Finding Foreigners: Examining US College Basketball Coaches' International Recruitment Strategies

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The intersection of elite sport and globalization has allowed for a rapid expansion of sport labor exchanges across the world. While sport labor migration research has tended to keep the spotlight predominantly on the migrant athletes, the role of the sporting coach or manager in recruiting elite international athletes has been under-investigated. This research project focuses on college basketball coaches in the United States due to their central role in deciding recruitment strategies and the recent spike in the number of international student-athletes migrating to the U.S. to participate in the sport of basketball. The 2019 NCAA International Student-Athlete Report shows that 13% and 12% of all active Division I men’s and women's basketball players, respectively, are non-U.S. nationals, representing an overall increase of approximately 5% for each gender category since 2010.

The recruitment of international basketball players by U.S. college coaches is initiated and interconnected through various forms, including but not limited to: FIBA-sponsored international tournaments, sponsorship showcase tournaments, online digital videos, online recruiting services, personal coaching staff networks, junior colleges, prep schools or high schools. Coaches have gone as far as targeting specific regions of the world in search of athletes of a certain sport position. Basketball coaches at the professional and intercollegiate levels have traditionally sought-after international players at the center position compared to point guards, shooting guards, or forwards (Eschker et al., 2004; Turcott & Pifer, 2018). Lastly, in the era of globalization, where sporting managers are able to instantly evaluate and communicate with athletes from long distances, the need for intercultural capabilities have become increasingly necessary in the coaching profession.

The purpose of this research project was fourfold: (a) identify coaches’ Division affiliation and strategies for recruiting prospective international student-athletes; (b) identify future international recruitment efforts; (c) understand basketball positional preference amongst international players; and (d) position intercultural leadership theory as a means of understanding international athlete recruitment. Data was collected from a cross-sectional convenience sample of 351 participating coaches from NCAA, NAIA, and NJCAA colleges and universities. Responses were compared by whether or not the coach reported having ever coached an international player, using Chi square tests for categorical variables and independent-sample t-tests for count variables.

This study will discuss the results of the survey in light of whether preferential recruiting methods correlate with a coach’s intercultural leadership experiences and abilities. Duchesne et al. (2011) found that working with international athletes can aid and develop coaches' cultural competency. Concludingly, this study is a strong indicator of how some coaches are more readily willing to seek players of different backgrounds and nationalities, which could lead to certain advantages by broadening their recruiting options. Coaching staffs with less international connections or staff members who played overseas appear to be more willing to pay for online services that facilitate international player and college coach connections. There also appears to be a pipeline effect where coaches are able to use former international players to grow their international networks in the home regions of formers players.