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**Career Prep and Transitions of
College and Professional Athletes:
Research Findings, Policy,
and Practice**

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of research findings on the career preparation and transitions of college and professional athletes. Through an exploration of the literature, this paper details areas where studies have been undertaken, where additional inquiry is needed and, where reasonable policy and practice can be implemented to ensure more inclusive, quality or “healthy” career prep and transition process for both college and professional athletes.

Most career transition research—highlighting either voluntarily or involuntarily withdrawing from a career—has been undertaken in settings beyond sport.¹ Yet, empirical research on the career preparation and transitions of college and professional athletes has been steadily growing over the past few decades. Transition studies in sport have documented how the careers of athletes is a complex, multidimensional decision-making process. Transitioning—whether college or professional athlete—after a competitive athletic career ends or even abrupt forced retirement can be brutally challenging. But successfully preparing for and coping with transitions during and after sport increase the chances for an athlete to shift and adjust effectively to quality or “healthy” post-careers and other desirable outcomes.

At the collegiate level, transition research in athletics has focused largely on athlete adjustments to college life (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1991; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011) and the relationship between athlete identity and career transitions (e.g., Beamon

¹ I use the terms sport and athletics interchangeably.

& Bell, 2011; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Kidd et al., 2018; Petitpas et al., 1996; Stokowski et al., 2019). Other studies have revealed that college athletes are not intentionally engaged in and prepared for a range of career options during college (Comeaux, 2013, 2015; Stankovich et al., 2001), and, at times, experience transition distress, anxiety, and depression (e.g., Beamon & Bell, 2011). As well, studies have focused on evidenced-based approaches and career development programs associated with the transition to life *after* college athletics (Comeaux, 2013; Navarro, 2015; Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018).

At the professional level, this transition phenomenon—as early as the 1960s—has mainly been studied by sociologists and psychologists (Stambulova et al., 2009). Research has discovered that antecedents and individual contextual factors play a significant role in the post-career adjustment of professional athletes, with the quality of transition contingent upon the circumstances precipitating their transition (Roberts et al., 2015). For example, professional athletes may transition because they lack enjoyment and gratification, motivation, and adequate levels of competitive performance (Lavallee et al., 1997; Park et al., 2012), and also due to age as well as nagging and chronic injuries (Alfermann, 2000; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). The athlete transition—depending on whether it is voluntary or involuntary—can be met with numerous challenges, including emotional distress, occupational and financial stress, family problems, body image concerns, and even substance abuse issues (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee et al., 1997; Reardon & Factor, 2010; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Conversely, successful, quality, or “healthy” career transitions for professional athletes

are facilitated by important characteristics, including athletes who (a) perceived control over the transition process, (b) intentionally planned for post-career options, and (c) achieved personal and team goals such as winning a championship (Knights, Sherry and Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Lavalley et al., 1997; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Policy-makers, college and university leaders, leaders in sport organizations, and the like are searching for supporting evidence that speaks to the career preparation and transitions of college and professional athletes. Amid ongoing litigation and pressures from internal and external athletic stakeholders about athletes' rights and well-being, perhaps there is no better time to provide related evidence (Staurowsky, 2015). The goal of this paper is to explore empirical studies on the collegiate and professional athlete career preparation and transition experience. Through an exploration of the literature, I detail areas where studies have been undertaken, where additional inquiry is needed and, where reasonable policy and practice can be implemented to ensure quality career transitions for both college and professional athletes.

The College Athlete Preparation and Career Transition

In 1991, the NCAA implemented Bylaw 16.3.1.1, which mandated that member colleges and universities provide general academic counseling and tutoring services to all Division I athletes. In addition to these services, practitioners in academic support centers for athletes offer specialized programs such as faculty–student mentoring (Comeaux, 2010), with the goal of enabling athletes to develop skills for academic, athletic, and personal growth and success. Many athletic departments offer general life

skills develop programs, but these programs are largely targeted at the transition *into* college, eligibility maintenance, and projects specific to study skills, time management, and academic scheduling. Absent tends to be programs related to the transition to life *after* college athletics. In an effort to stretch our understanding of the preparation and transitions of college athletes, I draw on studies that have highlighted this dynamic, longitudinal process. I review in broad strokes relevant foundational studies that center the career preparation and transitions of college athletes, giving special attention to the identities and purposeful engagement activities of college athletes.

Athlete Identities

Shulman and Bowen (2001) used the College and Beyond database to examine athletes' experiences at 30 mostly selective private schools in the United States. The authors found that athletes tended to underperform academically across all divisional classifications, and this underperformance was more pronounced for those who played in the revenue sports of football and men's basketball. Scholars have also found that Division I college athletes in particular, largely those playing in revenue sports, become increasingly disengaged from their academics due to the commercialized nature of college athletics and the priorities of their coaches (Adler & Adler, 1991; Eitzen, 2016).

Several studies have documented the role that athletics play in shaping the identities of students who participate (Adler & Adler, 1991; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Much of this work has primarily captured the role conflicts of Division I football and men's basketball players. In a case study of Division I men's basketball players at one school over a four-year period, Adler and Adler (1991) explored the nature of identities

and roles during college. They found that male basketball players transitioned into college life with feelings of optimism about their desired academic goals and career transition. Within one or two semesters, however, they began to devalue the academic role because of sport requirements and demands that structurally inhibited their academic presence on campus. The authors revealed that the more the studied basketball players remained in school, the more they began to feel the commercialism or business nature of college athletics, making sport participation more of a full-time job than an avocation.

Further, Meyer (1990) examined the attitudes and feelings of Division I female athletes regarding their roles as students and as athletes. Through semi-structured interviews with scholarship female athletes, Meyer found that the majority of female athletes in basketball and volleyball expressed idealistic feelings about their academic obligations and goals in the first year of college, and that their academic interests improved over time. The author concluded that a more positive environment existed among female athletes compared to their male counterparts. Female athletes were more likely to encourage each other academically, take active roles in course selection and program development, and decline special considerations from professors and administrators. These findings contrast with Adler and Adler's (1991) study, which reported male athletes in the sport of basketball were more inclined to lose interest in their academic endeavors over time.

A handful of studies has documented the importance of research to informed practice (e.g., Comeaux, 2010; Gayles & Hu, 2009). For example, Comeaux (2010)

explored the complex negotiations of first-year Division I football players' role identities in the context of a faculty–athlete mentor program. Using focus groups and pre- and post-test questionnaires, he found that the formal faculty–athlete mentoring program had a positive influence on academic and future goals of first-year athletes, despite potential role conflicts. In particular, the studied athlete participants reported having more balanced academic and athletic identities over the course of their first year. Some were even more optimistic about their future trajectories, reporting a willingness to discuss their career aspirations with their faculty mentors while receiving substantive mentor feedback.

More recently, Kidd and his colleagues (2018), using survey and interview data, examined the post-career transitions of former FBS athletes. They found that students who—irrespective of socioeconomic status, sport, ethnicity, or degree competition—had a high level of athletic identity were more likely to experience challenges with transition to life after sport. They concluded:

“Profit-athletes must be allowed and encouraged to participate in non-sport internships in order to increase their vocational training and professional acumen. Such a mandate is essential, as some of the participants in the current study indicated that due to their athletic participation, they did not have time to participate in meaningful internships prior to their sport retirement.” (p. 133)

In sum, the overconsumption of the athlete role can make it difficult to perform or meet the demands of the student role. With the centrality of commercialism in college athletics, male athletes in particular tend to have more difficulty striking a healthy

balance between their academic and athletic lives, as compared to their female counterpart (Adler & Adler, 1991; Meyer, 1990). Nonetheless, pedagogies of inclusion and responsive interventions—for example, a formal faculty-student mentoring program for first-year athletes— can help college athletes create compatible and affirming identities as both students and athletes (Comeaux, 2010).

Academic Engagement Activities

Scholars have produced a small but steadily growing body of empirical research on the academic engagement of Division I college athletes. These studies have examined the environments of current athletes, specifically how these individuals engage in activities with various members of the campus community. In this section, I focus explicitly on career transitions because they are largely influenced by the quality of athletes' participation in educationally purposeful engagement activities.

Studies on purposeful engagement activities of students within the college environment is quite abundant (e.g., Hu & Kuh, 2003; Kuh, 2001, 2008). Comparatively limited in the body of research on student engagement are specific examinations of college athlete engagement, including the relationship that educationally purposeful activities have on the development of athletes. Such activities can include, but are not limited to, meaningful interactions with faculty, internships, and collaboration with non-athlete peers on problem solving tasks (see Comeaux, 2010; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Umbach et al., 2006).

Gayles and Hu (2009), for example, used a dataset from the Basic Academic Skills Study to examine the extent to which Division I athlete engagement in

educationally purposeful activities influenced a set of desired outcome variables. They found that, on average, athletes' interactions with students other than their teammates had positive impacts on personal self-concept, learning, and communication skills. Compared to non-revenue athletes, revenue athletes had lower level of interaction with students other than their teammates.

In addition, Comeaux and Harrison (2007), using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, found differences between Division I White and Black athletes in their various forms of interaction with faculty members. Faculty who provided assistance in achieving professional goals and help with study skills were positively associated with white athletes' academic success, whereas these same variables were not significant for Black athletes. More recently, studies have explored the international educational experiences of Division I Black college athletes (Walker, 2018; Walker et al., 2019). For example, in a phenomenological study, Walker (2018) examined the experiences of 20 Division I Black athletes who participated in a study abroad enrichment program. The author found in part that international education experiences enhanced the process of their identity development.

Research related to the effects of academic engagement activities on the career transitions of college athletes has been sparse. In a qualitative interview study, Riley (2015) explored how former Division I Black football players viewed the influence of participation in high-impact engagement activities during college—including internships, first-year seminars, interaction with faculty, undergraduate research, and writing-intensive courses—on their career transitions. Participants varied in their views on

campus activities, and some were aware of the educational benefits of purposeful engagement activities on the quality of their career transitions. Nevertheless, they would have preferred more support and guidance from coaches and academic personnel. All of the study participants also reported they were limited in their engagement activities because of time constraints as a result of tremendous sport and coaching demands in a highly commercialized enterprise.

Comeaux (2013) designed the Career Transition Scorecard (CTS), a data-driven approach to improve academic engagement activities among athletes. The CTS was specifically designed to bridge the gap between research and practice in academic support centers for athletes, and to address the lack of explicit and positive learning environments designed to influence desirable educational outcomes of all athletes. It is intended not only to shed light on educational patterns and to foster evidence-based practices among higher education practitioners, but also to enhance the quality of athletes' school-to-career transitions. Other scholars have also engaged in related work to enhance the career transition of athletes. For example, Navarro (2015), in an empirical study of 29 Division I college athletes, explored their major choices and career aspirations. She discovered that the following influenced their undergraduate major choice and future career aspirations: "a) interactions with academic/student affairs professionals across campus; (b) interactions with academic/student affairs professionals internal to athletics; and (c) the struggle to balance the roles of student and collegiate athlete" (Navarro, 2015, p. 370).

In sum, studies have documented, albeit conditional on sport demands and expectations as well as the campus climate, the relationship between educationally purposeful engagement activities and academic success for college athletes (Gayles & Hu, 2009). The degree to which athletes interact with faculty members will increase the likelihood of academic success, and these interactions may vary by athletes' race (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007). As well, career transition is a dynamic and complex process. Riley (2015) used participant interviews to document the structural impediments that make it more challenging for Black athletes to fully engage in meaningful educational activities and to enhance the quality of school-to-career transitions.

Implications for Research

Despite the body of work in this area, additional research is needed to better understand the type and quality of educational activities in a range of academic settings that lead to positive gains and successful career transitions for college athletes. Qualitative inquiry (e.g., case studies) and large-scale quantitative studies—with data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport, and other background characteristics (e.g., first generation status, family income, athletic scholarship status)—would advance this line of work. It would also be instructive to explore the intersectional identities of athletes with a diversity of theoretical perspectives (e.g., critical race theory, antiracism theory) and methodological approaches to better understand their participation in sound engagement activities. For example, using a feminist theory lens (e.g., intersectionality, Black feminist thought, postmodern feminism, social

constructionism), we can better understand how athletes' experiences are gendered, as well as how athletes' engagement in sound activities are impeded or facilitated due to campus climate issues and/or the structure of intercollegiate athletics. It would be wise to build upon the work of Riley (2015) and Kidd et al. (2018) and explore the linkages between sound engagement activities and career transitions for athletes by race/ethnicity, gender, and type of sport using a variety of methodological approaches. Lastly, there is a need to collect national data on post-college outcomes of all athletes, including employment outcomes such as earnings, career advancement, and so on.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Today's academic support centers must employ new and different ways of thinking about athletes, their academic conditions, and career transitions in a multi-billion-dollar industry. Both for reasons of social justice—broadly defined as “improving the learning of all pupils and enhancing their life chances” (Mitescu et al., 2009, p. 18)—and for reasons of racial equity—broadly defined as producing fair and just academic experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for racial/ethnic students at predominantly White institutions (Bensimon, 2004)—athletic stakeholders must do more to improve the quality of the career preparation and transition process for all college athletes while curbing commercial activities.

Professionals in academic support centers must reimagine programming that starts upon athletes' entrance to college; programming must include assessment and evaluation tools to inform decision-making. As well, professionals within academic support centers must provide incoming athletes with specialized services and programs

(e.g., faculty–student mentoring programs, service learning, internships, study abroad), so that athletes will begin to find identities outside of their sport and work toward their goal of quality school-to-career transitions (Comeaux, 2010, 2013; Kidd et al., 2018; Walker, 2018). Importantly, identify and expand internship opportunities, work-based learning and community-based experiences so that athletes are better positioned for their chosen career path. Indeed, school must be held accountable for improving the achievement of all students, including those who participate in athletics, while integrating career development and academic skills and competencies within the curricula. At the local level, schools should find creative ways to partner with businesses to provide work-based learning opportunities for athletes.

A number of sensible recommendations have been proposed to strike a proper balance between academics and commercialism in college sports. At present, there are structural impediments—e.g., sport demands, increasing commercialism—that make it more challenging—and perhaps less likely—for athletes, particularly those playing in revenue sports, to fully engage in meaningful educational activities and to prepare for life after sport. As such, it would be prudent for the NCAA to reduce the number of games in all sports to limit unnecessary academic pressures on athletes (Knight Commission, 2010; Lumpkin, 2012). Moreover, in order to restore the balance between athletics and academics, the Knight Commission (2010) recommended: (a) greater transparency, including better measures to compare spending on athletics to spending on academics; (b) rewards for practices that make academic values a priority; and (c) treatment of college athletes first and foremost not as professionals, but as students.

The Professional Athlete Transition

Professional athletes tend to have a razor sharp focus on developing their athletic talents and advancing in their respective sport. Nonetheless, life has always been a multi-layered balancing act. Many keen advocates for professional athletes argue that they should devote as much time and energy, if not more, to their future or long-term professional development off the court or field. It is well-documented that the average career span is about 4.8 years for NBA players, 3.5 years for NFL players, 5.6 years for MLB players, and 5.5 years for NHL players (Hsu et al. 2011). As well, we know that 60 percent of NBA retirees are bankrupt or are under financial stress within five years, and 78 percent of former NFL players are bankrupt within three years of retirement (Flynn, 2014). I review foundational studies that center the career transitions of professional athletes.

In an attempt to expand our understanding of the career transition process of professional athletes, a number of studies have examined significant factors that impact transition and adjustment. For example, Park and colleagues (2012) explored the career transition of elite tennis players. Employing focus groups, they found that elite athletes (a) demonstrated readiness for transition through planning and preparation, (b) expressed negative and positive emotions with more negative emotions during the early stages of the transition process, and (c) developed coping strategies during the decision-making process.

Similarly, Lavell et al. (1997) explored the predominant causes of elite athlete transitions or retirement. They discovered that age, injury, and voluntary career

termination were likely factors in career transition and retirement of athletes. Involuntary transition moreover was linked with greater emotional and social adjustment, while athletes who voluntarily transitioned or retired tended to experience the least adjustment difficulties because they perceived the most personal control over the transition process. Relatedly, Sinclair and Orlick (1993), using the Athlete Retirement Questionnaire, discovered athletes experienced more successful transitions when they achieved self-identified goals and proactively planned for life after their sport. This finding lends support to the work of Lally (2007) who found that athletes who prepared for life after sport experienced a quality transition process, while those who did not adequately prepare experienced challenges to career transition adjustments. Other studies have examined the transition difficulties encountered by elite athletes. For example, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000), in a qualitative study, explored the transition and retirement experiences of elite, female gymnasts. They found in part that female athletes who struggled with body and appearance had more transition difficulties.

Implications for Research

To date, the investigations have greatly contributed to a better understanding of the dynamic and complex transition process, but further research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon at the professional level. Future longitudinal, large-scale studies and advanced quantitative research should track professional athletes, while considering differences by sport, throughout their athletic careers, providing more definitive knowledge about their complicated and cumulative experiences. Quantitative studies undoubtedly could also be enhanced by the use of complementary qualitative

studies to capture and document the voices of professional athletes. Researchers should also develop models of career planning and exploration activities that are offered through individual sport organizations and players associations.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Several practical implications for sport professionals and consultants who work closely with athletes on the career transition process emerged from this review. The review provided evidence of the association between the quality of athletes' career transitions and their planning process. As such, findings from empirical studies (e.g., Lally, 2007) revealed that athletes showed changes in their athletic identity and required an adjustment time post-athletic career. Thus, to help with this transition process, professionals must provide athletes with support systems— for example, career planning, identity reformation support, and social and emotional support in the form of counseling—to help them prepare for life after playing competitive sports. Professionals in sport organizations might also include a provision in their players' contracts which makes it mandatory for them to attend workshops or seminars on various educational and career-related services and activities. At the very least, these career transition intervention sessions should be strongly encouraged. And given the mentor/coach-athlete relationships, professionals in sport organizations might consider the role that coaches or mentors can play to support athletes during the career transition process.

Finally, I previously mentioned that professional athletes might be under financial stress during and after their career transitions. It would be instructive for sport organizations or athlete representatives, early on, to make financial advisers available

to their players to help with financial planning and developing financial literacy, so they are on the path to financial security.

Conclusion

Research in the area of career preparation and transitions of college and professional athletes has increased gradually over time, as highlighted in the steadily growing number of empirical studies. It is important that sport leaders and educators account for the issues and intentional strategies and recommendations outlined in this paper. It is also imperative that sport leaders and educators rethink, reimagine, and redefine their roles—continue to listen to the voices of both college and professional athletes—and provide opportunities for athletes to develop their skills and competencies throughout the career preparation and transition process.

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