The Fulfillment of Canadian Student-Athletes in the NCAA

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Annually there are an average of 2,000 Canadian student-athletes between 17 and 23 years of age who move to the United States for their university education and athletic pursuits (Barnes, as cited in Falls & Wilson, 2012). This migration of Canada's athletes across the border to play in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has been met with concern on the part of Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), the governing body for intercollegiate athletics in Canada, who believe this is resulting in a talent-drain in Canadian university sport (Hastie, 2013).

At first glance, one might easily understand why a Canadian student-athlete would choose to move to the NCAA for their athletic and academic pursuits. The cultural framing of 'full-ride' scholarships offered by universities and colleges illustrates the idea of a 'free-ride' with tuition, residences and meals taken care of for college athletes (NCAA, 2012). By contrast, CIS institutions offer Athletic Financial Awards, which cover only tuition and compulsory fees (CIS, 2013). In addition, the spectator support and media attention for intercollegiate sport in the NCAA dwarfs that of the CIS, leading to a culture where the focus by Canadian youth, teachers, coaches and parents is on the pursuit of a post-secondary athletic career 'down South'.

However, alternative discourses shed light on the lives of some NCAA student-athletes in the U.S. Hanlon (2006) argued that student participation in intercollegiate athletics is not treated as an extra-curricular activity but as an occupation whose workers are not given protection from their employers. And while the 'full-ride' ideal remains a hallmark perception projected by recruiters across the U.S., many collegiate athletes face the possibility that their scholarship will not be renewed (Hanlon, 2006). Additionally, Dyck (2011) stated that Canadian athletes who do not receive full scholarships may pay significantly more money than if they stayed in Canada.

Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study is to analyze the experiences of Canadian student-athletes who move to the NCAA for their post-secondary pursuits. Specifically, my research will document how the "practical consciousness" (an idea or belief that has come to be accepted as given) of student-athletes regarding the NCAA evolved over their time in the U.S. collegiate sport system, and how fulfilled they felt from an athletic and academic perspective. There is limited literature on the experiences of Canadian student-athletes in the NCAA, and no current research on whether or not they were fulfilled in their post-secondary endeavours in the U.S. Through the use of Giddens' (1984) duality of structure framework, this study will analyze how Canadian student-athletes were shaped over their experience in the NCAA, whether or not they were faced with dilemmas, and how they responded to those conflicts. Paraschak (2000) stated that duality of structure is relevant to sport managers because it incorporates the broader social context in which sport exists and thus shapes the choices of athletes, coaches and administrators. Athletes are not only shaped by the social world of sport but have the ability to shape it as well.

There is previous literature on the experiences of Canadian student-athletes who played intercollegiate sport in Canada, and limited research on Canadians who participated in the NCAA. Miller and Kerr (2002) found that sport played a larger role in the academic decisions of Canadian high school athletes than some may anticipate. Student-athletes tend to define themselves through their athletic involvement (Lally & Kerr, 2005), usually eliminating other interests as they prioritize their training above all else (Harrison et al., 2011). This was consistent with Dyck's (2010) research documenting Canadian NCAA athletes whose athletic expectations left them unable to devote more time to academics. Further, there is also U.S.-based research showing that university faculty and non-athlete student peers hold unfavourable attitudes toward student-athletes (Baucom & Launz, 2001; Simons et al., 2007). There is contrasting evidence that showed benefits for student-athletes due to athletic commitments, such as a reduction in stress and increased time management skills (Miller & Kerr, 2002) as well as helping the transition to college life and living away from home (Falls & Wilson, 2012). In addition, previous literature has noted differences in experiences due to gender and race. Female student-athletes tended to have a higher commitment and success rate in academic life than their male counterparts (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Simons, Van Rheenen & Covington, 1999). African-Canadian
student-athletes often strongly believed that a U.S. scholarship could provide significant social and financial awards, even though this possibility was fairly remote (James, 2005; Singer & May, 2010).

Current research documenting the experiences of Canadian student-athletes has largely focused on motivation from an athletic and academic perspective. However, utilizing Giddens' (1984) duality of structure framework offers a novel approach by providing a broader context from which we can begin to understand how Canadian student-athletes are shaped as they experience the NCAA social structure. Further, exploring fulfillment amongst Canadian NCAA participants offers a unique contribution to the existing literature on collegiate athletics in North America.

Between twelve and fifteen semi-structured, retrospective interviews will be conducted with Canadian student-athletes who participated in the NCAA within the last five years. Participants will be split into two separate pools, the first being Canadians who were former NCAA student-athletes who graduated or completed their eligibility at that institution. The second pool is characterized by Canadians who began their post-secondary career in the NCAA but returned to Canada, many of whom finished their collegiate athletic and academic career at Canadian universities. Broadening the pool of participants allows for exploration of multiple perspectives of Canadians who participated in the NCAA sport structure (Creswell, 2009). Semi-structured interviews allow me to probe to gain further knowledge on a topic from the participant (Markula & Silk, 2011). The interview guide was designed to explore how Canadian athletes were shaped to believe the NCAA was the best destination for their post-secondary lives, how their experiences as an NCAA athlete re-shaped their beliefs, and whether they were fulfilled in their experience. Data collection is currently in progress with analysis projected to be completed by February, 2014. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions will then be coded and analyzed, with major themes being drawn from the data.

From a sport management perspective, this research is useful for North American university athletic departments. For U.S. schools, this study provides a qualitative account of their institutions through the experiences of Canadian student-athletes, which is useful from both a recruitment and student-athlete service perspective. For Canadian athletic departments, this study provides rich insight into the experiences of NCAA athletes whom they would have preferred stayed in Canada for their post-secondary endeavours. A deeper knowledge of these experiences may allow Canadian university athletic departments to adjust their programs to be a viable alternative to the NCAA. This research can also provide recommendations on how university athletic institutions can improve the circumstances of their student-athletes and serve them in a holistic, inclusive manner.