The “Has-Been” Effect: Assessing Perceived Well-Being from College Sport Participation

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The question is straightforward: Do former college athletes perceive their participation in college sports as a worthy investment of their resources, time, and effort? The impetus for this research stems from the observation that despite growing uncertainty of actual long-term physical, social, and economic benefits, young people still clamor for college athlete status. Although there are some scholars who have argued that participation in high school and college athletics leads to greater labor marketability and economic well-being in later life (see Barron, Ewing, & Waddell, 2000; Ewing, 1995, 1998, 2007; Henderson, Olbrecht, & Polacheck, 2006; Long & Caudill, 1991; Sack & Thiel, 1979), others continue to debate the post-graduation benefits derived from athletics (see Beamon, 2008; Eide & Ronan, 2000; French, 2004; Staurowsky, 2013). While there is some evidence that former athletes garner higher wages than their non-athlete counterparts, Henderson et al. (2006) found that the distribution of wage premiums by occupation was not uniform (i.e., some athletes earned less than non-athletes). This view complicates the opinion held by Pargman (2012) that student-athletes should be allowed to major in sport to end the ‘charade’ of academic enrollment and gamble future economic earnings on a professional sport contract. Thus, post-graduation benefit in terms of economic well-being for the majority of student-athletes without professional sport prospects remains questionable.

Similarly, participation in college sports is generally viewed as a positive social exploit, but that too is an increasingly debatable claim. While the social motivations for engaging in college sport in the first place may differ (e.g., leisure, prestige, belonging, normative pressure, etc.), social well-being assessed as an outcome is under-theorized (see Fox, 1997, 1999; Mill & Hoffman, 2009; Reinboth & Duda, 2006). Former student-athletes are instrumental in determining the socioeconomic value of college sport participation by providing a degree of critical distance to appraise an activity which is so physically and emotionally engrossing at the time. Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to complicate the question asked at the outset by probing the lived experiences of former student-athletes to understand the perceived socioeconomic well-being of participating in college sports when life after graduation can be used as a point of comparison.

Socioeconomic well-being has been conceptualized by some in terms of capital (see Morrow, 2008). Although the schema by which capital facilitates productive activity has been theorized by many (see Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000), scholars generally agree it centers on exchanges of economic, cultural (or human), and social capital. Social capital takes a center role in this project and is approached from two unique theoretical standpoints. The first is offered by Bourdieu (1986), who defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resource which is linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 249). On the contrary, Coleman (1988) offered that social capital is the change in relations between people to facilitate social action governed by rational action (utility maximization) and social norms (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2007). Thus, where Bourdieu (1986) would argue that the underlying purpose of social capital is to access economic capital, Coleman (1988) would contend that the purpose is to secure human capital in terms of education, technical skills, or expertise.

Bourdieu (1986) approached capital to explain class inequalities and determined that social positioning was due to the distribution of the overall volume of economic, cultural (i.e., human), and social capital. To Bourdieu (1986), social capital was based on the social networks to which people had access or were granted access by way of institutionalized class stratification. In this sense, people use social capital to move across social class boundaries in order to acquire other forms of capital (namely, economic). In this respect, a student-athlete can embody different forms of capital. For example, scholarship athletes are provided quasi-wages (i.e., investment of economic capital) for access to their human capital (i.e., athletic skill). In turn, the athlete invests in their own human capital through
training to gain social capital and access to the exclusive social networks provided by elite sport. Ultimately, the goal is to convert that social capital into economic capital by way of increased future earnings. In this regard, participation in college sports will increase socioeconomic well-being if the student-athlete 1) perceives an increase in their social capital and 2) that increase is followed by social mobility which improves access to economic capital (e.g., professional opportunities, increased wages, etc.).

An alternate view proposed by Coleman (1988) contends that an individual can increase his or her social capital by entering into mutually reinforcing networks of shared norms and values regarding a particular form of achievement. Moreover, the constellation of people within the social network produce enhanced outcomes that are otherwise impossible. In this sense, the student-athlete would perceive their participation in college sports as increasing their socioeconomic well-being if 1) their social capital increases and 2) they are granted access to a social network that increases their access to additional forms or levels of human capital. Put another way, Coleman (1988) would argue that student-athletes perceive value when their social networks are replaced or reinforced with expanded social networks that provide otherwise elusive support through a community of like-minded people with a common purpose.

In this qualitative study, perceptions of socioeconomic well-being of former college student-athletes (n=10) are assessed. Since the focus of this study is to explore how most student-athletes perceive the value of their participation in college sports and not those who transitioned to professional sports, the latter are excluded to avoid exceptional case bias. Through semi-structured interviews, research participants are asked to retrospectively assess their socioeconomic well-being as a result of their participation in college sports. Perceived socioeconomic well-being is interpreted from participant interviews in terms of economic, social, and human capital exchange as conceived by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988).

Implications for this study follow two general themes. First, the critique of college sports is well established and growing, but largely ignores the lived experience of student-athletes. This research brings to the fore a population ‘hiding in plain sight’ while achieving the critical distance necessary for a thorough assessment of human capital investment through sport with obvious opportunity costs and risk. Second, by interrogating the experiences and perceived well-being of former student-athletes, it may be possible to reverse engineer the trajectory of college sports to uncover points of divergence well before reaching the college level. If this is made known, there is a clear opportunity for sport managers and other interested parties (e.g., coaches, parents, etc.) to engage in corrective action early to address the issues that are unwittingly reproduced on college campuses across the country.