Professional Athlete Philanthropy and Collegiate Athletes: An Examination of Influence

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As noted in the title of their article examining the philanthropic foundations of professional athletes, Babiak, Mills, Tainsky, and Juravich (2012) state that philanthropy is now “part of the game” in professional sport (p. 159). From contractually obligated charity appearances to establishing philanthropic foundations (Babiak et al., 2012; Tainsky & Babiak, 2011), it is clear that professional athletes are engaged in their communities. While community initiatives and philanthropic foundations have direct beneficiaries, less attention has been devoted to the residual effects of having athletes so visibly engaged in their communities. It is with that in mind, this study looks to further develop this body of literature by addressing how the philanthropic engagement of professional athletes influences the civic engagement of collegiate athletes.

For the collegiate athlete, community engagement is likely a team-based activity. Such service is often required or encouraged by athletic departments (Chalk, 2008), with some collegiate athletes believing service to be part of their obligation (Jarvie & Paule-Koba, 2013). Similar to Babiak and colleagues’ (2012) assertion regarding professional athletes, philanthropic behaviors are “part of the game” for most collegiate athletes as well (p. 159). However, it should be noted that this service is not guaranteed to continue beyond college. In regard to motivations for community and civic engagement, the prevalence of service learning on college campuses has led to a wealth of literature. Previous service in high school (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Jones & Hill, 2003), the influence of peers (Jones & Hill, 2003), and connecting to the community (Hellman, Hoppes, & Ellison, 2006) are among those factors found to contribute to service engagement among college students, though not all factors contributed to sustained service activity (Jones & Hill, 2003).

Given their public profiles, the potential influence the philanthropy of professional athletes has on individuals can be viewed through the lens of celebrity influence (Tainsky & Babiak, 2011). Given this context, social influence theory (Kellman, 1961) offers guidance as to the potential impact professional athlete philanthropy has on collegiate athletes. Through the three processes of social influence, compliance, identification, and internalization, an individual seeks to embody the attitudes and behaviors of a referent other (Kellman, 1961). Likewise, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) supports the idea that behaviors can be learned from influential others. These learned behaviors are dependent on attending the model, retention of the behaviors, the means to reproduce the behaviors, and the motivation to replicate the behaviors (Bandura, 1986).

While the influence of celebrity is clearly detailed in the literature examining celebrity endorsements (see Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004; Choi & Rifton, 2012; McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1990; Ohanian, 1991), Shuart (2007) notes the difference between celebrities and heroes, with heroes being those whose attitudes and behaviors are “worthy of emulation” (p. 128). In considering that semantic distinction, this study chose to focus on the professional athlete’s status as a role model when examining their influence on a collegiate athlete’s future civic engagement.

H1: Among collegiate athletes who believe their favorite athlete to be active within the community, the extent to which the collegiate athlete view their favorite athlete as a role model will positively relate to the collegiate athlete’s intent to become civically engaged.

The literature guiding this study also lends itself to question if the impact of gender on this exploration. The service and engagement literature is clear on gender differences. Women are consistently shown to be more likely to participate in community service than their male counterparts (Chesbrough, 2011). In regard to influence, the outcomes addressing gender are not so straightforward. As suggested by the work of Eagly (1983), the responses are embedded in systemic, traditional gender and sex norms. Baker and Churchill (1977) noted that endorsers of the opposite sex were more effective in influencing consumer behaviors, thus reflecting heteronormative values. In their examination of teen responses to athlete endorsers, Bush et al. (2004) more directly reflect Eagly’s assertion that
women are more likely to be influenced (1983). Bush and colleagues found girls to be more likely to be influenced to speak positively about the brands and products endorsed by an athlete role model than boys (2004). Shuart (2007) separated the constructs of sporting hero and celebrity, however gender differences were still evident. In this study of college students, males were more likely to be influenced by their sporting hero and respond to a male sporting hero as opposed to a female sporting hero (Shuart, 2007), reflecting the gender inequalities in athlete endorsement contracts. Accounting for the literature detailed above and the exploratory nature of this study, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Among collegiate athletes who believe their favorite athlete to be active within the community, the relationship between the extent to which the collegiate athlete view their favorite athlete as a role model and the collegiate athlete’s intent to become civically engaged will vary by gender.

In order to address these hypotheses, a 26-item instrument has been adapted from the extant literature. Of the 26 items, 6 will be demographic, 3 will inquire as to the respondent’s favorite athlete and their community engagement, 3 will inquire as to the respondents experience with philanthropy, and 1 will be a screening question. The extent to which the professional athlete is viewed as a role model will be measured applying Rich’s (1997) 5-item scale. As Bush et al. (2004) previously adapted this model to the sport context ($\alpha = .93$), their phrasing will be used. The collegiate athlete’s intent to become civically engaged will be measured by Moely, Mercer, Illustre, Miron, and McFarland’s (2002) 8-item Civic Action Scale ($\alpha = .86; \alpha = .88$).

Six NCAA institutions across all divisions have been approached regarding the participation of their collegiate athletes in this study, with data collection set to begin in mid-January. The instrument will be distributed electronically with the aid of an administrator on each campus. Utilizing Bush et al. (2004) as a guide, data analysis will include descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, regression analysis, t-tests, and ANOVAs. These analyses will address the hypotheses and any other key demographic differences.

The results of this study will extend the literature by providing insight as to the social outcomes of professional athlete philanthropy. While collegiate athletes may not be the intended recipients of such philanthropy, the influence on this group may have positive benefits for the community. This examination will also examine the effect of gender the intersection of role model influence and civic engagement. Establishing the impact of gender in this context offers additional clarity for future studies.