Team Impact! An Exploration of Athlete Philanthropic Foundations and Perceptions of Team CSR

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The scholarly literature addressing the charitable foundations of professional athletes is in its infancy. Similar to sport organizations, the resources and media platforms available to professional athletes can make their philanthropic organizations quite valuable in support of a charitable cause (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Tainsky & Babiak, 2011). While advancing the charitable cause is the most important outcome, the scholarly literature suggests there are other outcomes of athlete philanthropy that warrant exploration.

Early work addressing the philanthropic foundations of professional athletes have sought to understand which athletes are starting these foundations (Tainsky & Babiak, 2011), the motivations behind the establishment of a foundation (Babiak, Mills, Tainsky, & Juravich, 2013) and factors influencing donations intentions (Kim & Walker, 2013). However, one area that has not received focused examination is the relationship between the athlete’s philanthropy and the athlete’s team. The work of Tainsky and Babiak (2011) revealed a potential relationship, but the details of that relationship were beyond the scope of their examination. As such, this exploratory study seeks to begin addressing this gap in the literature.

Guidance as to the impacts of philanthropy can be found in the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature. CSR practices, including charitable endeavors, have been shown to result in a number of benefits for an organization such as engendering positive feelings (trust, openness) towards the organization (Weber, 2008). This particular benefit is vital to organizations, as it can influence a wide array of outcomes from consumer behavior (Kim & Walker, 2013) to employee relations (Bhattacharya, Sen, & Korschun, 2008; Weber, 2008). While sport organizations may not be directly involved in an athlete’s charitable efforts, it would behoove the organization to understand if the outcomes of such philanthropic work impact the organization. As such, the primary question guiding this study pertains to the impact an athlete’s charitable foundation has on fans’ attitudes towards the athlete’s team.

The CSR literature also suggests several factors may influence this prescribed relationship. Within the exploratory nature of the current study, two key factors (i.e., awareness of CSR efforts and team identification) were identified. More specifically, the literature indicates that awareness of CSR efforts may be a precursor to the exploration of any outcomes of CSR (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Walker & Heere, 2011). It stands to reason that in order for sport organizations to reap the benefits of CSR practices, stakeholders must be aware of those practices. Thus, awareness was included in this examination.

Furthermore, team identification has been identified as a variable in CSR outcomes. Building on social identity theory, scholars in sport have examined team identification in such topics as consumer behavior (Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007) and CSR outcomes (Inoue, Mahan, & Kent, 2013; Walker & Kent, 2009). Specific to the context of this study, team identification has been found to have a moderating effect on a number of CSR outcomes, including donation intentions (Inoue et al., 2013) and reputation (Walker & Kent, 2009). Additionally, Kim and Walker (2013) found identification with a particular athlete to play a role in donation intentions to the athlete’s charitable organization. As identification has regularly been found to be significant in the literature, the inclusion of team and athlete identification as variables was deemed prudent for use in the present study.

Given the background above, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: Fan attitudes toward an athlete’s charitable foundation will impact the attitudes towards the athlete’s
organization.
H2: Fan awareness of the athlete’s charitable foundation will impact the attitudes towards the athlete’s charitable foundation.
H3: Fan awareness of an organization’s philanthropic efforts will impact the attitudes towards the athlete’s organization.
H4: Fan identification with the player will moderate the relationship between the awareness of the player’s charitable foundation and the attitudes towards the athlete’s charitable foundation.
H5: Fan identification with the organization will moderate the relationship between the awareness of the organization’s philanthropic efforts and attitudes towards the organization.
H6: Fan identification with the organization will moderate the relationship between the attitudes towards the athlete’s charitable foundation and the attitudes towards the organization.

In order to address these hypotheses, the research team will examine the case of one major league baseball franchise. This franchise has four players with established philanthropic foundations. A 73-item questionnaire comprised of adapted items previously used in the literature (Dean, 2002; Mael & Ashford, 1992; Russell & Russell, 2010; Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003; Walker & Heere, 2011) will be electronically distributed to a convenience sample of sport fans located in a number of different media markets. Data analysis will include the use of structural equation modeling, regression analysis, and descriptive statistics.

The results of this exploratory study will provide a foundation for future explorations examining the relationship between the charitable foundations of an athlete and that athlete’s team. The study will offer clarity to this central relationship, along with beginning to identify what factors influence this relationship. Practically, the study offers guidance to sport organizations in regard to the marketing efforts and potential benefits of the personal philanthropy of the organization’s athletes.