Evaluation of an NCAA Sponsored Online Support Group for Career-Ending Injured Collegiate Athletes Transitioning Out of Sports

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Collegiate athletic organizations receive criticisms for the exploitation of collegiate athletes (Beamon, 2008; Zirin, 2013). However, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) claims to support and protect collegiate athletes with a priority on their well-being (NCAA, 2013). Despite NCAA provision of Catastrophic and Exceptional Student-Athlete Disability Insurance Programs and potential for athletic scholarship renewal by collegiate athletic departments, many collegiate athletes suffering career-ending injuries in college sports face the physical and mental consequences of their career-ending injury alone (Stoltenburg, Kamphoff, & Lindstrom Bremer, 2011). A career-ending injury is an injury or illness that restricts an athlete’s participation in further varsity competition in the college sport(s) in which he or she received financial aid (NCAA, 2013). One of the most devastating experiences a college athlete may encounter is forced early retirement due to a career-ending injury (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). This non-normative athletic retirement is a traumatic life event (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985) as these athletes face significant psychosocial adjustments during their transition out of sport (Stoltenburg et al., 2011).

Due to changes in athletic identity and social network, social support is essential during an athlete’s transition out of sport (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997). Career-ending injured athletes without adequate support experience more negative than positive. They perceive a lack of sensitivity and concern from others about their injury and feel others become distant during their recovery (Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997). Individuals who surround the athlete on a daily basis often do not know how to provide helpful support due to lack of personal experience. Besides distancing themselves, they may minimize its importance, avoid talking about it, criticize the athlete’s attempts at coping and/or encourage a quick coping process, and give inappropriate advice (Lehmen, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986). During interviews with men who suffered spinal cord injuries while playing in the English Rugby Football Union, Rees, Smith, and Sparkes (2003) discovered the paralyzed men obtained strength and support from talking with others suffering similar injuries. They understood each other and gave each other helpful advice. Currently, there is no organized communication method to help connect career-ending injured collegiate athletes with similar athletes across the United States.

Since the NCAA is a governing body with access to each member school and claims to advocate for collegiate athletes, what communication service(s) could it provide to help collegiate athletes who suffer career-ending injuries connect with one another during their transition out of college sport? Providing online support is one method...
proven to be effective in increasing the quality of life for individuals undergoing traumatic life events (Osei, Lee, Modest, & Pothier, 2013). This study’s sample consists of former male and female NCAA Division I collegiate athletes from four athletic conferences (ACC, Big Ten, Horizon League, and MAC) who suffered career-ending injuries while actively playing on athletic scholarship within the last five years. Objectives of this study are to explore the unique experiences of these athletes during this traumatic event, identify their impressions regarding the NCAA’s handling of career-ending injuries and discover the types of programs they desire from the NCAA to facilitate their transition out of college sport. This qualitative study will seek information about the ideal services they want to receive and their preferences regarding channels of communication when utilizing an NCAA sponsored support group. Overall, the researchers want to determine the likelihood of this group of athletes utilizing an NCAA sponsored online support group that incorporates their ideal services and preferred channels of communication.

Participants will be identified through a purposive criterion method using snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Contact information for the athletes who have suffered a career-ending injury will be obtained from university head athletic training coordinators. A semi-structured telephone interview guide will be used to gather information related to study objectives. Researchers will present participants with the same scripted set of questions proceeding in the same order. However, clarification and elaboration probes will be used to collect additional information related to specific topics (Patton, 2002). Upon achieving efficient verbatim transcriptions of each interview, the primary coders will use initial coding during the content analysis phase to condense information gathered that related to the research objectives. During the inductive analysis phase, pattern coding will be used to further develop themes and categories that answer the study objectives (Saldana, 2009). The process of coding and forming themes will continue until the final higher order themes have been established (Patton, 2002).

Based on previous studies showing the negative psychosocial effects of collegiate sport career-ending injuries (Klieber & Brock, 1992; Stoltenburg et al., 2011) and the positive effects of online support groups on individuals that face traumatic life events (Osei et al., 2013), the researchers predict that the majority of the participants believe they received inadequate attention and support services from the NCAA. The researchers also predict that when given the option to participate in an online support group for career-ending injured athletes, participants will utilize the service if it incorporates their desired channels of communications and service benefits. Although a work in progress, this paper will examine and discuss the real-life experiences, thoughts, and opinions of collegiate athletes who suffered career-ending injuries as well as identify intervention methods and implications practitioners can use to help ease their transition out of sports. This preliminary study will provide a foundation for future studies regarding the helpfulness of online support groups for career-ending injured athletes.