Athletic Identity and Athlete Satisfaction: An Analysis of Club Sport Athletes

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Created in the early 20th century to govern student-athlete competition, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is responsible for the regulation of nearly 20,000 college sport teams in the United States of America, which equates to approximately half a million student-athletes. Although the NCAA oversees a substantial number of student-athletes and is the predominant governing model for college sport, it is equally important for researchers to address the needs of the largest subset of intercollegiate sport participants in the country: two million club sport athletes.

For the purposes of this study, club sport is defined as “a group of students that voluntarily organize to further their common interests in an activity through participation and competition” (Roberts, Miller, & Wells, 2003, p. 11). Unlike NCAA sanctioned athletic programs, club sport teams are primarily managed by students, suffer from a lack of university allocated funding, and are rarely able to award athletic scholarships (Czekanski & Lower, 2018). Despite the perceived shortcomings of the club sport structure, four times as many student-athletes participate in club sports than participate within the confines of the NCAA.

While the number of club sport athletes is substantially higher than membership within formal bodies, there is a lack of research concerning club sport and participating student-athletes (Glenn, 2015). Previous scholars have explored isolated areas of club sport including leadership (e.g., Flosdorf, Carr, Carr, & Pate, 2016) and participation motivation (e.g., Parietti & Lower, 2016), and though research regarding athletic identity (AI) and athlete satisfaction (AS) exists, researchers have focused predominately on the concepts individually or the AI-AS relationship in contexts other than club sport (e.g., Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2012; Cunningham, Choi, & Sagas, 2008). To address gaps in sport research, the current study employs role theory (Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Biddle, 1986) and the construct of AI (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1990) to assess the relationship between AI and AS of intercollegiate club sport participants. In addition, this research examines the potential mediating effect of person-team (P-T) fit on the relationship between an athlete’s identity and satisfaction (Cunningham et al., 2008).

Utilizing a 42-item survey containing the Athlete Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) developed by Brewer et al. (1990), a modified version of Riemer and Chelladurai’s (1998) Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire (ASQ), and a person-team fit scale (Cunningham et al., 2008), researchers will explore the connection between AI and AS and the potential impact of person-team fit. Data will be analyzed using multiple regressions and correlation coefficients in an effort to better understand AI, AS, and P-T fit as they relate to club sport.

In the intercollegiate sport context where satisfaction likely influences individual retention, club sport assessment, and overall university evaluation, this research should be of interest to those seeking to increase athlete participation in club-based programs, promote inclusion, and uphold high quality campus standards. By investigating antecedents of athlete satisfaction—AI and P-T fit—researchers hope to provide proponents of intercollegiate club sport with information to improve the sustainability of club sport programs.