

A Comparison of Professional Sports Career Aspirations Among College Athletes

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A sample of NCAA Division I male basketball and football student-athletes completed a questionnaire on their professional sport aspirations. Participants were classified by the variables of family income, race, year in school, grade point average, and athletic honors. Significant differences were found for year in school, race, and family income. African-American, high income, freshman, junior and fifth-year senior student-athletes were the most likely to aspire to participate in professional sports.

The glorification of professional athletes and professional sports in the United States appears to have a powerful effect on American youth, often creating unrealistic expectations about their chances of signing a professional sports contract (Coakley, 1993; Leonard, 1993). Moreover, the chance of a college athlete of ever signing a professional sports contract is less than 1% while the average career of the professional athlete is less than four years. By the time professional athletes reach the end of their sports careers, most other individuals may be just starting their careers (Coakley, 1993; Leonard, 1993).

African-American males are more likely to have African-American professional athletes as role models than their White counterparts. Edwards (1973) and Sailes (1984, 1987) have argued that holding professional athletes as role models has contributed, in part, to the disproportionate representation of African-American athletes in the three major professional sports (i.e., football, basketball, and baseball). The high number of successful African-American professional athletes has fueled young athletes' hopes of playing professional sports. Consequently, many African-American males have relied on sports for status and prestige more frequently than their White counterparts. It has been argued that this pattern is a response to institutional racism against African-Americans that has limited employment opportunities in other segments of American society (Edwards, 1973; Harris, 1993; Sailes, 1987, 1993). Moreover, success in sports has been a means for African-American males to generate self esteem and self-empowerment (Majors, 1990).

Despite the odds against it, members of the lower or working class are more likely to view sport as a vehicle for social and economic mobility (Oliver, 1980). Perceptions that few opportunities exist through traditional channels have contributed to the development and experiences of this compensatory value system (Rehberg & Cohen, 1975; Sailes, 1987). The majority of African-American scholarship student-athletes come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Coakley, 1993); therefore, it is reasonable to assume that race and class are variables which influence the sport socialization and value development of African-American males. Such socialization and value orientation encourage sport participation for reasons of social status and prestige (Majors, 1990; Sailes, 1984).

Rehberg and Cohen (1975) argue that the singular focus of sports participation to obtain professional sports status has overshadowed the desire for academic achievement, leading to poor academic achievement and low graduation rates. Sailes (1993) cites obsessive coaches and the business mentality of college athletic departments as important factors causing the lack of academic achievement among college student-athletes. Telander (1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1992) has noted that Division I college athletics serve as a farm system for professional sports and argues that student-athletes should be allowed to pursue professional sports without jeopardizing their college eligibility. College athletics likely serve as the focal point for professional sports recruitment.

By contrast, among high school student-athletes, sports contribute to physical, social, and educational development (Harris, 1993; Sabo, 1988). Coakley (1993) and Leonard (1993) found that student-athletes performed at higher levels in the classroom than their nonathlete peers. In addition, it was found that high school student-athletes believed that participation in high school athletics could possibly deliver educational, social, and life-skill benefits and opportunities that would facilitate the transition to purposeful productivity and full employment later on (Harris, 1993; Oliver, 1980). Moreover, high school athletes had higher aspirations to attend college, and parents took a greater interest in their offspring's socialization, when they were involved in high school sports. The desire to play professional sports was positive because it required participation in the college sports system which exposed the student-athlete to a higher level of scholarship and required academic eligibility (McElroy, 1981). With these considerations in mind, the present study sought to identify those male student-athletes most likely to aspire to participate in professional football or basketball.

Method

Participants

Questionnaires were forwarded to athletic academic advisors at 50 NCAA Division I institutions. The advisors were asked to administer the questionnaire to male student-athletes participating in basketball and football. A total of 390 student-athletes responded to the questionnaire (basketball, $n = 170$; football, $n = 210$). The participants were grouped according to their status on the following variables: family income, race, year in school, grade point average (GPA), and having received an honor for athletic achievement (see Table 1). The return rates for Hispanic ($n = 8$), Pacific Islander ($n = 0$), and Native American ($n = 2$) student-athletes were too small to consider for this investigation. The return rates for African-American ($n = 217$) and Caucasian ($n = 163$) participants were adequate to conduct a statistical analysis.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

A review of the literature failed to identify an instrument that met the specific needs of this particular investigation; therefore, an instrument was developed to address the questions of interest (see Appendix). The result was a 12-item questionnaire that was forwarded to members of the National Association of Aca-

demc Advisors for Athletics (N4A) who were employed at NCAA Division I institutions. A total of 50 schools were randomly selected from the N4A directory. Thirty-one schools responded for a return rate of 62%. It was felt this high return rate would eliminate any subsequent bias which might have existed with a lower return rate. Advisors were instructed to administer the instrument to the student-athletes they counseled. Participants were asked to complete the instrument when they showed up for advisement and were informed that their participation was voluntary. At no time was identifying information about the school or participants requested by or provided to the researcher.

Results

The data revealed that approximately half the sample (52%) planned to pursue a career in professional sports after college. Moreover, 95% of respondents chose to attend their college to increase their chances of being drafted into professional football or basketball. However, once on campus, only 44% of the sample felt attending that specific college would increase their chances of being drafted. Half of respondents felt their chances of being drafted were very good. Eighty-three percent indicated they would enter the professional sports draft before graduation if they were drafted early. Only 27% indicated they would return to school at some time in the future to complete their degree if they were drafted before graduation.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine significant differences between groups. The Tukey HSD procedure was employed to locate significant differences on multiple variables within the variable groups labeled *Year in School* and *Family Income*. It was hypothesized that student-athletes who received athletic achievement honors or awards would have the best chances of entering professional sports and therefore would have higher aspirations to play professional sports. However, there was no significant difference in the professional sports aspirations of outstanding athletes ($M = 15.4$, $SD = 2.97$) and those student-athletes who were not honored for athletic achievement ($M = 15.1$, $SD = 3.20$), $F = 1.16$, $p = .603$. It was also hypothesized that student-athletes with the highest professional sports aspirations would not be as serious about their academics and would have lower GPAs than those with lower aspirations. However, this investigation did not reveal a statistically significant difference between student-athletes who had an A or B GPA ($M = 12.9$, $SD = 3.92$) and student-athletes whose GPA was a C or below ($M = 13.6$, $SD = 3.45$), $F = 1.29$, $p = 1.30$.

Significant differences in professional sports aspirations among student athletes by race, family income, and by year in school were observed. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. African-American student-athletes had significantly higher professional sports aspirations than their White counterparts, $F = 1.84$, $p < .001$. Surprisingly, upper income student-athletes had significantly higher professional sports orientations than middle and lower income student-athletes, $F = 5.90$, $p = .003$. This finding is in direct contrast to what had been hypothesized. Finally, freshmen, junior and fifth year senior student-athletes had significantly higher professional sports aspirations than sophomores and seniors, $F = 24.40$, $p < .001$.

Table 1
Comparison of Group Means

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Family income					
Upper income	27	15.7	4.18	5.90	.003
Middle income	299	13.2	3.42		
Lower income	54	13.2	3.65		
Race					
African-American	217	13.8	3.94	1.84	.000
Caucasian	163	12.9	2.90		
Year in school					
Freshman	144	14.3	2.80	24.40	.000
Sophomore	72	12.1	2.95		
Junior	82	15.2	2.58		
Senior	64	10.6	3.94		
Fifth year	18	13.5	5.65		
Grade point average					
A or B	81	12.9	3.92	1.29	1.30
C or below	299	13.6	3.45		
Honors					
Yes	45	15.4	2.97	1.16	.603
No	335	15.1	3.20		

Discussion

While the data from this study are preliminary, they provide some insight into the pervasiveness of professional sports aspirations among a segment of male student-athletes participating in NCAA Division I basketball and football. It was not surprising to find that African-American student-athletes had significantly higher aspirations toward professional sports than their white counterparts. In examining the participation percentages of African-Americans and Whites in professional basketball and football, the overrepresentation of African-American professional athletes and their subsequent visibility may encourage African-American youth to fantasize more about the possibilities of their participation. Edwards (1973) suggested that perceived institutional racism and discrimination in American society disproportionately channeled African-Americans into the areas of entertainment and sports. Moreover, Lapchick (1988) reported that an African-American family is seven times more likely to push a male youth into sports than a White family.

Oliver (1980) found that lower income student-athletes were more likely to have higher aspirations than their middle and upper income counterparts. Thus, it was surprising to find in the present study that upper income student-athletes had higher aspirations regarding professional sports than middle and lower income student-athletes. The fact that this investigation had larger African-American participation numbers than Caucasians might account for the higher aspirations among

the participants from a higher income background. Table 1 indicates that the largest group was middle income. It is likely that the number of African-Americans is higher in that group. It is possible that undisclosed race dynamics within groups confounded the data and actually supported the contention that race was a factor in professional sports aspiration. Further study is needed to determine the validity of this contention.

It was interesting to note that student-athletes who did not distinguish themselves athletically had approximately the same aspirations to play professional sports as those student-athletes who did distinguish themselves with athletic honors. Student-athletes with little or no chance of playing professional sports—based on the assumption of a positive correlation between athletic honors and professional potential—held the same aspirations as those student-athletes who had the most viable chance of playing professional sport. It is reasonable to assume that the appeal of professional sports is very powerful; consequently, the self-evaluation of less successful student-athletes is neither realistic nor carefully considered.

Previous research suggests that athletes who trained hardest in order to enter the professional sports draft would be most likely to ignore their academic studies (Harris, 1993; McElroy, 1981; Rehberg & Cohen, 1975). Sailes (1993) asserted that elite student-athletes were required to maintain academic eligibility in order to compete to gain exposure to professional sports talent scouts. He found that elite student-athletes did little more than major in eligibility. That is, they did not study to receive grades higher than those required to maintain their athletic eligibility, at least a C average. Thus, it was hypothesized that student-athletes aspiring to play professional sports would earn lower grades than those not having like aspirations. The results of this investigation failed to support that hypothesis; student-athlete performance in the classroom was not related to level of professional sports aspiration. It appears that student-athletes earning good grades had aspirations to play professional sports similar to those of their counterparts earning lower grades.

Freshmen, juniors, and fifth-year seniors held higher aspirations to play professional sports in comparison to sophomores and seniors. Follow-up interviews with student-athletes at a large midwestern university produced the following analysis. Freshmen student-athletes entered college with high aspirations to play professional sports. It is likely they considered their first year on campus as the beginning of the professional sports process. By their sophomore year, still relegated to the practice or reserve squad, the futility of their situation began to appear and their aspiration to play professional sports began to diminish. However, it is likely that they started getting more playing time, and established a greater understanding of the dynamics of their sport—possibly becoming starters by their junior year—that would explain an increase in professional sports aspiration during that period. By their senior year, lower aspirations might be the result of the realization of their lesser playing ability compared to the elite class of more talented teammates. Finally, fifth-year seniors' increased professional sports aspiration could emanate from the realization that their talents were commensurate with professional sports opportunities outside the United States or that their skills

might provide the opportunity for temporary employment with a professional team during their summer training camp. This scenario is only hypothetical, and it is only one of many plausible explanations to determine the reasons for the differences year in school generated.

Conclusion

While this investigation is far from conclusive, it does illuminate some possibilities regarding the professional sports aspirations among a sample group of college student-athletes. Just as the pervasiveness of professional sports cannot be denied, its impact on American youth and our intercollegiate athletes cannot be ignored. The lure of professional sports can have serious consequences for contemporary student-athletes who tend to put "all of their eggs into one basket." Currently, approximately one fourth of NBA and one third of NFL athletes have completed their college degrees (Coakley, 1993). When their careers are over in three to four years, many professional athletes will likely have few marketable skills and will be disenfranchised and unemployable in mainstream society. They will exist on the periphery of employment opportunities, unable to compete with their degreed counterparts. The attraction of professional sports should be kept in proper perspective. Student-athletes should be encouraged to pursue their college degrees and develop marketable skills regardless of their ability. They should be informed that less than 1% of college student-athletes ever play professional sports and that the average professional sports career lasts only four years.

Student-athletes who distinguish themselves athletically should not be discouraged from pursuing professional athletics after college. If any group of aspiring athletes has the greatest potential for signing a professional sports contract, it is this group. However, they should be counseled to complete the degree to counter the hardships that might occur due to career ending injuries. In addition, regardless of their athletic talent, there are many athletes with equal or more ability. The competition for few positions in professional sport makes having alternative plans very important and crucial to future success in the job market.

The average career of the typical professional athlete is only four years. The typical professional athlete is 25 years old when his professional sports career ends. However, his youth, inexperience, and lack of practical work experience will place him at the bottom in the group of new entrants into the work force. Today's athletic academic advisor would be well advised to inform his or her male student-athletes that common sense dictates a more sober approach when considering post-college careers. One cannot continue to put all of one's eggs in a single basket when dealing with an industry that is as business-oriented as professional sports and treats its employees as replaceable parts. Advisors should also assist and encourage student-athletes to explore ways in which skills developed in athletics transfer to other work settings. Doing so helps student-athletes to prepare for post-athletic life while valuing and respecting the importance of their athletic experiences and aspirations. Maintaining minimum eligibility standards and majoring in eligibility to get a shot at professional sports simply is not smart.

Specific goal-setting and counseling led by common sense are the best guarantees for today's college student-athlete to be successful in a highly competitive and technically-oriented job market.

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Appendix

You are being invited to participate in a study to determine the professional sports aspirations of student athletes who play basketball or football at NCAA Division I colleges or universities. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Please do not provide any information that may identify you or your school. Answer each question as accurately and completely as possible. Darken the appropriate space on your response sheet for each question. Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions regarding this study or would like a copy of the results, please contact Dr. Gary A. Sailes, Indiana University, at 812/855-0538.

1. What is your ethnic background?
 - a. African-American
 - b. Caucasian
 - c. Hispanic/Latin
 - d. Asian-American/Pacific Islander
 - e. Native American
 - f. Other
2. In what sport do you currently participate?
 - a. basketball
 - b. football
3. What is your current year in school?
 - a. freshman
 - b. sophomore
 - c. junior
 - d. senior
 - e. fifth year senior
4. Is your current grade point average above or below 2.5?
 - a. above
 - b. below
5. What is the current household income for your family?
 - a. \$60,000 and higher
 - b. \$25,000 to \$59,999
 - c. \$24,999 and below
6. Did you receive any of the following athletic honors while playing for your school? (select all that apply)
 - a. All-American
 - b. All-Conference
 - c. All-Tournament Team
 - d. Most Valuable Player
 - e. Player of the Year
 - f. Other
 - g. I received no honors

The remaining questions require your honest and most sincere opinions. Please answer the following questions accordingly:

STRONGLY	AGREE	UNDECIDED	DISAGREE	STRONGLY
AGREE				DISAGREE

7. After college, I plan to pursue a career as a professional athlete.
8. I came to this college primarily to increase my chances of playing professional sports.
9. Playing at this school has increased my chances of becoming a professional athlete.
10. Based on my current sports skills and performance, my chances of becoming a professional athlete are pretty good.
11. I plan to enter the professional sports draft before I graduate.
12. If I leave college before graduating to enter the professional sports draft, I plan to return sometime to earn my degree.

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