung Pil Lee, University of Michigan
Kathryn Heinze, University of Michigan
Kathy Babiak (Advisor), University of Michigan
Matt Juravich, University of Michigan

Abstract 2011-195
Saturday, June 4, 2011
1:35 PM
20-minute oral presentation (Room 9)

Athletes are an important resource that professional sport teams utilize to both make a significant impact on social issues and to garner positive associations for their team (Hamilton, 2004). In addition to the charitable work athletes perform for their teams via community outreach, athletes also frequently engage in their own personal philanthropic endeavors either through direct support of a cause or established organization (e.g., the American Diabetes Association), or through the establishment of their own charitable organization (e.g., Peyton Manning’s PeyBack Foundation). Much of the research in the area of sports philanthropy (including team / league charitable foundations, community outreach, or cause-related marketing efforts) has been at the organizational level (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Brietbarth & Harris, 2008; Sheth & Babiak, 2009). While a few studies have examined attitudes, practices and motives behind individual charitable giving and activity in different contexts (Brown & Ferris, 2007; Freeman, 2004; Jackson, 2001; Kottasz, 2004; Wright, 2001), we know little about the motives behind the formation of individual charitable foundations (i.e., the formalization of philanthropy).

Athletes today garner attention beyond what they do on the field of play, and expectations are increasingly being placed on them by stakeholders to demonstrate charitable involvement (Roy & Graeff, 2003). In addition to these external pressures, ethical and moral motivations and perceptions related to ‘doing the right thing’ may also play a key role in the decisions of athletes to be philanthropic. In the sport context, little academic attention has been paid to the professional athletes themselves as philanthropists. Further, there is little empirical research addressing the motives of individual athletes to formalize their philanthropy. Finally, there has been no research investigating athletes and their foundations from the perspective of social entrepreneurship despite expectations that they take an active role in addressing social causes and issues. Athletes play a key role in the philanthropic community and thus it is important to understand what drives their behavior.

The purpose of this research is to explore the philanthropic motives of individual athletes and their potential social impact as those motives are articulated and realized through their own charitable foundations. Further, the research examines athlete charitable foundations and their initiatives from the perspective of social entrepreneurship. Specifically, we ask the following questions:

(1) What are the motivations behind the formation of charitable foundations? What intentions, attitudes, norms, and ethical factors influence the engagement in charitable activity? What challenges or barriers do athlete foundations face?

2) To what extent do professional athletes view themselves as ‘social entrepreneurs’ (Dees, 1998)? What assets and advantages does this population perceive itself to have that allows it to be able to make a social impact?

To help guide this research, we draw on two theoretical perspectives: The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and social entrepreneurship. TPB suggests that individuals are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms and ethics, and perceived behavioral controls. TPB has been used to predict leisure intentions and behaviors (Ajzen & Driver, 1992), charitable donations (Smith & McSweeney, 2007), philanthropic decisions by corporate executives (Dennis, Buchholtz, & Butts, 2007) and engaging in physical activity (Trafimow & Trafimow, 1998). There has been little empirical research, however, on individual philanthropic activity such as the establishment of charitable foundations using TPB. Thus, our study could create more nuance around TPB in this area. A second perspective we use to explore athlete philanthropy is social entrepreneurship. Dees (1998) defined a social entrepreneur as “adopting a mission to create and sustain social value, recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission, … acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand and exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created” (p. 4). The primary purpose of the social entrepreneur is to create superior social value for his/her clients. Social entrepreneurs’ ability to attract resources (capital, labor, equipment, media attention etc.) in a competitive marketplace is a good indication for their productivity compared to the alternatives they are competing against (Dees, 1998). We investigate to what extent athletes serve as social entrepreneurs and what motivates them in this pursuit.
In our initial exploration of athlete foundations in North America, we found approximately 1122 charitable foundations established or purported to be established by athletes across a range of sports such as NFL, NBA, NHL, MLB, MLS, WNBA, Olympics, PGA, LPGA, ATP, WTA, boxing, and auto racing.

Survey instrument development and data collection. We designed a survey based on an integration of variables related to the Theory of Planned Behavior to gain a deeper understanding of attitudes, behaviors and practices of athletes who establish charitable foundations and their perceptions about themselves as social entrepreneurs. We adapted initial questions about intentions to be philanthropic (using the TPB) from a survey conducted on philanthropy and corporate CEOs by (Dennis et al., 2007) and from the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship from Dees (1998). Data will be collected via an online protocol. Our sample is 800 of the 1122 athlete foundations based on our ability to collect contact information.

For both theory testing and theory development, we will use structural equation modeling including confirmatory factor analysis for each motivational factor using AMOS 18.

Philanthropy in the US makes up a large portion of the funding for social initiatives. Therefore, it is important to understand what motivates such behavior. In particular, we know little about what leads to individual philanthropy. This research fills that gap by examining the antecedents of athletes’ charitable foundations. Important future research questions may explore differences between motives and intentions of charitable giving between athletes who have formalized their philanthropy via the establishment of a foundation and athletes who opt for other avenues of giving (such as direct donations to causes, or giving of their time and ‘celebrity’ persona). Other important questions relate to the longevity of these efforts. Specifically, how long after an athlete retires will they maintain their philanthropic efforts? Future research should also consider additional factors such as organizational or network influences contributing to philanthropic behavior. For example, the culture of the team or organization to which the athlete belongs and the extent to which teammates, coaches, or team executives are also philanthropically inclined may play a role. Answers to these questions would provide a richer understanding of philanthropic behaviors in this highly scrutinized population.

The potential practical implications of this research are twofold. First, we anticipate generating new insights into the motivations behind athletes engaging in philanthropy. This knowledge will serve as a starting point to encourage (or caution) others to establish and manage similar individual charitable foundations from a strategic standpoint. In addition, this research may serve as a foundation for the examination of individual philanthropy in other contexts including political, corporate, entertainment, or the arts.