

Professionalization of Sports and Athlete Post-Career Preparation

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Abstract

Research Question/ Aim of the Paper

How do the professionalization of sports affect the inclination of athletes to prepare for their post-career? Compared to civil careers elite sport careers are relatively short whilst at the same time athletes stake a lot on their careers at a young age, often combining school or apprenticeship and commitment to sport. In sports that offer few possibilities for a professional living athletes must prepare for and enter civil careers alongside their sports career. In professional sports this is not required to the same extent, and accordingly athletes may choose to neglect further education or preparation for a second career. In this paper a study of the relationship between elite sport career and civil education among Norwegian elite athletes is presented and discussed. Theoretical background and methodology

The relationship between elite sport and athlete education seems to have attracted scant academic attention in the European sport setting. In American sport sociology the issue has been raised in relation to university sport scholarships which is believed to promote professional sport veiled as higher education (Slack 2003), and as an ethnical and social issue contained in the effort many skilled lower class youth put into pursuing a professional sports career at the expense of higher education that would magnify their chances for upward social mobility (Hoberman 1997). Besides this sociological "career gambling" approach the issue can also be studied as a post career problem as indicated above, as a sport industry problem since many previous top athletes start a new career in the industry, however with low formal education, or as a career boosting mechanism relating to the view that young athletes with much leisure time need alternative sound foci to balance their concentration on their sport in order to perform well in their sport.

The study was performed as a survey in 2007 among Norwegian athletes in two team sports, women's team handball elite players and men's football elite players. Whilst the latter sport contains almost exclusively professional players in the two top divisions, woman's team handball is still very much an amateur sport in Norway. The study will be compared to a similar Danish survey undertaken in 2002 among Danish football and team handball players (Nielsen, Nielsen, Christensen & Storm 2002), and discussed in relation to other available studies.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The survey reveals that 88 per cent of elite female team handball players take up higher education after secondary school, compared to 46 per cent male professional footballers. 60 per cent of the football players find the sport-education combination difficult, whilst only a few female team handball players do. The study tries to substantiate and explain these differences, relating them to individual as well as organizational factors which are included in the study.

Implications

The perhaps not unsurprising results that professionalization of (team) sports seem to demotivate athletes to further their education to prepare for a second career raise several questions of importance to sport organizations as professional sports expand and the number of professional athletes increase. One issue revolves around the question of whether professional sport in fact creates a social problem for increasingly more athletes and to what extent the responsibility for this is primarily individual or rests with the clubs and associations. Another concerns the question of whether both professional athletes and sport organizations in fact can benefit from addressing the issue more constructively than is the case today.

References

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