Moving Beyond Passion: Investigating the Motivations of Professional Female Athletes as League Employees

Jami Lobpries, Texas A&M University
Courtney Hodge, Texas A&M University
Adam Cohen (Advisor), Texas Tech University
Gregg Bennett (Advisor), Texas A&M University

Introduction

A recent NY Times article discussed the impact of finances on career decisions of National Pro Fastpitch league (NPF) players and the implications of these economic bearings on players’ motivation for continuing professional sport careers. Five year veteran Amber Patton stated, “I just really hope that this league takes off and people aren’t faced with this decision [of retiring early]. It’s tough, but you have to make a living” (Seminara, 2013, para. 3). While players are intrinsically motivated to pursue their passion of playing professionally, the league’s financial and stability struggles are problematic for sustaining players’ intrinsic behaviors. Thus, the idea of attracting and retaining athletes in a women’s professional sport organization warranted the need to look internally at the athletes currently working towards the growth and survival of women’s professional sports.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the initial and continuing motivations of professional female athletes in the NPF, and subsequently, their needs as athletes and employees in a developing professional league. We contend that understanding player motivations is important for the retention of players and the league’s ultimate survival (Kreitner, 1995). Specifically, this study looks at the athletes as employees of women’s professional sport to draw insights for research, theory, and the sport industry.

Theoretical Framework

To guide our investigation, we adopted Deci & Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory (SDT). Simply stated, motivation is what drives individuals to act or perform. Intrinsically motivated individuals exude feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, freedom, and control (Deci & Ryan, 1985), whereas, extrinsic motivation refers to behavior driven by external rewards or fear (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Researchers suggested motivation was either intrinsic or extrinsic, but upon further examination, investigators realized motivation did not neatly fit into one of two categories (Deci & Ryan, 1987). According to SDT, motivation falls along a continuum, ranging from least self-determined (i.e. amotivation) to most self-determined (i.e. intrinsic motivation) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gagné, Ryan & Bargmann, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested self-regulated behaviors are positively associated with intrinsic motivation and self-determination.

In the sport context, researchers have used SDT to investigate how athletes’ self-determination is influenced by autonomous and controlled forms of motivation (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Cresswell & Eklund, 2005). While scholars provided evidence that autonomous forms of support and motivation generally enhance athletes’ levels of self-determination (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007), Kimball (2007) suggested elite athletes acknowledge the controlling nature of competitive athletics and maintain high levels of self-determination. Furthermore, SDT has proven to be a useful framework for examining elite athletes’ persistence and dropout in sport (Calvo et al., 2010; Ryska et al., 2002).

Methods

This study is in collaboration with the NPF Players Council to monitor and evaluate the league based on the perspective and experiences of current players. Due to lack of empirical research on professional female athletes, it was deemed valuable to gain insight from the athletes themselves. Considering this gap in knowledge, qualitative methodology was selected as motivations for playing in the NPF (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Specifically, two focus groups consisting of eight players, a suitable number recommended by Kruger and Casey (2009), was targeted and achieved. Both focus groups were conducted on Google Hangout due to its cost-effective nature and flexibility in reaching a broad pool of participants (Im & Chee, 2006; Stancanelli, 2010). To gain a deeper understanding of the players' experience, open-ended surveys were emailed to every player on a 2012 NPF roster (n=80). This allowed participants to provide their opinions and feedback without being limited by multiple choice or scales (Choi & Pak; Foddy, 1993). In total, 43 players completed the survey (54% response rate). The two focus groups and 43 surveys were viewed as sufficient due to a high percentage of players participating in the study along with saturation being achieved when data began to repeat itself (Creswell, 1998). Once all data were collected, all three authors began analysis guided by Deci and Ryan's SDT (1985, 2000) which provided a priori categories to assist with the coding. The authors independently analyzed the focus group transcripts and the survey responses line-by-line to determine themes that were revealed from the coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings
The authors discovered five themes in relation to motivation and player needs. The first three themes were recognized as intrinsic, self-determined motivations: (a) the opportunity to compete professionally, (b) being a role model, and (c) growing professional softball. Beyond these self-determined motives, the data revealed there were unfulfilled needs being met by the league which contributed towards players’ continuation: (a) dissatisfaction with leadership, and (b) need for financial compensation. More specifically, needs such as seeing signs of growth and being treated as an employee of the organization were mentioned throughout focus groups and survey responses. Material rewards such as financial compensation were identified by players as a means for making a viable living. Hence, while players are motivated to play for self-determined reasons, their desires begin to diminish when their needs as organizational employees are not met. For example, one player stated, “There needs to be signs of growth in order to stick around. Especially for the older players or when us Olympians decided to play in the pro league.” As the data revealed, some of the games’ best and most marketable players may leave the game early in order to pursue careers which afford them stability and greater financial gains.

Discussion
The authors extend the SDT theoretical framework (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to illuminate the motivation and psychological needs of NPF players. Additionally, our findings illustrate the managerial implications for motivating players and meeting their basic needs. Management literature suggests motivated employees help organizations survive (Kreitner, 1995). Players’ motivations for continuing their careers could play a significant role in the future and survival of women’s professional sports. While these women initially seek professional careers to compete at the highest level and act as pioneers for women’s professional sports, the data suggests the league, or organizational leadership, is not meeting their basic needs nor providing the capacity for these women to achieve their intrinsic, self-determined goals.

In summary, the findings suggest players’ intrinsic motivations may not be enough to sustain a women’s professional sport league. In recent years, the growth of the NPF has plateaued which could be due to the league’s failure to motivate and satisfy its key employees. Results from this study indicate women’s professional leagues may need to look internally first, before they can survive and grow externally (George, 1990). The retention of full-time professional athletes, or professional leagues core product, will be difficult if the leagues fail to satisfy the motivations and needs of their internal customers [i.e. the players] first. Overall, we believe this study sheds light on the current conditions of professional female athletes and contributes to the scholarly work pertaining to women’s professional sport and employee motivation.