Are they Recruitable? Perceptions of Deviant Student-Athletes

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Recently, there has been increased concern regarding the state of big time college athletic programs as news of student-athletes engaging in deviant behavior off-the-field has become common on popular media outlets (Martin, 2014). The deviant behavior of student-athletes has the potential to affect an institution and its athletic program in a variety of ways such as sanctions, development of a negative reputation, loss of public confidence, and financial penalties (Cialdini, Petrova, & Goldstein, 2004; Kihl & Richardson, 2009; Maennig, 2005). Furthermore, the negative ways in which these actions can affect an institution can have long lasting and far-reaching consequences (Frank, 2011; Hughes & Shank, 2008).

Anecdotal evidence and previous research suggest that youth engaged in organized sport are not likely to participate in criminal activities (Carmichael, 2008). This assumption is amalgamated into the broader belief that sport builds character, and that through participation in sport young people are taught to be good citizens (Bredemeier & Shields 2006; Coakley, 2006). In contrast, a substantial body of literature has indicated that sport participation has led to less desirable outcomes (Beller, 1993; Bredemeier & Shields, 1985; Eitzen, 2014), and in the recent past a growing amount of NCAA student-athletes have been accused of engaging in deviant behaviors (Camire & Trudel, 2010; Preis, Krause, & Beach, 1999).

With the increased attention paid by the media to the actions of student-athletes comes the potential for long lasting consequences for institutions. These potential repercussions call into question how members of the public truly perceive the recruitability of a prospective student-athlete who has engaged in deviant behavior. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine public opinion towards the recruitment of an elite student-athlete who has engaged in deviant behavior. Subsequently, this inquiry seeks to evaluate if, within the eyes of the public, athletic ability masks the potential risk of recruiting an athlete who has been accused or found guilty of engaging in deviant behavior. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: Does deviant behavior by a student-athlete impact their recruitability?

RQ2: Are there deviant actions committed by prospective student-athletes that are viewed more negatively than others?

RQ3: What impact, if any, does race have on the recruitability of deviant student-athletes?

RQ4: Do highly identified fans perceive the recruitment of deviant student-athletes differently?

To best answer the research questions, survey research methods were utilized in the form of four vignettes (illegal drug use, assault of a man, assault of a woman, and a control in which no deviant behavior occurred). Additionally, researchers incorporated scales to measure fan identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), CORFing behavior (Spinda, 2011), and recruitability. The researchers developed the items to measure recruitability based on consultation with researchers who have conducted vignette research and study student-athlete development/scandal issues. An exploratory factor analysis showed the recruitability scale measured team fit (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .886$) and behavioral consequences of the athlete’s actions (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .834$).

The survey was created using Qualtrics and administered through Amazon’s mechanical Turk (MTurk), a Web application that assists researchers from a variety of academic disciplines in recruiting a national population for survey-based experiments through offering modest compensation (Sprouse, 2011). MTurk was chosen because it provides quality data that meet or exceeds those of traditional internet samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling 2011; Sprouse, 2011). A total of 323 participants completed the survey questionnaire; of which 147 were men, 172 women, and 4 identified as other. Racially, 241 participants identified as White, 43 as Black, 23 as Asian and 16 as Hispanic. Regarding fan identification, 22.7% of the participants rated as low, 46.6% as moderate and 37% as high.
Results for RQ1 revealed a statistically significant effect for deviant behavior on recruitability, $F(3, 316) = 39.257, p < .001$. An analysis of the vignettes for RQ2 revealed significant differences among the vignettes such that the control vignette was viewed most positively ($M = 5.71, SD = .94$), the illegal drug use ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.64$) and assault of a male vignettes ($M = 4.20, SD = 1.28$) were viewed statistically similar, and assault of a female ($M = 3.43, SD = 1.37$) was the viewed most negatively. Data analysis for RQ3 revealed a significant race and deviant act difference in CORFing behavior, $F(3, 310) = .801, p < .006$. Further examination revealed the difference comes from participant views of Black athletes ($M = 3.56, SD = .231$) that engage in drug use compared to their White ($M = 4.65, SD = .234$) counterparts. The findings of this study are in accordance with the implicit association research (Baron & Banaji, 2006) in that White prospective student-athletes were judged more harshly for illegal drug use than their Black counterparts, suggesting a potential participant bias in assuming Black athletes already use drugs. A comparison of drug use to assault revealed that only cases in which a woman was assaulted was there a statistically significant difference. This finding suggests that aggressive behaviors, such as assault, impact a student-athletes recruitability especially when the assault occurs to a woman. Lastly, addressing RQ4, there was no statistical difference between highly identified fans and their perceptions of recruiting of deviant student-athletes.

Since the current literature has yet to examine the public’s perception of deviant student-athletes, this study stands to inform practitioners and scholars regarding how the public perceives and supports the active recruitment of an elite student-athlete who has engaged in deviant behavior. There were three primary findings from our study: (a) deviant behavior committed by a prospective student-athlete does impact that prospective student-athlete recruitability with assault of a woman being the most severe, (b) White recruits are judged more harshly for using illegal drugs when compared to Black recruits, and (c) highly identified fans are not likely to perceive deviant student-athletes differently than moderately or lowly identified fans.