Transferring Athletic Genius: An Exploration of the Applied Athlete Mindset in Life After Sport

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Sport for Development - Other (College Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
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College sport participation has been linked with social, psychological, and career-related benefits (e.g. Berg, Warner, & Das, 2015; Chalfin, Weight, Osborne, & Johnson, 2015; Inoue, Funk, & Jordan, 2013; Warner & Dixon, 2011). However, elite competitive sport participation can also expose athletes to both short and long-term risks to their mental and physical health (e.g. Brooks, Potter, Carter, & Leal, 2014; Houston, Hoch, & Hoch, 2016). Extant research and a number of high-profile cases have prompted societal concern and discussion surrounding the long-term effects associated with competing in American collegiate sport (e.g., Gayles & Blanchard, 2018; Weight & Cooper, 2015). This growing public health concern includes questions surrounding the long-term mental and physical health outcomes of former collegiate athletes (e.g., Kerr, DeFreese & Marshall, 2014; Simon & Docherty, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to explore the long-term psychological influence of athletics participation on life outside of sport.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with n = 105 subjects who had participated in intercollegiate athletics. Chain-referral sampling was utilized to gain access to a large number of diverse athletes with the sample chains beginning from 10 distinct researchers (Heckathorn, 1997; Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003). Inclusion criteria detailed respondents were to have participated in intercollegiate athletics with a minimum of 10 years post-graduation to garner responses from athletes who were significantly removed from their time as an athlete. Two independent researchers developed themes as the result of both deductive and inductive approaches after reviewing ten transcribed interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2009). The coding schema was then compared, modified, and utilized with the entire sample of interviews.

Results

Nearly all participants noted athletics has had a significant effect on their lives beyond sport. Every participant mentioned experiencing an intensely negative situation through sport that provided a foundation to overcome adversity. Other prominent themes included time management, perseverance, patience, drive, teamwork, athlete identity, academic regret, a dissonance between recruitment and reality, and family support. Though adversity was noted by all participants, each believed the short and long-term benefits have outweighed the negative experiences and were grateful for the experience.

Discussion

As intercollegiate athletics is largely publicly subsidized and is a visible area of the American University system, it seems as though we should have a better understanding of the educational outcomes and purposes of athletics. Toward this end, it is noteworthy to have built a rich data-set of athlete narratives to explore the long-term psychological effect of sport participation. The chain-referral sampling methodology will continue, and the database will grow in an effort to facilitate additional research into retired collegiate athletes. In addition, this study adds directly to previous literature on the educational impact of participation in athletics by outlining specific lasting skills that can be developed through sport participation and applied in non-sport scenarios decades after concluding eligibility. This study also highlights how educational lessons were learned and through that understanding we will be able to further ingrain educational emphases within the organizational structure of intercollegiate athletics.