Commitment and Advancement of Professional Athletes: All or Nothing?

Edward Horne, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Thomas Slotcavage, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Matthew Haugen, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Jon Welty Peachey (Advisor), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Jules Woolf (Advisor), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Sport Development - Sport Development (Professional Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Friday, May 31, 2019  3:25 PM  
Room: Napoleon A1

Abstract 2019-264

Athlete development is a growing area of interest within the sport development domain. However, research on professional athletes’ development is incipient (Brouwers, Sotiriadou, & De Bosscher, 2015). Professional athletes are often ill-prepared for the next phase of their career (Stronach & Adair, 2010), which is a concern, as most athletes will retire and transition directly into a new career. Retirement, however, is often viewed as a single event and fails to take into account the athletes’ entire sport experience. Calls have been made to view this career transition holistically (Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), accounting for the demands placed on professional athletes throughout their development and careers in increasingly commercialized and professionalized sport systems. The purpose of this study, then, is to examine professional athletes’ sport experience and how the design of sport systems impacts their personal development, and therefore their preparations for life after sport.

Athlete retention and athlete advancement, two of Green’s (2005) three essential tasks for athlete development, guided this study. Commitment influences athletes’ desire to remain in their sport. Athletes’ perceptions of the necessary commitments required to advance professionally would have implications for their personal development. As athletes commit to a sport, their involvement in other non-sport activities ostensibly declines. The continued professionalization of sport likely intensifies the perceived levels of commitment necessary for advancement. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:  
1. What commitments do current professional athletes believe are necessary for advancement?  
2. How does professional athletes’ commitment to their sport impact their personal development?

Method

A narrative inquiry approach (Taylor, 2013) was adopted, which involves a systematic exploration of people’s narratives of their life experience. Through the stories people tell about their lives we can learn how their experiences have shaped and influenced their personal development. A purposive sampling technique is being employed to recruit participants at a professional tennis tournament in the Midwest, United States. Twenty male professional athletes will complete semi-structured interviews using Plummer’s (2001) short life story interview approach focusing on their experiences of advancement and commitment to tennis, while concurrently discussing their life experiences outside of tennis. Data analysis will involve thematic and pattern coding using a two-cycle coding process as recommended by Saldaña (2014).

Expected Results and Discussion

As a work in progress, we expect to find professional athletes struggle to balance their athletic commitment with other aspects of their personal lives. Escalating commitment will be viewed as a necessity driven by the competitive nature of their elite sport environment, while also being detrimental to their personal development. Coping strategies will emerge, as will rationalization for excessive commitment. The practical implications of this study will enable managers to better understand the effects sport systems have on athletes’ personal development, such that better strategies for enhancing athletes’ ability to transition into a new career can be designed. This research will also further our theoretical understanding of athlete development, particularly with regards to the often over-looked population of professional athletes.