How You View Them Is Not How They View Themselves: High-Profile Professional Athletes as Organizations

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Upon being asked to give an example of an organization, any given person is likely to name Apple, Nike, Toyota, McDonalds, or various sport leagues and franchises, among a host of other examples. What is it about these entities, however, that makes them an organization? Is it certain characteristics they entail? Organizational studies within sport management typically encompass the examination of the people within the organization, as well as the activities and processes of the organization. While certainly useful, this is potentially limiting because it pigeonholes our conception of what an organization is, viewing those who comprise the organization as simply people. I argue, however, that we can view certain power-broking individuals within these ‘organizations’ as organizations in their own right, researched at macro level and worthy of being analyzed and discussed in the same manner as what we typically think of when we consider organizations. While Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey and others serve as excellent examples, this investigation centers high-profile professional athletes as the unit of analysis.

An organization can be defined as an entity that engages in activities and decision-making practices, while possessing goods and services that are sought after by stakeholders (Thompson & Strickland, 2003). If we understand an organization in this way, there should be no reason why we cannot envision high-profile professional athletes as organizations. Historically, professional athletes have been viewed as stakeholders, or arguably, pawns of organizations, strategically utilized and exploited to grow the financial bottom lines of these organizations. In the American context, in sports such as basketball, football, baseball, and hockey, your everyday professional male athlete is paid handsomely to showcase his talent and athletic prowess in competition, many of whom earn well over a million dollars per year. You then have your high-profile professional athlete who not only garners income from the sport organization that employs them but also gains income through outside business ventures such as appearances and sponsorships and has a host of managers who are employed by the professional athlete (e.g., LeBron James, Tiger Woods, David Beckham, etc.). For instance, Tiger Woods is known to be the world’s first billion-dollar athlete (Badenhausen, 2009).

To date, athletes have been equated to brands (e.g., Chadwick & Burton, 2008, Milligan, 2009) but not as organizations. Therefore, a better understanding of this rationale could offer scholars new insights into their research, as well as offer professional athletes and their managers a new perspective on how to manage athletes’ careers. For this reason, I sought to begin “taking the pulse” of stakeholders of a National Basketball Association (NBA) franchise regarding this issue. To that end, the purpose of this case study was to provide these participants with an open space to present their opinion on how they view high-profile professional athletes.

A qualitative case study design was employed to garner participants’ perceptions. This method served the purpose of the study because of its (de)constructivist nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), permitting participants to reevaluate how we as humans think of organizations. The primary method of data collection was predicated upon semi-structured in-depth interviews with study participants (n=10). Creswell (2002) acknowledged that case study research only necessitate a sample size as little as three, thus making this sample size justifiable. This included three athletes who competed for the franchise, the organization’s content manager, advance scout, assistant coach, sales executive, ESPN radio affiliate, a marketing professional and a lawyer. Interviews were audio recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim. Analysis took place simultaneously with the data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All interviews were listened to continually in order to become more familiar with the words of the participants (Marsh & Rossman, 1995; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Open coding and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) were used to identify themes. To meet trustworthiness standards and ensure validity and accuracy of the participants’ responses, participants were emailed the transcripts and asked to read them for accuracy. Member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journals were also employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995).

Two central themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme, acknowledgement, centered on the participants...
likening high-profile professional athletes to organizations in their own right. For instance, one participant stated the following: “Is the professional athlete in and of itself a business entity? No. Successful professional athletes who understand that they’re more than just the sport they play, yes; they are organizations. They branch out and use their sport as a catalyst to do other things.” One of the athletes stated the following: “Yes, definitely [I am an organization]. I think you have to look at yourself that way. You’re being paid very well; you have business ventures; you have investments, stocks, bonds, whatever. You’re part of a billion dollar industry, so you’re definitely a business yourself. You represent yourself well.” Participants regarded LeBron James as the most relevant example. “LeBron James is the best example right now because he is a business. He’s not just a man; he’s an organization. Every move he makes affects his value.”

The second theme was responsibility. It buttresses the first theme by noting how high-profile professional athletes, just like organizations, have a responsibility to the larger society. This was very similar to what has become known as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Carroll 1979, 1999) and corporate citizenship (Maignan, Ferrell, & Holt, 1999; Walters & Chadwick, 2009). One participant asserted the following: “It’s one of those things, ‘to who much is given, much is required,’ you know. And a lot of them aren’t necessarily comfortable with being role models but if you’re blessed to be in the position they’re in, there’s certain sacrifices you have to make. And you got to carry yourself a certain way, you know. Sure they’re adults, and we’re humans, we all make mistakes but I feel there are certain things you just shouldn’t be involved in.” Participants noted Tiger Woods as an athlete who went wayward and did not follow live up to social expectations. Thus, it would behoove these athletes to employ CSR like principles as a strategy (e.g., Brietbarth & Harris, 2008; Husted & Salazar, 2006; Margolis & Walsh, 2003) in the same manner as typical organizations to safeguard their organization. To do so, they should employ and retain good managers as part of their organization. Scholars have spoke to the notion of encompassing competent managers and the benefit of having these individuals (Castanias & Heflat, 2001; Sirmon, Gove, & Hitt, 2008). If not, they have much to lose such as what happened to Tiger Woods, Michael Vick and other high-profile professional athletes who have committed transgressions. Further support from the data will be provided in the presentation. This includes a comparison of organizational charts of the athlete as an organization and the athlete within an organization (e.g., sport franchise).

The study was certainly not without limitations. For one, interviews only took place with one sport organization. It could also be argued that basketball players are more visible compared to American football or hockey (due to the equipment they wear), thus making them more inclined to be classified as high-profile. Despite this, it supplies a noteworthy first-step in interrogating how we view organizations. Future research should look to build off of this and conduct research with other sport organizations within the NBA as well as other sports leagues. It would be interesting to gain an international perspective from soccer clubs. Like basketball, many of these professional athletes are regarded as high-profile (e.g., David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo). These methods would afford scholars to further analyze these individuals as organizations and come up creative ways to manage this new type of organization.