The Multicultural Goal: The Acculturation of Foreign Professional Athletes in MLS

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More and more athletes are moving between countries and hemispheres. Professional athletic clubs, which have begun to recruit players from other countries, are buying the best players on the world market in an effort to maintain and/or improve their team’s performance (Dolles & Söderman, 2005). Scouting networks have expanded with the rise in the number of coaches who are recruiting their athletes from all over the world (Weedon, 2012). For example, Poli and Besson (2011) found that the more successful a professional soccer league is in Europe, the more frequently its clubs tend to recruit players from abroad.

Even though the labor migration of athletes performing in top level sports is a constant in today’s globalized world, and sports organizations should be aware of the impact of the potential effects of team diversity, the adjustment process of incoming foreign athletes is not necessarily understood, nor do sports organizations comprehend how this process, in conjunction with team diversity are interrelated with performance on the field (Agergaard & Botelho, 2010). In fact, little is understood about this connection (Weedon, 2012).

In comparison to other migrant workers, professional athletes often face far more difficult challenges: first, they have to compete with their colleagues for their position and playing time; second, their successes and failures are far more public, which adds to the pressure and associated stress; third, most of them are far less educated than migrant businesspersons, with limited language capabilities and lack of intercultural experience; and fourth, they face the distinct challenge of frequent new assignments, sometimes changing teams as often as from one season to the next.

Nevertheless, the expectation to perform at a high level is immediate, regardless of their transition. Moreover, team compositions change at least once a season. As a result, some foreign athletes face problems as severe as psychological trauma (Winter, 2011). Instead of seeking ways to assist these athletes, clubs seem to adapt their recruitment strategies. For example, they appear to be signing only those athletes who are already confident in the local language and culture (Agergaard, 2008), and perhaps avoiding athletes from other countries they had utilized in the past. Of course, this may mean the loss of potentially valuable assets to their teams and ultimately to their teams’ performance (Kuper & Szymanski, 2009).

Method

In this study, I analyzed the cultural and personal adaptation processes taking place when professional athletes move to the United States. I identified factors that both help and hinder the foreign athletes in their acculturation process, with a focus on their stressors and acculturation difficulties. These factors allowed to understand the foreign athletes’ acculturation process from an action-oriented perspective, whereby I learned factors which would assist them in their transition; as a result I could propose recommendations that would facilitate a smoother adjustment. This research may also help increase foreign player retention rates, and ultimately contribute to the improvement of foreign athletes’ performance on the field.

I chose soccer, because it is the most popular sport in the world (Guilianotti, Bonney, & Hepworth, 2013), and consequently, some findings and inferences may be applicable to leagues on an international level. While European clubs attract foreign players through financial incentives, MLS, their American counterpart, attracts both older players desiring “to ease into retirement,” and younger players who choose MLS as a starting point for their international careers (Schaelaeckens, 2012, para. 1). Since the goal of this study was to assess the acculturation process of foreign athletes, and acculturation is more intense for first-time travelers (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011), Major League Soccer (MLS) was particularly suitable for this study due to the influx of early career professionals.

The research consisted of a comparative case study analysis of two Major League Soccer clubs during one season.

The research questions were based on several theories, as well as former findings from the context of the global workplace. My main research question was: How do foreign elite athletes adapt to host and team culture in the
United States? To answer this question and its sub-questions, thirty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with new foreign athletes, their teammates, and staff members.

Findings (excerpt)

The professional athletes seemed to acculturate in a difficult context. While some of them had lived abroad before, their depth level of engagement in the previous host culture and the extent of their other intercultural experiences remains largely unknown. After moving to the United States, the athletes in this study demonstrated an interest in learning about American culture, however, their cultural learning was minimal, which partially supports my hypothesis that experiencing changes in cultural knowledge & behavior on a conscious level facilitates integration.

Furthermore, their proficiency in English seemed to be rather low. Once they realized they were moving to the United States, they lacked time to study the language. The lack of fluency fostered a tendency to experience new life challenges as rather threatening. Their difficulties with English were exacerbated by problems fulfilling even basic needs and impacted them in their athletic environment. In addition, their English language skills did not improve significantly.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a strong correlation between the foreign athletes’ acculturation and their performance success. The relationship seems to go both ways. Performance success, which was a constant struggle, seemed to have a major influence on the athletes’ acculturation. The results indicated that if their performance were not higher than, or at least equal to, the expected level of coaches and management, they were more likely to face homesickness. Nevertheless, since the athletes were very driven to succeed, even in the midst of particularly serious stressors, they accepted their difficulties because they were grateful for the opportunity to advance their careers.

This study also found a relationship between acculturation and individual performance that may go both ways. While their personal performance influenced the foreign athletes' acculturation process, their acculturation difficulties off the field also increased their stress level and resulted in a negative impact on their performance on the field.

Given that serious problems were likely to occur, the athletes indicated the level of support they need to integrate, and revealed that a systematic support structure, primarily from the teams, seems to be crucial for a smooth acculturation process.