

Published in “*JTRM in Kinesiology*” an online peer-reviewed research and practice journal

Narrative Research Addressing the Challenges of a Career in Professional Sports*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to highlight the challenges that accomplished young athletes face as they aspire to become professional athletes. The data used in this study was derived from selected lived and told sport experiences of undergraduate and graduate kinesiology majors who were former competitive athletes. Additional data was derived via email exchanges between the author and a mother of a teen soccer player. Statistics from football, basketball, ice hockey, and soccer are also presented in order to place both players' compensation and the odds of a professional career in sports in a proper perspective. Parents are advised of the challenge they may face as they try to reason with a child who neglects her/his studies in favor of focusing on her/his dream of a career in professional sports. The author also recommends steps parents may follow in order to help their child select a fitting and fulfilling post-professional athletics career.

Introduction

Amid growing evidence of the very low likelihood of a successful, lucrative, and long lasting professional athletic career, two recent polls reveal that youth in Britain and in the United States rank professional athletic careers as one of their top choices (Akesson, 2011; Dodd, 2012). For example, a survey by STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math fields) of British children's dream jobs polled 1,000 children ages 6-16 about their career aspirations (Dodd, 2012). The choice of “Professional Athlete” crowned the top ten dream careers, followed by “Performer,” and “Doctor.” “Fire Fighter” placed fourth, followed by “Astronaut,” while “Teacher,” “Pilot” and “Zoo Keeper” respectively took the eighth through tenth positions. According to the Marist Poll (Akesson, 2011), of the top ten choices of American children, the first through fifth selections were “Doctor,” “Vet,” “Athlete,” “Pop Singer,” or “Firefighter,” in that respective order, with the closing three selections (picks 8-10) being “Actor,” “Spy,” and “Model/Dietitian.” A surprising finding in the Marist Poll was that in their first ten choices, American children no longer aspired to become astronauts (Akesson, 2011). Three decades earlier, the top ten ambitions of children included “teacher” in first place, followed by “banking/finance,”

Submitted April 26, 2013; accepted November 1, 2013.

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*This paper is an extensive expansion and revision of an earlier online posting (Frankl, 2008).

“medicine,” and “scientist,” while “lawyer,” “sports star,” and “astronaut,” ranked respectively in sixth through eighth place (The Telegraph, 2009).

Data provided by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2011) indicate that some 471,025 high school and 31,264 college athletes play baseball (see Table 1). Given 806 draftees in professional baseball, less than 3% of college and roughly 0.0017% high school athletes will eventually become professional baseball players. While the prospect of a professional career in baseball seems very dismal, the odds are even smaller when professional football is considered. Since 1,108,441 high school and 67,887 college athletes play football and draftees are limited to 255, less than 0.0003% and 0.004% high school and college level athletes respectively, will make it to the professional level. For a summary of the above and data for high school and college men’s baseball, football, ice hockey, and soccer, as well as, women’s high school and college basketball refer to Table 1 below (Manfred, 2012).

Table 1

Number of Male and Female Athletes on Selected High School and Collegiate Varsity Athletics Teams as Contrasted with Available Positions on Professional Sport Teams

| Gender/Level Varsity Athletics Event | Number of Draftees | Total # of Players | Available Positions Expressed as % of Total Number of Players |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---|
| Men's HS* Baseball | 806 | 471025 | 0.00171 |
| Men's College Baseball | 806 | 31264 | 0.02578 |
| Men's HS Football | 255 | 1108441 | 0.00023 |
| Men's College Football | 255 | 67887 | 0.00376 |
| Men's HS Ice Hockey | 11 | 36912 | 0.00030 |
| Men's College Ice Hockey | 11 | 3944 | 0.00279 |
| Men's HS Basketball | 48 | 545844 | 0.00009 |
| Men's College Basketball | 48 | 17500 | 0.00274 |
| Men's HS Soccer | 49 | 398351 | 0.00012 |
| Men's College Soccer | 49 | 22573 | 0.00217 |
| Women's HS Basketball | 32 | 438933 | 0.00007 |
| Women's College Basketball | 32 | 15708 | 0.00204 |

*HS – High School

The well-documented low probability of a successful and well-paid professional athletic career stands in stark contrast with unrealistic career aspirations of both British and American youth. A possible explanation to this disconnect from reality, as suggested by Coakley (2007), is that misinterpretations of media coverage of a few successful athletes contribute to such distorted views. Stories and news clips by the mass media about a small number of men and women that made it are common, while on the other hand, one rarely hears the story of the many that did not make it. Wolfson (2003) points out that kids "...hear Alan Shearer [now retired professional English League Football (soccer) striker whose net worth was estimated in 2012 at over \$52.5 million] talking about how

his teachers told him to work harder at school because he'd never make it big, and look at him... that encourages [kids] to think it could happen to them, too" (Wolfson, 2003, personal communications).

In addition, stories about very young athletes, such as the case of American Major League Soccer's (MLS) Freddy Adu and professional hockey's Sidney Crosby, have generated a great deal of media attention. At barely 21, Crosby has signed a 5-year, \$45 million extension to his contract with the Pittsburgh Penguins. Adu, who signed with the MLS at the age of 14, commented at the time that "If you're good enough, you're old enough...If you feel like you're ready to go, hey, give it a shot." In 2007, Adu's MLS contract was bought by Benfica, a 103-year-old Portuguese soccer club for \$2 million (Associated Press, 2007). In addition to his estimated over half-million yearly salary, by the time he turned 18, Adu was also expected to earn undisclosed amounts of money through endorsement deals with Nike and Pepsi (Goff, 2007).

More than two decades ago, the imbalanced treatment by the media and the general public of the issue of career opportunities in professional sports prompted Tom McMillen, former National Basketball Association (NBA) player and member of the U.S. Congress (cited in Coakley, 1994, p. 386) to warn that "The overall message being drilled into our kids is clear and dangerous . . . Superstars sign 5-year contracts for \$20 million. Teachers sign 1-year contracts for \$20,000.00. In those circumstances, to whom will you listen, your teacher or your coach? Where will you spend your time, in the library or the gym?"

Addressing the probability of "a satisfying and rewarding career" as a professional athlete, "Digger" Phelps, former University of Notre Dame basketball coach, disclosed in 1983 that "I still have to tell most of the kids who come to play for me that they're not going to make it as pros, that they should forget that dream . . . and that, even if they do make it, the average pro career is only three and a half years, and when it's over, they'll still . . . have another 50 years to live" (cited in Coakley, 1994, p. 274). Coakley (2007) rightly points out that while a career as a professional athlete could be a wonderful experience, most professional careers seldom last longer than 3-5 years and rarely bring fame and fortune to the athlete. For example, according to the National Football League's Players Association (NFLPA) the average career in the National Football League (NFL) lasts three and a half seasons (NFLPA.com). The average career timeline, however, is a misleading value. A relatively large number of players had very short careers. Their "career" often lasted only one season and was terminated as a result of injury. The 3.5 year mark is a statistic that does not do justice to any particular reality. It reflects an arithmetical average that is calculated by including the careers of more fortunate players that stayed in the fray for 5-10 years. Thus, the mode or the median career length rather than the average career length are more valid values to consider.

An illustration of the difference between the average salary and the median salary of professional soccer players in the MLS may illuminate the previously presented point. The total "guaranteed salary" of Los Angeles Galaxy's 28 players in 2013 was \$2,950,000.00 (Becker, 2013). Thus, the average salary per player for 2013 was \$105,357.14 ($\$2,950,000.00 / 28$). Note that the two designated players' (DPs) salaries on the team (Donovan and Keane) count as \$368,750.00 against the total Galaxy team budget thus masking the fact that the two highest paid Galaxy players earned a combined \$6,833,333.33 or 2.3 times the official total Galaxy purse for 2013. The median salary value for the Los Angeles Galaxy players, as well as players of other MLS teams, still

provides a skewed image of the true earnings of the vast majority of the players on these professional teams. In 2013, the guaranteed salary for players on Galaxy's roster spots 1-24 was set at \$46,500.00. As a matter of comparison, listed below are starting salary averages for 2013 college graduates in nine broad career categories (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2013).

Table 2

Average Salary by Professional Career

| Career Category | 2013 Average Salary |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Business | \$54,234.00 |
| Communications | \$43,145.00 |
| Computer Science | \$59,977.00 |
| Education | \$40,480.00 |
| Engineering | \$62,535.00 |
| Health Sciences | \$49,713.00 |
| Humanities & Social Sciences | \$37,058.00 |
| Math & Sciences | \$42,724.00 |
| Overall | \$44,928.00 |

The media attention bestowed on the top picks and the highly publicized ceremony of the selection process may leave the impression that joining the professional ranks is a straightforward process. Naturally, the vast majority of athletes that were designated for the first round selection were drafted. What the public is seldom made aware of is the fact that the likelihood of a male age 20-39 making it to the pros in American football in 1988, for example, was 1/62,500 for Caucasians and 1/47,600 for African Americans (Leonard & Reyman, 1988). Furthermore, the probability of having a long career as a super star and making large sums of money are even smaller. On the other hand, the possibility of being injured and/or cut from the team after the first season is very real.

In order to further illustrate how hard it is to make it to the pros and then have a long career as a professional athlete, the told experiences of three (out of dozens of similar cases) of the author's former Kinesiology students are shared below. In addition, to illustrate the conflicts and difficulties parents of a teen who is aspiring to become a professional athlete face, also shared is the story of a concerned mother and her teenage son from North Wales, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Procedures

Throughout his teaching career, the author conducted numerous open-ended responsive interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with former student athletes that were enrolled in his sport psychology and sport sociology classes. In addition, over the past twelve years, the author has had numerous email correspondence exchanges with sport administrators, coaches, parents, and various professionals that addressed questions related to the purpose and value of a youth sports experience. Of the many shared personal stories, the

author selected three personal experiences of former students that competed in individual and/or team sports. Also included is the tale of one correspondence via email of a personal soccer experience, as told from the parent's perspective. These lived and told experiences are representative of and highlight the challenges young athletes face as they aspire to turn professional. The procedures followed by this qualitative study limit the validity of the findings of this study by both the small number of cases discussed and by the author's bias in his decision to include four representative sport experiences while excluding many other similar stories.

Four Representative Individuals' Lived and Told Sport Experiences

A Lived and Told Sport Experience of a Former Junior Tennis Player

At 15, this talented junior athlete was the Junior Tennis National runner-up in the US. The following year, he came back to the Nationals and played better and harder, and with more confidence than he ever played before. Again, he made it to the finals where he played his very best tennis. Despite his remarkable efforts and greatly improved skills, he lost his match in two straight sets 0:6, 0:6. He could not hold his serve, nor could he break his opponent's serve and at least win one single game. Michael Chang, his opponent turned pro in 1988 and qualified to play at the French Open in 1989 where he made history by defeating Ivan Lendl, the number one player in the world at the time. The 17 year-old Michael Chang from the US became the youngest player in history to win the French Open. Mr. Chang never won another major event and retired in 2003 following a successful career as tennis pro that lasted 15 years (7-years as a top 10 player). At the age of 24, following failed attempts to make it as a professional tennis player, the former talented junior tennis player was enrolled in a kinesiology program and trained to become a physical education teacher and coach. Mr. Michael Chang's experience and success as a professional player is the clear exception in this vignette. The experiences of many thousands of talented tennis players, such as described above, demonstrate the enormity of the challenge to make it to the tennis professional ranks and then make it to the top.

Tens of thousands of junior tennis players compete in as many as 5000 (usta.com) tournaments each year for the eventual coveted title of the best junior (under 18) player. Once at the top, a handful of players still face a grim reality best described by Emilio Sanchez: "Every kid who is playing wants to be a pro. The main problem is that the spots available are very, very few. Because in tennis you only have 100 top pros and these 100 pros don't change every year. So it's not like you have 100 chances every year to be a top 100 player because many of these guys can have careers lasting seven to 10 years and only a few guys slip or get injured or retire. So you may have five spots open up in the top 100 every year. Think about that for a minute. You're talking about maybe five spots for all the young players in the world, for all of the academies, for all of the federations all over the world" (Nott, 2007).

The reality a top junior player faces when making the transition from the US junior or the college level may be even bleaker. Players ranked 101–200, as well as many unranked players, are stronger and more experienced than the typical newcomer and are fiercely fighting for a spot in the top 100. Moreover, the level of play as represented by the average speeds of the first and second serves at the college and junior level as compared to ranked Association of Tennis Professional (ATP) players is quite revealing. For

example, the average first and second serve speed for 16 of the 32 players who made it to the 3rd round of the Men's Singles at Wimbledon in 2007 was 119 mph and 99 mph respectively as compared to 91 mph and 71 mph for a sample of nationally-ranked under 18 boys (Tennis Speed, 2007). Thus, college or nationally ranked junior players would have to return serves that are on average 30 mph faster (and up to 40 mph faster) than they are accustomed to while their first and second serves, unless perfectly placed, will present them with a major weakness.

A Lived and Told Sport Experience of a Former Baseball Player: Junior through Minor League Baseball

This next kinesiology major was an accomplished baseball player who at every age group, starting at little league and continuing through college, was the best and most valuable player of the league, then region, and finally the state in which he played. Eventually, he became one of the top amateur baseball players in the Nation and was invited to pitch for a minor league baseball team. At the minors he was doing very well until he hurt his pitching shoulder. Several surgeries later, he embarked on a Kinesiology program at a California State University and worked on his degree while trying to recover and rejoin the professional ranks. He managed to make it back to the pros for a very short time until he reinjured his shoulder. He then came to the realization that a career as a physical education teacher and coach would be a much more practical choice. He later completed his Master degree in Kinesiology and is now a successful physical education teacher and baseball coach.

A Lived and Told Sport Experience of a Former High School Varsity Football Player

The third kinesiology major highlighted here was a star defensive back on his high school football team in the Los Angeles area. During his senior year, several college football scouts approached him with offers of "full-ride" college football scholarships. Some visited his home and met with his parents in an attempt to secure a commitment from him to join their college football program upon graduation. During his division's championship game (the last game of his high school football career), scouts from several major universities with division I football programs (e.g., University of Michigan and University of Southern California) were sitting in the bleachers and were watching the game while following every one of his moves on the field. At about the middle of the fourth quarter disaster struck as he suffered a severe knee injury during a tackle. He was rushed to a local hospital where he underwent several surgeries to repair torn ligaments in his right knee. He later bitterly recalled an almost week-long hospital stay that was void of any visits by the many college football scouts that were in hot pursuit of his potential services over the previous year. He lamented that as soon as the extent of his injury was made known, all the recruiters vanished and the letters and phone calls offering athletics scholarship dried up.

In high school, he devoted himself entirely to football. He spent endless hours on the field and in the gym while neglecting his high school education. He nevertheless earned his high school diploma and was thus able to attend college. However, due to his inadequate academic preparation, to be admitted to a kinesiology program, he needed to first take preparatory and remedial non-college courses. Once admitted into a college degree program as a kinesiology major, the challenges he was facing were still far from over. It took him seven years to complete a four-year program as he had to repeat (in some cases

twice) several of the upper division courses in his major. On graduation day, as he looked back at his completed journey, he resolved to make sure his future students and athletes in high school would get good academic advice and be treated with dignity.

A Lived and Told Sport Experience of a Soccer Mom: Email from Concerned Mom from North Wales, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

The last example that is presented here is based on email exchanges between the author and a “concerned mom” from North Wales, UK. Following her visit to the author’s website she asked for help regarding the following question (Frankl, 2007):

“My [teenage] son has played football [soccer] since he could walk. I don't think he is an extremely gifted player but he does have a lot of determination and some good skills. He plays for his school and a local team. I keep asking him what he is going to do when he leaves school and he just keeps saying that all he wants to do is play football. I have tried to persuade him to consider other options including joining the armed forces and play for them. He just cannot see that he may not be a good enough footballer to play professionally. Can you give me any advice on either what to tell him or where I could take him either for training or consulting? Thank you. Concerned mom, North Wales.”

Based on her description of the problem she faced, it seemed that the concerned mom from North Wales was engaged in a clash of value differences with her teenage son. Carpenter and Kennedy (2001) point out that the expectation that an individual would change or adjust her or his values is comparable to asking that person to alter her/his sense of reality. It was thus pointed out that while it is possible to persuade a teenager with dreams to make it to the professional level through the use of reason, it is not an easy task. Finding a solution that satisfies all involved parties is difficult since value differences are instigated not only from disagreements about the substance of a dispute but also out of disagreement about the proper resolution or the management of the issue under dispute. “Given the lack of agreement on both process and substance, parties involved in value conflicts tend to turn to force-based conflict options more often than negotiation or persuasive approaches, because force seems to be the only common language that both sides understand and honor” (International Online Training Program On Intractable Conflict, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

The above are common scenarios that young athletes and parents of teen athletes face. To address value differences effectively one may need the mediation of a social worker, therapist, school counselor or any other professional that the parent and her/his teenage child may perceive as fair and willing to genuinely consider the two sides. The position held by a 15 year-old teen of not needing to pay attention to his or her education since he or she plans to embark on a professional athletic career is self-destructive. The earlier discussed examples would suggest that teens in this case are setting themselves up for a big disappointment. Following their current roadmap to a career in professional sports they may dig themselves into a deep hole that they may later find very hard to climb out of.

Many parents share their children’s passion for their sport and wish them the very best. Parents genuinely hope that their children will be able to continue working hard on their

dreams. However, youth must also be advised that even in the event that they realize their dream, they need to pursue their education. The mix of youth and lack of education with superstardom and lots of money is a very lethal cocktail. Given a more likely event of not making it at all, or making it just for a few months, or even 2-3 years, young athletes should know "that nobody is going to give him a check . . . or give him a job because he's a former [athlete]. It just doesn't work that way" (Member of the 1988 US Olympic team, cited in Coakley, 1994, p. 274).

As is the case in professional tennis, baseball, basketball, ice hockey, and/or American football, the prospect of a career as a professional football (soccer) player in North Wales or anywhere else on the British Isles does not seem very promising. According to Johns (2002), "With the exception of the 1920s, domestic Welsh football has not been able to offer the wages or glory that English clubs could and thus Wales' most talented players have plied their trades outside her borders. Similarly, Welsh professional clubs have employed strong contingents of English players." Reporting on a study conducted by *The Guardian*, Taylor and Adamson (2013) reveal that only one third of Premier League players are English. In addition, as many as 74 different nationalities are currently represented in the British Premier League. Clearly, the days of British football (soccer) as a national market are long gone. Young aspiring talents from around the globe may now post their videos and other materials online for scouts to review and thus substantially broaden the pool of potential new players. English football clubs can pay much better salaries than most soccer clubs in the world and that would also include American soccer clubs. A growing number of young American-grown talented soccer players have dreams about a professional career in England. This new reality of a global soccer market makes the prospect of becoming a professional football (soccer) player in England even more competitive than it has been in any other time in the history of professional soccer (Bourke, 2003).

Still, those fortunate few who do make it to any one of the professional teams' rosters are quite far from "having it made." For example, in a study about upward social mobility and British professional soccer players, Houlston (1982), reported that there was an overrepresentation of players from lower socioeconomic groups in the league. These players experienced a steady decline in earnings and a diminished social status as their playing career dwindled and eventually ended. Average earnings per year for this group declined from about £7,500.00 (~\$12,000.00) to £3,500.00 - £4,500.00 (~\$5,600.00 - \$7,200.00). Several studies in the U.S. indicate that compared to non-athletes, athletes with a college degree earn more and enjoy a higher occupational prestige in their 40s and 50s (Coakley, 2007). Apparently, one's quality of life after competitive sports is strongly related to one's level of education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Over the past two decades, the author has collected stories told by undergraduate, as well as, graduate kinesiology majors who all shared sport experiences. It is doubtful that the above four described sport experiences of young and highly competitive varsity high school and college varsity athletes are unique. Less common, yet much more publicized, are the success stories with the happy endings.

Any career aspiration may start with a dream and a career as a professional athlete is no different in that respect. It is important, however, to also be aware of the following points

about one's choice of a future career (see AT&T Parent Project Career Development Course, n.d.):

- (1) It is now more common than ever before for a person to expect to go through several careers in her or his lifetime. For example, according to a 2012 Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor survey, younger baby boomers born between the years 1957 to 1964 held an average of 11.3 jobs from ages 18 to 46. Since the average career length of a professional athlete is relatively short, parents are urged to explore with their child all other strengths that he or she may possess and then discuss other potential career options that their child may have.
- (2) Parents and their children are advised to critically examine and embrace their child's weaknesses. A lot of time and effort may be saved by the avoidance of "false starts."
- (3) Reading the literature about second or complimentary careers that successful retired athletes in general, or in a specific sport are engaged in may provide some important leads. Such knowledge would be quite useful in the selection of the range of skills that one may need to develop for a potential second career. Successful professional athletes earn very large sums of money. It is, therefore, important to first learn of how to manage one's earnings. In order to avoid future financial disasters, one should consider viewing the documentary by ESPN films titled "Broke" (Corben, 2012). "Broke" tells the story of 30 former multimillionaire professional athletes who lost it all.
- (4) Lastly, a clear vision and good planning and preparation may pave the way to a fitting and fulfilling post professional athletics career that one may then enjoy for her or his foreseeable future.

The hope of a professional career in sports is shared by many aspiring young athletes. The few that make it to the pros, however, often have a relatively short career that is ended abruptly and leaves them with no job or the skills needed for success off the playing fields. If left unchecked, the dream of a career as a professional athlete may quickly turn into a nightmare. Thus, when aspiring for a career as a professional athlete one must first be sure to have an option to fall back on in case one's plan for a career as a professional athlete fails to materialize. In the event that one is successful and gets hired by a professional team there may still be a need for plan "B" should the career as a professional athlete turn to be a very short one.

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