Sport Transitions as Epiphanies

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Sport managers design development systems with the intent of retaining and advancing athletes through that system (Green, 2005). Important to this basic goal is the participant’s transition from one sport context to another. Transition research has focused primarily on elite athlete’s adaptation to career transitions as they advance at the highest levels or retire from sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). This orientation places a priority on the external transitions between sport structures before the internal, cognitive development of the athlete. This study examined the transitions of sport participants from an interpretive framework with the goal of understanding the individual’s experience of transition without it necessarily being linked to a typical external change. The sport stories of 48 students at a mid-sized, private university were collected and analyzed utilizing an interpretive paradigm. The disruption stage of these stories represents a time of crisis and transition. Denzin (2001) provided a typology for moments of crisis through four types of epiphanies: major, cumulative, illuminative, and relived. Using this typology of epiphanies can help sport managers to better understand these transition events within the life of the participant. Analysis resulted in each story being coded into one of the four original epiphany types. However, a large number of stories were categorized as major epiphanies. Further inductive coding yielded three sub-types of major epiphanies: major bodily, major life change, and major success. The stories within each type or subtype contained similarities in the speed of transition and the breadth of impact of the transition event. For example, stories of major bodily epiphany shared the immediate, life altering impact of significant injury while stories of cumulative shared the slow realization that the sport context had changed without the participant’s realization. Sport managers will be able to use the results of this study to understand and accommodate the pace and breadth of transition experienced by participants in their sport development systems thus maximizing the retention and advancement to the elite ranks.