

The Brawn-Drain? Issues for the Professional Sports Worker

by

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Introduction

The aim of sports is to produce pleasure, both for the players, and the audience. But over the last century, the organisation of the production of this pleasure has profoundly changed. From sport being leisure, often a prerogative of the 'leisured classes', sport has now been democratised, bureaucratised, commoditised, and even globalised (Breedveld, 1996).

The debates about professionalism versus amateurism (Coakley, 1998) in sport seem increasingly archaic. Amateurism, rather than being associated with the high ethical ideals involved in refusing to be paid for enjoying oneself, now has come to be seen as 'amateurish'. Sports are a serious business and are supported by a raft of technical, scientific and bureaucratic professions that support this industry (such as dieticians, physiologists, physiotherapists, biomechanics, coaches, referees, scorers, judges, education programmes, life-coaches and so on). Consider for a moment the irony that must be apparent to a sprint star at the Olympics whose support staff are highly paid professionals while the athlete must hold to the 'ideals' of not getting a salary for being the lynchpin of the whole 'show'.

Professionalism is now the reality in many sports. For the professional sportsperson (most professional sports are male), there are several challenges and issues that make them a 'special' type of worker. We now explore three of the challenges of the sports professional: the short-term nature of the career and its implications which includes living with injury and the fear of life after a sports career; second, the 'brawn drain'; and third, the celebrity status of athletes.

The short and risky career of the sports worker

The greatest risk to the professional sportsperson is that of serious injury. Income is dependent on performance and outcome, and this depends on the athlete remaining injury-free during the competitive season. This, in turn, may provide the impetus for

athletes to use performance-enhancing drugs in order to disguise the pain of injuries or to ensure a fast return to play. The risk of injury has also been used to justify the very high salaries paid in some sports, as athletes believe they are at risk of having a limited professional career.

Fear of injury and non-selection, and uncertainty about life after sport, are common issues raised in anecdotal sport biographies. The problem is compounded for some athletes in that they focused on sport from a very early age, neglecting tertiary education or career training. Michael Laws reflects below on the thoughts of Norm Hewitt, All Black, on professional rugby:

Although his greatest fear is not of being dropped but of what lies beyond. Of what happens once the rugby stops. This is the only life he had known, the only job he had had in the last eight years. Indeed he's only been trained for one thing in life and that is to play rugby. A part of him feels that his life is nearly over. And he's just turned 33 years of age.

They are natural qualms for the top sportsperson approaching the end of his career. He has lived a strange, self-absorbed existence that has delivered reward, celebrity and the respect of his peers. But with the collapse of a scrum, and maybe the flick of a selector's pen, it is all about to end. Norm Hewitt will be converted into Joe Average. The phone will stop ringing, the contract monies dry up, and the camaraderie of his playing mates will fade away. He appreciates this inevitability but it doesn't make it any easier (Laws, 2001: 285-286).

Athletes as global migrant workers

The need to maximise income over a short-term career has also added to the seductiveness of the global sports career. Over recent years, there has been a large increase in the number of sports women and men who leave New Zealand in order to continue working as professional athletes. For example, top international golfers, such as Marnie McGuire, Michael Campbell and Phillip Tautaurangi, have, by necessity, joined foreign circuits to further their careers. Major sports such as basketball, rugby league, rugby and netball, increasingly use foreign players to plug perceived weaknesses in domestic and international teams. While these athlete transfers have become commonplace in male-dominated sports, especially those with salary caps in place, the trend has met some resistance within women's sports. The extensive media coverage of the controversy surrounding the selection of former Protea goal-shooter, Irene Van Dyke, to the Silver Ferns is indicative of this debate (Gray, 2002).

The global migration trend, the 'Brawn Drain' (Bale, 1994), is particularly apparent in rugby union's 2003 Super 12 competition where approximately sixty percent of New Zealand-based team wingers originated from Fiji (see www.nzrugby.co.nz). This type of talent migration is a serious concern for many Pacific nations as the process usually benefits the importer, in this case New Zealand, rather than the exporters,

although the argument is complicated by many other factors such as the success of the athlete's settlement in the new country which can range from major forms of culture shock to chronic loneliness to minor homesickness (Klein, 1991). Athlete migration also impacts on the importing countries athlete development programmes; for example, players who are not signed by the franchise may, by necessity, need to move off shore or change sporting codes.

The full social impact of global migration in New Zealand has not been fully understood, either in terms of the sport at a macro-level, or at the level of the individual athletes and their families and this is an area identified for further research by Coakley (1998: 421).

The impact of global migration by athletes on how people think about and identify themselves in connection with nation-states is something we know little about. On one hand, there seems to be a tendency among people to appreciate athletic talent regardless of the nationality of the athletes. On the other hand, there is also a tendency among many people to have special affections for athletes and teams representing their nations of citizenship or their nations of origin.

This issue was felt most acutely in New Zealand with the so-called 'defection' of Russell Coutts and Brad Butterworth and six others of the Team New Zealand racing-crew members to the Swiss syndicate Alinghi (who eventually won the America's Cup from New Zealand in 2003). The 'Blackheart', and the more subtle but no less pointed 'Loyal' campaigns indicated the strong nationalistic fervor around national sportspeople and the personal dilemma between self-advancement and nationalism for the professional sportsperson (*New Zealand Herald*, 20 September, 2002).

In addition, many professional sport coaches have been forced, through lack of local opportunities, to leave New Zealand in order to obtain employment. It has become increasingly common for elite level sport coaches, such as rugby's Graham Henry and netball's Yvonne Willering, to accept national coach responsibilities for other Commonwealth countries. However, Australian Carrie Graf and Ian Rutledge represent a counter trend as they have been appointed to national head-coach positions for the National Basketball Association and the New Zealand Hockey Federation respectively.

Celebrity and the sports professional

The celebrity status which Laws (2001) refers to above, comes 'ready-packaged' with an athlete's selection into a popular sports team or meritorious individual performance, and creates certain demands and expectations from the New Zealand public. Fans expect sports heroes to be articulate, accommodating, and accepting of their role model status. Similarly, the sports organisations have behavioural expectations – they have developed player codes of conduct which are legally binding agreements signed as part of the player's employment contract. This issue is illustrated by cricketer,

Chris Cairns, who had to face a disciplinary hearing upon his return from the 2003 Cricket World Cup because he was physically attacked after a social gathering outside a South African bar (Longley, 2003). While Cairns viewed this incident as regretful, in that it may have had more serious consequences, he defended his right to celebrate his expected fatherhood. This highlighted the dilemma for official New Zealand team members in that, while touring, they are under the direct control of their management team twenty-four hours of the day. The conflict arises because, while it is imperative that the athletes have time-out to relax and socialise during long campaigns, they are under constant media scrutiny for newsworthy incidents.

The sport-celebrity-media nexus is further complicated by the sponsorship requirements of individual sports and the sport marketing campaigns of the major sport franchises. Many sporting heroes use women's magazines to generate added income, and sports organisations and franchises often benefit from the added exposure of advertisers using sport stars as models (for example Mandy Smith and the Canterbury Clothing Company). In this sense, the commodification of the professional athlete impacts on their popularity, creates a higher media interest, but probably curtails their individual freedoms.

Concluding Comments

The professional sports worker, a relatively new type of paid worker, is a fascinating subject. They fascinate us because of their physical talent, prowess and (sometimes) beauty. They seem to 'perform' in a world where the rules are different from the rest of us, as indeed in some cases they are. But also, the sports professional negotiates through the physical and emotional demands of their labour much like 'ordinary' people. Their celebrity status sometimes gives them astonishing media power (David Beckham, until recently playing football for Manchester United, is a case in point) but they are also dehumanised because of those same pressures (David and Victoria Beckham's recent stalking and kidnapping problems illustrate the downside of celebrity).

Sport is very important to national identity, and to the aspirations of young people. As with basketball in the United States, where young Afro-Americans excel, the physical talents of Maori and Pacific Island youth are equally rewarded in rugby union, rugby league, basketball and numerous other sports (but interestingly not others, such as cricket). Professional sport is only just beginning to be explored as a form of 'work' and there are many interesting ways to look at the professional sports worker – we have touched on only a few here but have raised issues regarding identity, gender, race, celebrity, nationalism, the body, and global migration, all direct concerns of labour studies. We hope that your interest is piqued by this introduction to the sports worker and continue to explore and think about some of the issues we have raised in this chapter.

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Bios

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