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“Balancing Acts”:

A Qualitative Investigation of Division I Football Players’ Roles of Student and Athlete

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Science

Degree

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Patricia Yvette Jones

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone that came before who struggled and fought for me and all African-Americans to be a free people, have equal rights and opportunities. This is to all those who refused to give up on their dreams even though they were challenged and denied. To everyone in my family who supported me through this journey - my mother, Leona Boyd; my father, Curtis Jones and stepfather Robert Boswell; my sisters and brothers, Leon, Shaleen, Charity, Quentin and Shantel; my aunts Sonya, Unity, Jenny and Kim and my cousins Summer (much love) and Storm. I also dedicate this thesis to Zion, my son who literally stayed by my side along the way, even in my night classes where we secretly wrote notes to each other. Know that I love you all!!!

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine African-American Division I football players' perceptions of their ability to balance their roles as "students" and "athletes". Three major questions were addressed: Can student-athletes balance both the roles of "student" and "athlete"? If so, how are they able to do so? And, are they truly successful at it? Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight African-American football players at a Division I university. Six themes emerged which included: (a) parental emphasis on education and sport; (b) "childhood dreams" versus sport realities; (c) reality check; (d) perceptions of student-athletes; (e) pressure to become a "man"; and (f) being a student-athlete. Future directions for research, sport psychology consultants and athletic department staff are also given.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

After working at the Student-Athlete Success Center on the university campus for a year, I was given the opportunity to discuss with numerous individuals the multiple roles that student-athletes assume. At this center, athletic scholarship-granted student-athletes receive academic counseling and are provided a computer lab, study space, tutors and other forms of academic assistance. I spoke with various student-athletes, academic counselors, athletic administrators and coaches. In our discussions, each group expressed concerns regarding African-American student-athletes and how they balance the roles of “athlete” and “student”. We also discussed how administrators and coaches could assist these student-athletes in believing it is acceptable to be successful academically as well as athletically.

An interview I conducted for a class assignment with an African-American collegiate football player, “John Doe”, intrigued me and encouraged me to pursue this topic. I was able to hear firsthand how imbalanced role identification could be for a student-athlete. For example, John Doe perceived himself to be a student and an athlete, but felt that others perceived him solely as an athlete. This contradicted his own sense of being as an athlete and student. He stated that he was productive in the classroom, completing assignments and studying for class. He was close to achieving the Student-Athlete Success Center Honor of a 3.0 by obtaining a 2.95, and he believed his professors, academic counselors, and coach would label him as “smart”, “talented”, “hardworking” and “dedicated”.

However, even with his academic success, he felt that he was more productive on the field as an athlete, studying film and practicing plays, than as a student in the classroom. In the classroom he felt bored; and even though he wanted to get good grades, athletics played a bigger role in his life. The time he dedicated to studying plays was more than what he dedicated to studying for classes. The level of confidence that John Doe felt when he was on the athletic field was much higher than what he experienced in the classroom. This may be due to the amount of time spent on the field training versus studying for in the classroom. He stated, "I do what I need to do, you know, to get a B. You know, my goal is an A, but more likely it is going to be a B or a C. I'm an average student, but on the football field you have to study or you'll fail, which is my fear." This is just one example of how he did not believe he was successful academically even though he maintained a relatively high GPA for an African-American student-athlete in football. Many African-American male student-athletes may feel that they are more productive and successful on the field than in the classroom.

Brief Literature Review

Very little research has been conducted on the ability of a student-athlete to balance, or place an equal amount of importance, on academics as well as athletics, which is the essence of the student- athlete role. One of the few examples is Adler & Adler's (1985) study of athletes in "big-time" college sports and the relationship between their athletic participation and academic performance. Adler & Adler (1985) drew from a four-year participant observation study and tracked athletes' involvement in academics throughout their college careers. Their study included lower-and middle-class student-

athletes of which 70 percent were African-American. They showed that a majority of athletes entered college with optimistic and idealistic goals and attitudes about their future academic careers. Over time, however, their athletic, social, and classroom experiences lead them to become progressively detached from academics. These athletes abandoned their earlier aspirations and expectations, and gradually lowered their academic aspirations and experienced inferior academic performance.

Adler and Adler's (1985) study reveals how student-athletes' attitudes and goals can shift from academics to athletics as they proceed through college. However, there was no explanation given for why this shift occurred. They discuss how student-athletes have to choose and prioritize between their athletic and academic commitments, shifting from a state of idealism to pragmatic detachment. However, the question still remains: Can student-athletes balance the roles of "student" and "athlete" successfully?

Another study conducted by Settles, Sellers & Damas (2002) found both the athletic and academic roles to be highly central identities for student-athletes. After administering a questionnaire to 256 student-athletes at a Southern Division I university (with the exception of the football team and the men's and women's soccer teams who were competing at the time), they concluded that interference between the demands of being an athlete and a student were associated with some levels of distress. However, student-athletes who viewed being a student and an athlete as separate roles (perceived the distinctiveness between the two roles) reported higher levels of psychological well-being. Therefore, separating the two roles may allow student-athletes to better focus on the demands and tasks of each role and yield better performance. Student-athletes were

also more likely to identify with the student role when making a distinction between the athletic and academic roles. The authors suggested that when student-athletes struggled on the athletic field, they may feel more positive by receiving good grades in the classroom. However, Settles, Sellers & Damas (2002) do not discuss how many student-athletes in this study separated the two roles and how many were able to do so successfully.

Statement of the Problem

There is a lack of research on African-American college football players' experiences of balancing the roles of athlete and student. They are a distinct population in comparison to other athletic teams. Football teams are unique because of their size, the amount of media exposure players are subjected, and the very diverse backgrounds, attitudes and personalities of all the players on the team. By researching this topic, I was trying to assess whether African-American football players are able to balance between their student and st and if so how. The inability to balance the roles that student-athletes possess could contribute to problems such as low GPAs, not participating in class, and delayed or failure to graduate. Such an imbalance could also lead to maladaptive behaviors such as being unprepared for or uninterested in academics both prior to and while attending college. This balance may also be threatened because of the lack of academic preparation many African-American football players have upon entering college. By taking on the roles of "student" and "athlete", student-athletes have to be able to integrate the two roles. For instance, if student-athletes do not, they might decide

that if they identify with being students first and an athlete second, they will not be successful as athletes and vice-versa.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine African-American Division I football players' perceptions of their ability to balance their roles as "students" and "athlete.s" I addressed two major questions: Can a student-athlete successfully balance both the roles of "student" and "athlete"? And, if so, how are they able to do so? In addressing these questions, I hoped to also identify, explain, describe and document the shift that student-athletes experience in their identity while transitioning through college as was discussed in the study conducted by Adler & Alder (1985). A more complete review of literature can be found in Chapter Two.

A second purpose was to provide participants an opportunity to say what they wanted and express how they felt without the fear of being judged or penalized for discussing and sharing their perspective. Perhaps this group may be unable to voice how they feel or what they believe in because they are constantly advised by the athletic department on what to say and how to say it. They must be constantly mindful of how the media and the administration interprets what they say, when they are given the opportunity to speak out. For instance, during my interview with John Doe he was cautious about what he shared. Throughout the interview he was convinced that the interview would be shared with individuals in the Athletic Department. Throughout the session I repeatedly informed him that this was not the case and the interview would

remain confidential. Immediately after the session, he told me that he wished he had openly shared more of what he knew and was awaiting a second opportunity.

In yet another example, one of the athletes who spoke to me regularly while I worked at the center was quoted in the newspaper after a practice game. The reporter misquoted a majority of what this athlete stated, and while reading the article he became distraught. The monitoring of what student-athletes say and do could also be related to the conflict that exists between athletics and academics for student-athletes. For example, teams are not authorized to travel during study days and finals. However, many student-athletes travel for competition during study days and finals week, and suffer by not being able to study for an ample amount of time to properly prepare for final exams. If student-athletes were to say something regarding this situation to a reporter or someone outside of the Athletic Department, then the athletic administration might be questioned.

Limitations of the Study

The following were limitations of the current study:

1. There was a limited number (e.g., eight participants) from one Division I football team in the Southeastern United States.
2. Players were asked to reflect on their roles as students and athletes only.

Delimitations of the Study

The following were delimitations of the current study:

1. Only male African-American football players were interviewed.
2. Participants were between the ages of 18-24 years.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided to ensure uniformity and understanding of terms used in this document.

ADAPTIVENESS: When an individual is presented with tasks that favor one identity over another and increases s/he the salience of the favored identity (Yopky & Prentice, 2005).

ATHLETISM: Is a prejudice against student-athletes (Hyatt, 2003).

DISTINCTIVENESS: When a task triggers an individual to self-reflect leading the individual to focus on parts of his/her identity that distinguish him/her from others within the social environment (Yopky & Prentice, 2005).

ROLE CONFLICT: The extent to which a person experiences pressures within one role that are incompatible with the pressures that arise within another role (Settles, Sellers & Damas, 2002).

ROLE INTERFERENCE: When demands of one role or multiple roles impede on each other. For instance, this occurs when a student-athlete's student role prevents him from adequately performing his athlete role or vice versa (Settles, Sellers & Damas, 2002).

ROLE OVERLOAD: When one does not create two distinct roles but combines the roles when demands are conflicting. For example, this occurs when a person simultaneously fulfills multiple roles such as student, athlete, son, father and brother (Settles, Sellers & Damas, 2002).

ROLE SEPARATION: When an individual is aware of the distinctiveness of two roles. For instance, this occurs when a student-athlete prevents a harmful experience of one role

such as their athlete role by separating it so it doesn't interfere with other roles (Settles, Sellers & Damas, 2002).

SELF-CONCEPT: An idea of the self constructed from the beliefs one holds about oneself and the responses of others (Hyatt, 2003).

STEREOTYPE THREAT: When anxiety is experienced as individuals risk confirming a negative stereotype that represents their group. For student-athletes, this occurs when the risk of confirming the stereotype that they are less academically competent than other students hinders their academic performance (Steele, 1997). The next chapter describes literature reviewed for the current study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

On college campuses across the nation students encounter stressful situations linked to their gender, age, and race, class standing, and social economical status. This stress varies from student to student and by circumstance. For example, it has been found that many African-American students will change their self-concept, outlook and values in order to disidentify with academic achievement (Steele, 1992). By disidentifying with achievement, students refuse to confirm the racial inferiority stereotypes that relate to their racial group. Students also utilize assimilation to become a part of campus life. By doing so, students attempt to master the culture of the mainstream in order to gain acceptance (Steele, 1992). However, their level of stress rises. This increase in stress could be due to students' inability to develop methods to better manage their multifaceted identities.

On a daily basis college students are under pressure to perform at a high level. They constantly receive the message that in order to succeed on campus and in today's society the level of education that they possess is extremely important and influential. These stressors pertain to all students including student-athletes. Student-athletes appear to have more privilege than the average college student. For example, they have their own personal facilities for working out, studying, academic support and numerous sources of funding. The belief that student-athletes are privileged has been adopted by some because many student-athletes are awarded scholarships to play at the collegiate

level. It is not taken into account by many professors or other students that being an athlete at a collegiate level is a complex layer added onto the “typical” student life. Student-athletes are faced with challenges that non-athletes probably do not experience. In addition to the typical student routine of attending classes, socializing, and studying, student-athletes also endure sports-related activities such as practice, athletic trainer appointments for injuries, traveling and studying team plays (Watt & Moore III, 2001). These additional commitments force them to take on multiple identities and roles that have to be balanced in order to be successful academically and athletically. In this chapter, I discuss literature related to student-athlete roles, the media, faculty perceptions, shifting identities, financial considerations and NCAA involvement.

Student-Athlete Roles

Student-athletes take on the role and identity of both “student” and “athlete”, which can be harmful if a balance is not established. Some student-athletes are able to balance the two roles successfully whereas others are not. Many student-athletes encounter role conflict, role separation, role overload and role interference (Settles, Sellers & Drama, 2002). Role conflict is the extent to which a person experiences pressures within one role that are incompatible with the pressures that arise within another role. Role separation is when one prevents a harmful experience of one role by separating it from others; for instance, a student-athlete may prevent a harmful experience of the “athlete” role, by separating it so it doesn’t affect the other roles of student, son or brother. Role overload exists when a student-athlete simultaneously fulfills multiple roles such as student, athlete, son, father and brother. Role overload

takes place when one does not create two distinct roles, but combines the roles when demands are conflicting. Role conflict and role overload create demands on a role or roles that impede on each other; this is known as role interference. Role interference occurs when a student-athlete's student role prevents him/her from adequately performing the "athlete" role or vice versa. By utilizing these previous strategies, student-athletes attempt to deal with the multiple roles they take on. However are these strategies effective?

Settles, Sellers & Drama (2002) found that student-athletes' academic and athletic roles are both highly significant identities to them and as such, interference occurs. One belief is that by separating the roles of "student" and "athlete", they may be better focused on the demands and tasks of each role, allowing for better performance in each role. Interestingly, student-athletes who viewed "student" and "athlete" as two distinct roles were more likely to identify with the student role. Student-athletes who experience both role conflict and role overload also experience low levels of well-being versus student-athletes who view the two roles as distinct. However, these are just some of the strategies student-athletes may use when attempting to balance the roles of both "student" and "athlete".

Steele (1997) defines stereotype threat as a process by which anxiety is experienced when an individual risks confirming a negative stereotype representing his/her group. Yopky and Prentice (2005) pointed out how some student-athletes experience stereotype threat. Student-athletes are sensitive to the significance of their "student" and "athlete" identities. The salience of these competing identities is

dependent upon the task at hand. The shift that occurs from one identity to the other is often spontaneous. Yopky and Prentice (2005) explain that student-athletes are believed to encounter adaptiveness, which is when a person is presented with tasks that favor one identity over others, because this increases the salience of the favored identity. Student-athletes may also experience distinctiveness. This is when a task triggers them to self-reflect and leads to a focus on identity, which distinguishes them from others within their social environment. Stereotype threat may be experienced by student-athletes and when race is taken into consideration the chance of experiencing stereotype threat is increased. In academic settings, student-athletes' ethnic minority status are linked to negative academic stereotypes. Stereotype threat is inescapable for students with identities that are both contextually distinctive and negatively stereotyped (Yopky & Prentice, 2005).

Faculty Perceptions

Faculty also hold stereotypes about the academic performance of student-athletes. A study conducted by Engstrom, Sedlacek & McEwen (1995) revealed that faculty believed male student-athletes in both revenue and non-revenue sports had less academic ability than nonathletes. They also expressed disdain and anger toward situations in which privileges or services were granted to student-athletes. When the topic of full scholarships and low SATs were brought up, faculty presented strong feelings of anger, disapproval, and concern toward nonrevenue and revenue student-athletes versus other students. Therefore, this study indicated faculty do, in fact, hold prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes toward both revenue and nonrevenue student-athletes (Engstrom, Sedlacek & McEwen, 1995). It appears that faculty believe student-athletes with full scholarships

and low SATs are unqualified or undeserving of admission to their institution. When it came to male athletes in revenue and non-revenue sports, faculty in the study expressed a strong negative attitude, especially towards those recognized in the media. This could be due to faculty members considering athletic performance undeserving of attention and pride when compared to other forms of student accomplishments (Engstrom, Sedlacek & McEwen, 1995).

The Media

The media may also play a key role in why student-athletes are viewed differently by faculty. The media often focuses on illegal, illegitimate practices in revenue-generating sports (Engstrom, Sedlacek & McEwen, 1995). Special gifts and money that are given to a few student-athletes are reported regularly. All of these things may affect how faculty view the legitimacy of revenue-generating sports in its entirety. Race and class are also key factors when discussing the media because a majority of the athletes in revenue-generating sports are African-American males, who are constantly scrutinized by the media. This could be the reason why faculty think of team members of revenue-generating sports as being primarily African-American and disadvantaged (Engstrom, Sedlacek & McEwen, 1995).

The attitude that student-athletes are academically unable to perform has not only been taken on by faculty, but by society as a whole. This attitude has been labeled as *athletism*, a prejudice against student-athletes (Hyatt, 2003). The perceived elite status that student-athletes supposedly possess can cause inequitable treatment and discrimination towards them. This is especially true for African-American male student-

athletes who are categorized by faculty and fellow classmates as low academic performers. In addition, some African-American student-athletes in revenue-generating sports such as football and basketball are admitted under special circumstances (Hyatt, 2003). Interestingly, with society as a whole marginalizing their academic ability through athleticism and stereotypes such as “dumb jocks” these student-athletes may begin to take on the same attitude. If student-athletes marginalize their own academic ability they risk developing a low academic self-concept. Academic self-concept is how a person views his or her own abilities and interests in academia are viewed. A low academic self-concept leads to a low level of academic motivation (Hyatt, 2003).

Shifting Identities

While some student-athletes have trouble balancing the two roles of “student” and “athlete”, most experience additional identities that also play a valid role in this balancing act. For example, when the student-athlete is African-American and male, not only does he have to make a distinction between the “student” and “athlete” role, but he also encounters stressors that pertain to race and gender. A study conducted by Adler & Adler (1985) found that upon entering college, African-American basketball players felt idealistic about their academic performance, experience and they were optimistic about the chance of graduating. However, once they began school there was a switch in attitude. The idealism that was experienced upon entering school gradually shifted to disappointment and cynicism. Student-athletes in the study believed that if they displayed too much interest, effort, or success academically, they would be ridiculed by their fellow teammates for doing so. They also felt that professors only viewed them as

“jocks” and treated them differently than the general student body. It is believed that all student-athletes -not only African-American males- react to rejection by rejecting those they believe have rejected them (Sykes & Matza, 1957). In fact, once participants’ beliefs have shifted, they begin to engage in role distancing and detachment. They first distance themselves from their academic identity and focus more on athletics. Then, they detach themselves from identifying with the academic identity entirely. In other words, they abandon the belief that they held upon entering college that they were going to succeed academically by getting good grades and eventually graduating, and begin to focus solely on their athletic success.

NCAA Involvement

The above issues that student-athletes encounter have been observed and actions have been taken in an attempt to create change. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) oversees all post-secondary sports programs in the United States. The NCAA was founded in 1905 in response to the rising death toll in college football and increasing “professionalism” of college sports in general. The mission of the NCAA (2001) is “to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body” (policy, 1.3.1). In 1988, the NCAA approved a rule known as Proposition 48, which raised academic standards for athletes coming to college. The raise in academic standards caused a lot of concern from African-American coaches and civil rights leaders who felt that the new rule would deprive African-American athletes with low SAT scores the chance of a college education. Yet another rule was enforced and adopted by the NCAA in 1996 known as

Proposition 16, which required incoming scholarship athletes to meet standards for high school grade point averages and SAT scores on a sliding scale for eligibility. Athletes with a 2.5 GPA in high school had to score at least 820 on the combined SAT; those with a 2.0 GPA had to score at least 1010. These changes in academic standards received the same criticisms as Proposition 48 as many felt that it, too, would hinder African-American athletes in their quest to enter college, obtain a college degree or graduate.

With the new rules that were put into place and the criticisms that were received, evaluations were done to see if the concerns were valid (Suggs & Welch, 2003). An NCAA annual report showed that before Proposition 48 fewer African-American athletes graduated than at any other time since the mid-1980's. After the proposition was instituted in Division I revenue-generating sports such as football and men's basketball, 51 percent of football players graduated and 41 percent of male basketball players graduated over a six-year period. According to the report, only 33 percent of Division I African-American male basketball players graduated in the six-year time span, the lowest rate since 1985. Suggs & Welch (2003) noted a decrease in the numbers of African-American athletes in 1996 made up 55 percent of basketball players in the previous class but only 52 percent of the 1996-97 class. These similar patterns held true for African-American football players and African-American male athletes as a whole.

A study conducted by Amato, Gandar & Zuber (2001) found that there was a negative and statistically significant relationship between football success and football player graduation rates two years prior to Proposition 48. However, the same relationship did not exist two years following. They believed that the change in the

football success and football player graduation rate relationship was from the stricter freshmen eligibility standards encompassed in Proposition 48. The changes the NCAA implemented were an attempt to assist student-athletes in their college experiences both academically and athletically. However, Proposition 48 can be harmful to those who do not possess a strong academic background. If student-athletes are unable to meet the eligibility standards, they will not be authorized to play at the college level or obtain an athletic scholarship.

Even with the NCAA involvement, there are still academic distinctions that can be made between collegiate divisions, revenue and nonrevenue-generating sports, and scholarship and nonscholarship student-athletes. Some differences that exist between Division I, II and III are: (a) Division I student-athletes may have fewer opportunities to be a part of the traditional college experience because of the demands of their athletic preparation, which can include higher benefits, costs of a win-loss record, and media attention and scrutiny; (b) Division II and III schools take pride in their ability to integrate the student-athlete and athletics as a whole into their college environment. The belief is that Division II and III student-athletes participate for the love of the sport rather than for external rewards (Snyder, 1996); and (c) Division I schools are considered to be significantly more professional than Division III schools; when athletic competition is taken into consideration it has been suggested that similar differences appear in the student-athletes' athletic versus academic motivation (Snyder, 1996).

Financial Considerations

When examining the academic performance of African-American males in revenue-generating sports such as football and basketball, one has to take into account that in commercial terms, NCAA-member college sports' revenue increased 8000 percent since 1976 going from \$6.6 million in 1977-78 to a multi-billion dollar sports entertainment enterprise. However, research has shown that athletes participating in football and men's basketball -two of the highest revenue-producing sports- perform worst in the classroom even when academic background is taken into account (Maloney & McCormick, 1993). Football and men's basketball players earn one-tenth of a grade point average lower per semester than other athletes and nonathlete students. Male basketball players had the worst grades overall; they averaged a 1.93 GPA which predicted that less than half of them would graduate. Football players did not perform much better; they had a GPA of 2.12 which implied a graduation rate of 53 percent (Maloney & McCormick, 1993).

A distinction between scholarship and non-scholarship athletes should also be taken into consideration when it comes to academic performance. There are differences between the athletic scholarships in Divisions I, II and III. The dissemination of scholarships for athletic participation increases at the Division I and II levels. The only scholarships provided to Division III student-athletes are for academic reasons. According to research, scholarship athletes fared worse than nonscholarship or partial scholarship athletes in academic performance (Pudry, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982). This could be because full scholarship athletes take on the attitude of being employees of the

university (Pudry, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982). They feel as if they owe their coaches all their time, energy and undivided attention because their coaches, university are paying their bills (Pudry, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982). This belief can cause role conflict as well, leading to the role of “student” to be neglected or deemphasized. In this case, student-athletes can overemphasize athletic identity at the expense of academic pursuit, which allowed them to maximize their performance on the field.

Conclusions

When evaluating the academic performance of student-athletes, one has to examine every aspect of the student-athlete experience. This begins by considering the type of life that student-athletes live, which is similar to the general student population, but has additional commitments and restraints that also have to be taken into consideration. Taking on both roles of “student” and “athlete” can be very conflicting if the two are not balanced properly. When race is added to this scenario, the stressors and conflicts increase. Even with the NCAA implementing and enforcing new rules to allow and assist in student-athletes’ college experience, problems, concerns and inequality still exists. When one goes further to examine how the role of “student” and “athlete” are balanced in a more specific population in collegiate athletics such as African-American male student-athletes, the type of sport especially with high media focus and commercialization has to be taken into consideration. The performance of African-American student-athletes in revenue-generating sports, such as football, often do poorly academically and this could be due to role conflict, separation, overload and distancing leading to detachment. The next chapter describes the methods for this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The Researcher

In this chapter, I describe the method used for this study. First, I focus on myself as a researcher, the choice of research type, the research paradigm, the research tradition, and data collection. I end with a description of my data analysis procedures. As a researcher I am aware that the research I am conducting is significant and that I will struggle with my academic commitment to my research versus to the African-American community. This is due to wanting to become a well-respected researcher as well as remaining loyal to who I am as an African-American. As stated by Carter (2003), “Though the two are not mutually exclusive, this effort requires ongoing vigilance. This vigilance emerges from an ideological framework, informs that focus of my research, directs my inquiry, and stipulates the level of my commitment to and action toward my community” (p. 30). Until now, I did not consider how or what impact I would have on the population I intended to study. Because of the multiple roles I have taken on being an African-American, female, student, and researcher, this played a key role in my research. Being African-American drew me to researching individuals of the same racial background. The disparities that race creates such as lack of education, racial injustices, and financial strains that exist in the African-American community is what drove my interests.

As a researcher I was expected to take on a singular identity as a researcher, which could have hindered me because I am an African-American woman. However, I

embraced my multiple identities as a researcher, African-American, woman and as a low social class person. By doing so, I emphasized the authenticity of the often fictive relationship between myself as the researcher and the participants of my research (Carter, 2003). Being an African-American woman could have had its setbacks because men of the same race may not have wanted to take me seriously as a professional. For example, they may have wanted to converse about things that have happened in the African-American community (e.g., how we/they are being held down, oppressed, etc.). This could have become a distraction, especially when I conducted the interviews. This false relationship could have created an attitude of benign benevolence toward the communities where I conducted my research (Carter, 2003). I resisted this singular identity by embracing my multiple identities and I allowed myself as a researcher to grow and potentially offer society a different view of how research could be conducted. I attempted to work through these limitations by stating my own beliefs up front. It is impossible to be totally unbiased; however, I was aware of possible biases and acknowledged these beliefs and biases. My advisor and committee members also assisted with this process.

Researcher Bias

As an African-American researcher pursuing this topic, I was aware of the fact that I was not an athlete and I did not know exactly how an athlete feels or what he endures. I utilized my naivety of what student-athletes experience and encounter as a tool to empower them to want to educate me. While approaching and interviewing participants, I was curious about everything that related to their sport. Because of my

naivety, I had the potential to bring a different perspective to the research question. Also, it helped that I am an African-American who comes from a low socioeconomic class. It may be because of these characteristics that many of the African-American student-athletes felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with me. When they shared their experiences, I remained focused on the purpose of our interaction.

As a researcher, I attempted to refrain from making any assumptions. When dealing with the student-athlete population, this can be difficult especially if the researcher is unfamiliar with the life of student-athletes, or does not know any student-athletes personally. Since I had the opportunity to work with student-athletes for a year prior to my study, I was at an advantage because I interacted with various student-athletes and they helped me know potential participants for the study. This allowed me to have an “insider” perspective on what to say and what not to say them. For instance, I knew that addressing the participant by labeling him as either a “student” or an “athlete” was a sensitive topic for some. Some student-athletes preferred being viewed solely as athletes, while others wanted to be viewed as students. Throughout the previous year, I had come into contact and spoken with many student-athletes. They shared with me their own personal experiences, and gave suggestions and guidance on what should and should not be asked while conducting the interviews. The information they offered was invaluable. It gave me the opportunity to ask questions about what others may or may not want to disclose prior to data collection.

Choice of Research Type

Because quantitative research is commonly used throughout the sport psychology research field it is considered by some to be a more acceptable and legitimate form of research over qualitative research. It is possible that this belief has been adopted because quantitative research encompasses statistical findings grounded and supported by numbers. The goal of quantitative research is to provide a numerical summary of observations using descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative research provides a descriptive summary that explains behavior in a narrative recording (Zechmeister, Zechmeister & Shaughnessy, 2001). The validity of qualitative analyses has been controversial in the past. For example, it has been argued that qualitative research is highly subjective because researchers may have biases that influence their interpretations and conclusions (Zechmeister, Zechmeister & Shaughnessy, 2001).

I chose to utilize qualitative research over quantitative research because my research question required a more elaborate and in-depth observation of participants and their experiences. Qualitative research gives the researcher the opportunity to get to know participants in order to gain information (Caswell, 1998). The findings are, therefore, not based on statistical evidence, but are provided by participants firsthand. Participants are able to voice concerns and show the researcher their perspectives by either providing an example through telling a story or providing other resources that support their experiences. I believe that with qualitative research, I was able to go in-depth while interviewing and with the data while conducting data analysis (Patton, 1987).

Research Paradigm

As a constructivist, I believe that an individual who adopts the constructivist paradigm will need to take on the assumption that absolute realities are unknowable; it is only individuals' perspectives or constructions of reality that are the objects of inquiry (Hatch, 2002). I believe that experiences are often shared across and within social groups. Constructivists also argue that the realities that exist are unique because individuals' views of the world are what construct the individual's reality. This created reality links the knowledge and interests of individuals being studied to the researcher. To take on this paradigm, the researcher should not be distant and objective, but should have an approach that creates a subjective reality and mutual engagement between the researcher and participants (Hatch, 2002). This type of approach allows participants to openly share and not feel as if the researcher is interrogating them.

In order for a researcher to effectively utilize the constructivist paradigm, she must use a naturalistic approach when collecting and analyzing data. Interviews and observations are the preferred methodology for this approach (Hatch, 2002). Being able to interview the participants and observe them in their natural setting allows for the reconstruction of the participants' views of their own worlds. Using interviews and observation as an approach for data collection is the same methodology utilized in case studies. According to Hatch (2002), "accounts include enough contextual detail and sufficient representation of the voices of the participants that readers can place themselves in the shoes of the participants at some level and judge the quality of the findings based on criteria other than those used in positivist paradigms" (p. 16). Taking

all of this into consideration aided me in deciding to utilize constructivism as the paradigm for my research.

Research Tradition

Semi-structured interviews are a combination of informal conversational and the standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 1987). An informal conversational interview relies entirely upon questions that are spontaneously produced during the process of the interview. The semi-structured approach allows for a more natural flow where participants may not even be aware that they are being interviewed at all. A standardized open-ended interview is conducted with pre-existing questions that are carefully worded and arranged so that participants are asked the same questions in the same sequence. By utilizing a semi-structured interview, I established an interview guide in advance that was used during the interview; however, participants had the option to answer questions freely throughout the interview.

The semi-structured interview allowed for focused, conversational communication. It did not seem intrusive to those being interviewed and encouraged two-way communication. Participants were also able to ask questions of me throughout the process. It functioned as an extension tool that confirmed what participants already knew, but also provided the opportunity for them to learn more about themselves and their experiences (Patton, 1987). Often, the information obtained from semi-structured interviews provides not just answers, but the reasons for the answers. When participants are interviewed they may more easily discuss sensitive issues. Semi-structured interviews, therefore, can be used for participants to give and receive information.

This questionnaire framework used detailed questions that were formulated ahead of time. Relevant topics were initially identified through the literature review and the possible relationships between these topics and issues such as availability, expense, and effectiveness became the basis for more specific questions, which were prepared in advance.

Participants

Eight African-American male football players between the ages of 18-24 at a large Southeastern university were invited to participate in this study (see Table 1). The participants also possessed different class standings (e. g., two First Years ,two Second Year, two Third Year and two Fourth Years). Participants furnished information related to their GPA and major during the interview sessions. Prior to conducting interviews, all information pertaining to the research was submitted to the Institution Review Board (IRB) for approval (see Appendix A) and approval was granted. Participants were contacted via e-mail, phone and in person.

Data Collection

I met in a public location (e.g., campus library, minority cultural center, etc.) so that they were comfortable and felt open to share but I also felt safe. Participants were then asked to sign an informed consent document (see Appendix B). Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C). Questions were posed addressed to participants' athletic and academic identities and performance. Interviews were recorded and within 24 hours were transcribed by me after every session. All participants were asked the same questions in

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Class Standing	GPA	Family Structure	Parents' Level of Education
Rusty Shackelford	22	Senior	2.3	Father and Mother	Father bachelors degree
Paul Masson	21	Sophomore	2.7	Mother	College (degree unknown)
Freedom Rider	21	Junior	2.3	Father and Mother	Both college (degree unknown)
George	20	Junior	3.4	Mother	Attended but didn't finish
Mike Jones	21	Sophomore	2.5	Mother	Associates degree
Diamond Ice	20	Freshmen	2.4	Mother	None
John	19	Freshmen	3.0	Father and Mother	Both masters degree
Lando Johnson	21	Senior	2.6	Mother	Currently attending college
Average age= 21 Average GPA= 2.65 *ALL PARTICIPANTS LISTED WERE STARTERS ** PARTICIPANTS ARE LISTED IN ORDER INTERVIEWED					

the same order; however, additional questions were asked when the opportunity arose. For example, when participants answered a question sometimes the information given required further elaboration so follow-up questions were posed. Interviewing eight participants allowed for saturation to be reached so other potential participants were not contacted.

Data Analysis

After I audiorecorded and transcribed each interview, I conducted data analysis. In addition, immediately following every session detailed field notes were documented describing various observations made. First, I listened to each interview one time to get a sense of the whole. Then, I transcribed all of the interviews verbatim for contextual analysis. I coded the transcripts looking for common themes that emerged from the data. I intended to clarify the focus of my research by looking for common themes within and between participants.

Themes are concepts that emerge from the research data and can be formulated at different levels of abstraction (Bodan & Biklen, 2007). These can include words or phrases participants use to describe a feeling, phenomena or a set of field notes describing an incident. I used the themes to make connections between the various things participants said regarding their academic and athletic experiences. All underlying themes and supporting themes were noted and categorized as they emerged from the data. Themes that overlapped were noted as well.

As previously stated, each transcript was read several times. First, it was read to gain a sense of the participant's overall perspective and then it was read several more

times with comments, observations and queries noted in the margins. These notations were near data that were interesting, potentially relevant, or particularly telling. This process is similar to having a conversation with the data, asking questions of it (Merriam, 1998).

After reviewing the first transcript as previously outlined, I went through all transcripts using the same method. While composing individual lists of themes for each transcript, I then created a separate list of notes, comments and remarks comparing across transcripts, forming a master list. This master list was used as an outline reflecting the reoccurring regularities in the study (Merriam, 1998). Moving from the participants' own words to higher order themes, I used the regularities and patterns to categorize the themes and subthemes into major categories. My faculty advisor also read each transcript, thematized and then we came to a consensus about relevant themes.

During the data analysis cross-case analysis was utilized. A cross-case analysis is when answers from different people are grouped together (Patton, 1990). This method allowed for a more thorough data analysis (Patton, 1990). To be more specific, I followed Patton (1990) who found that the following items can be observed in this way:

Chronology: Describe what was observed chronologically, over time, to tell the story from beginning to end.

Key Events: Present the data by critical incidents or major events, not necessarily in order of occurrence but in order of importance.

Various Settings: Describe various places, sites, settings, or locations (doing case studies of each) before doing cross-setting pattern analysis.

People: If individuals or groups are the primary unit of analysis, then case studies of people or groups may be the focus for case studies.

Processes: The data may be organized to describe important processes (e.g., control, recruitment, decision making, socialization, communication).

Issues: The observation may be pulled together to illuminate key issues, often the equivalent of the primary evaluation questions, such as how did participants change? (p. 377)

In addition, participants were given a copy of their interview transcript and were asked if it accurately depicted what they said. None sent back any suggestions for change. The themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis and cross analysis are summarized in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was threefold: (a) to examine African-American Division I football players' perception of their ability to balance the roles of "student" and "athlete"; (b) to determine how if they were able to do so; and (c) whether any identity shifts occurred for these student-athletes in their transitioning throughout their academic career. Student-athlete roles were examined through a model, which explored participants' behaviors, justifications for behaviors, possible shifts they experienced, and how these shifts were related to the roles of "student" and "athlete". The model contained three categories used for analysis including: (a) student; (b) athlete; and (c) student-athlete. This chapter describes those results with supporting quotes directly from participants' interview transcripts. Readers are also referred to Appendix D for initial analysis of transcripts.

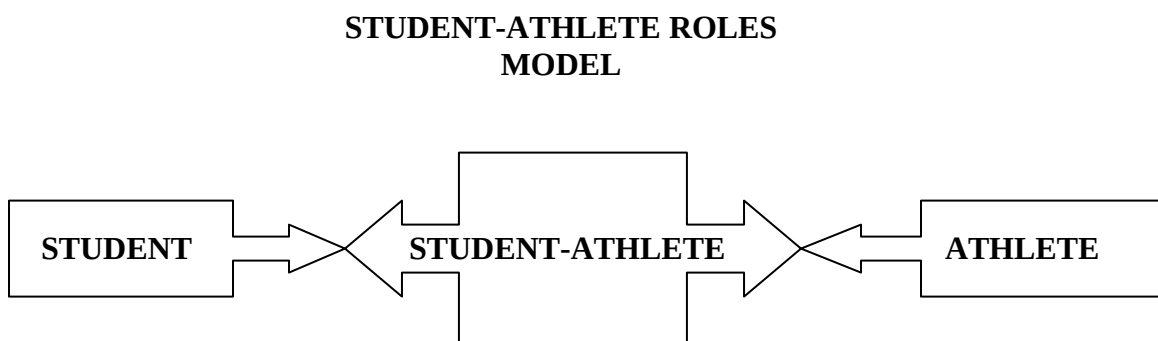


Figure 1 Student-Athlete Roles Model

Category #1: The Role of “Student” in “Student-Athlete”

Behaviors and justifications. Seven of the eight athletes interviewed had a difficult time describing themselves as students. In fact, when asked to define “student-athlete”, four of the seven asked for clarification of the term. For example, as Freedom Rider (Junior, GPA 2.3, Philosophy) said, “Let me see, let me see, my definition of a student-athlete? (pause) I don’t have an answer for you. I ain’t going to lie, I don’t know how to answer that question. I can’t answer that question.” Half of the eight described their behavior as students as a “lack of effort” and a “lack of application”. As Freedom Rider continued, “I know I can do just enough to get by and get away with it. It’s not good, but I do it. School is like a game to me, you play this role.”

He was fully aware that he did not apply himself. However, he also justified his behavior, “If I really did take school seriously, I could mess around and get a Masters but it’s just not what my interest is.” Three other participants shared a similar attitude, “I just don’t apply myself as much as I should. My schoolwork is good. I’m not failing, but I feel it could be better” (Lando Johnson, Senior, 2.6, Political Science); “I feel like I could be doing a lot better than what I’m doing, but I chose not to, I’m somebody who gets by” (Paul Masson, Sophomore, 2.7, Political Science); “I’ve had my share of ups and downs. That’s why I sit on a 2.5 (GPA). It could be a lot better” (Mike Jones, Sophomore, 2.5, Political Science).

Another indication that the participants did not identify as students was the justification they offered for their poor academic performance. John (Freshmen, 3.0, Communication/Journalism) described how the fast pace of the college experience in the

beginning was so overwhelming that he was placed on the student-athlete “concern” list. The “concern” list is a list for student-athletes who are not meeting the eligibility requirements academically. John (Freshmen, 3.0, Communication/Journalism) suggested that the reason he was on this list was because of, “Not prioritizing and not planning, I would miss classes but it would be so fast paced.” For Paul Masson (Sophomore, 2.7, Political Science) the classes that were a part of his major interested him whereas all other classes did not. As he shared, “I don’t care about [about these other classes].” Lando Johnson (Senior, 2.6, Political Science) felt the same way: “There are some classes, I just really can’t get into it...[it] doesn’t interest me”.

Another rationale that participants gave for why their focus was on athletics instead of academics was that football came easier to them than academics did, and that it was a type of schooling itself. As Freedom Rider (Junior, GPA 2.3, Philosophy) explained:

Athletics and athleticism is a type of intelligence. This is proven in psychology classes. I look at athletes as students in their craft and I don’t view or categorize a student-athlete as going to school to get an education and playing athletics; I believe athletics is a school in and of itself, just in a different way.

Diamond Ice (Freshmen, 2.4, Undecided/Psychology/Sociology) shared:

In football, if somebody’s tired or somebody gets the best of them, [they’re] going to dig deep and keep playing hard because that’s something they’re used to doing...a lot of people can relate to sports more than they can relate to sitting down in a boring classroom.

Mike Jones (Sophomore, 2.5, Political Science) had a similar belief:

In the classroom, it’s a little different. You sit back and take things in and then apply it. I learn on the run. So, I may lose or win a battle, but I’m playing a game within a game. So, I’m learning while I’m playing.

Instead of saying that they *could* be good in the classroom,, if they just applied themselves or defining athletic prowess as a form of intelligence, three participants described how they simply lacked confidence in the classroom. Freedom Rider (Junior, GPA 2.3, Philosophy) explained:

“I feel like I’m an underachiever...I don’t exert that confidence. I just kind of let it go.”

John (Freshmen, 3.0, Communication/Journalism) suggested:

When I know what I’m doing [in the classroom], I feel as confident. But, most of the time, I need encouragement.

Mike Jones (Sophomore, 2.5, Political Science) came directly to the point:

“When it comes to subjects that I’m not very interested in, I almost fall apart”.

Rusty Shackelford (Senior, 2.3, Psychology) indicated that he was intimidated by academics:

You go into a class not knowing what to expect or not knowing what to do and you’re often intimidated.

In summary, seven of the eight participants did **not** categorize themselves as a student. When discussing academics, they explained how they could be doing better academically if they chose to focus on academics. The participants seemed to acknowledge that it was not acceptable or OK to not view themselves as students, so they provided reasons for *why* they were not academically successful. They also described how their confidence in their academic abilities was low and how this low level of confidence had a direct effect on their academic performance.

Shift. At the beginning of the interviews participants wanted to be perceived as being a “student”. They tried to stress that academics was a priority in their lives. As

Paul Masson (Sophomore, 2.7, Political Science) stated when asked to define “student-athlete”, “...all the classes, studying, test taking and everything else.” However, as each interview progressed, seven of the eight had a shift in focus from answering questions the way they “thought” they should to answering questions with “athlete” as the primary self. As Paul Masson continued, “I’m an athlete who goes to school and like I said if I didn’t, if the school part didn’t come along with it at this level I wouldn’t go to school, I would just play football.”

Category #2: The Role of “Athlete” in “Student-Athlete”

Behaviors and justifications. Seven of the eight participants considered themselves athletes first and foremost. When asked to define “student-athlete”, these participants provided a definition that sounded like what they were supposed to say to the outside world as Rusty Shackelford (Senior, 2.3, Psychology) said, “[I’m a] student first, athlete second.” However, they had difficulty answering the question about how they viewed themselves according to their definition of “student-athlete”. In fact, most were much more at ease discussing their definition of the “athlete” than defining “student”.

Four of the seven had high levels of confidence and comfort in the athletic arena. As Mike Jones (Sophomore, 2.5, Political Science) stated, “I’m more confident on the field, because there is a lot more activity involved [than] being a student. You get to sit back and take more in as a player, a football player”. Paul Masson (Sophomore, 2.7, Political Science) said, “I know football. I know what’s going on and I study it. I actually study for it all week”. Lando Johnson (Senior, 2.6, Political Science) and Rusty Shackelford (Senior, 2.3, Psychology) talked about the passion they have for the game:

“I’m higher on the field than in the classroom. With me, football is something I just love to do. I just love to do it...so, I’m always comfortable there (Lando Johnson); “It’s the excitement of it. You’ve been around it so long, you just get ready for it. It’s something you can’t let go or don’t want to let go” (Rusty Shackleford).

While these participants attributed their athletic ease and academic difficulty to their level of confidence on the field, six of the eight participants attributed their athletic success to their faith and as a natural birthright. As George (Junior, 3.4, Exercise Science/Pharmacy) shared, “[Football is] just a natural thing to do.” Diamond Ice (Freshmen, 2.4, Undecided/Psychology/Sociology) expanded upon this notion when he said; “Being on the field is something natural for an athlete, or I can just say ‘boys’. Athletics is something they can relate to and catch on to really quick”. Freedom Rider (Junior, GPA 2.3, Philosophy) stated it succinctly when he posed the question; “Why take the hard route...when you can get paid for something that comes natural?”. He went on to say, “I put more into my athletics than I do my studies, because I know that I was blessed with a gift. It’s not arrogant; it’s not cocky. It’s just recognizing what’s going on. I was blessed with a gift to play this game.

George (Junior, 3.4, Exercise Science/Pharmacy) and John (Freshmen, 3.0, Communication/Journalism) talked about being “blessed”. They explained, “An individual that...was blessed to play a sport” (George); “I realized God blessed me with all these talents” (John) while Paul Masson (Sophomore, 2.7, Political Science) felt like his athletic ability was just destiny: “I feel like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing”.

Perhaps these seven athletes focused on being drafted because of their perceived God-given or natural talent. Four of the participants openly discussed getting to the next level as their number one goal. As Paul Masson (Sophomore, 2.7, Political Science) shared:

Just in high school, it was...a dream, you know? They got the statistics of how many people make it to a D1 school. And, then, you have got the league [NFL]. So, I'm D1 now. So, I guess my chances are better that I'm here. So, it's [football] more important to me now.

Diamond Ice (Freshmen, 2.4, Undecided/Psychology/Sociology) stated, "I can have something to play for - to get to the next level" and Mike Jones (Sophomore, 2.5, Political Science) shared, "After going through a program like this and beginning a conference [SEC], I think and believe that you're supposed to stay until the next level...". Lando Johnson (Senior, 2.6, Political Science) explained, "I feel like I'm closer to my goal. Like, I'm one, in high school I was two levels away from the money, from helping my people, helping my family. And, now, I'm one level away. This whole college football thing - besides paying for my education - is about going to the next level for this money".

Based on the interviews, it seems as if those who defined themselves primarily as an "athlete" described how they attended the university primarily to play football. They were clearly more focused on their athletic performance and ultimately being drafted into the professional football league, rather than academics.

Shift. Interestingly, those participants who espoused the philosophy of coming to the university solely to play in the NFL were juniors or seniors. These three older participants made it abundantly clear that their goal was to play in the professional

football league and that they did not really care about getting a college degree. However, the three other (and younger) participants, while still defining themselves primarily as “athletes”, were aware that they were on an athletic scholarship and that in order to play, they must maintain their grades to meet eligibility requirements. Diamond Ice (Freshmen, 2.4, Undecided/Psychology/Sociology) said, “... if you’re in a situation like I am on scholarship you could lose the scholarship”.

Category #3: The Role of “Student-Athlete”

Behaviors and justifications. The sole participant in the study who stated that he was a “student-athlete” (George Junior, 3.4, Exercise Science/Pharmacy) did not anticipate attending college to play football. In fact, he made it clear throughout the interview that he was at the university to obtain an education; he just happened to be an athlete as well. As he shared, “It just panned out that way. I really wasn’t focused on, ‘I’m going to go to college and become a professional athlete’. It [didn’t] happen that way”.

It was clear that academics was his priority:

...school is primary for me. Because without that, regardless of what you do professionally or whatever, you’re going to still have to work after you’re done anyway. You’re like a split second from being done for the rest of your sport days anyways, especially in football.

When asked about how he felt in the classroom, George (Junior, 3.4, Exercise Science/Pharmacy) said, “I feel like a regular student. I feel like anybody would going to class. Class is class. You want to learn, you learn; if you don’t, you won’t. You have to take the same attitude you do in your sport in the classroom”. This participant was a junior; his focus was on his academics first and his athletic career second. He was

performing extremely well academically, as indicated by his 3.4 GPA at the time of the interview. His major, Exercise Science, is considered preparation for medical school, physical therapy, and/or athletic training, and is academically rigorous. He suggested that football was a part of his life, but it was not his entire life.

Shift. Unlike the other participants, George (Junior, 3.4, Exercise Science/Pharmacy) did not shift in his role as student first, and athlete second. His academic performance and choice of major illustrate that academics was important to him. He felt that it was important to be a good “student” *and* a good “athlete”. This chapter covered the student-athlete roles which were examined through a model, which explored participants’ behaviors, justifications for behaviors, possible shifts they experienced, and how these shifts were related to the roles of “student” and “athlete”. In the next chapter, results are discussed in light of previous literature. Conclusions are drawn and contributions from the current study are described. In addition, suggestions for future directions for research and to practitioners are given.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the data from the current study using existing literature. Conclusions are drawn related to the analysis and contributions from this study are also highlighted. In addition, future recommendations are given for both research and application.

Discussion

This study was undertaken to examine African-American Division I football players' perception of their experience of being both students and athletes, how they attempted to balance each role, if they felt successful at balancing them and if they experienced changes to their identities while transitioning through college. Interestingly, seven of the eight participants identified more with the role of "athlete" than with the role of "student"; in fact, only one participant identified with both the "student" and "athlete" roles and was consistent throughout the interview. None of the participants identified solely with the "student" role which in some ways is to be expected since each was recruited to play Division I football and accepted a scholarship to do so. In a big-time intercollegiate athletic program such as the one these athletes participate in, mixed messages are often sent regarding the priority of being "students" as well as "athletes". As a participant mentioned in the current study:

Your only prior obligation is to play football. It's really not to go to school. They [Athletic Staff] tell you and your parents when you get here, they promote education. But, they're really promoting football. The first year they make an effort to try to help those who need help. But, after the first year they don't push study hall, grades or anything like that. They focus more on football and getting you out of class for football to do all this stuff and make to where you have to

take all these classes before football. You can't take classes during football so it makes it seem like football is more important than your grades.

Research conducted by Adler and Adler (1985) found that playing in a big-time Division I basketball program and being seriously involved academically rarely fit together. In fact, recent statistics suggest that "too many programs exploit talented athletes for a few years and leave them without a degree program when their eligibility to play expires" (Rotherham, 2008, p.2).

Similar to athletes in Adler and Adler's study, athletes in the current study described how they began their first year of college with optimism and hope. They expected their academic experiences to contribute to their future occupational successes. As Rusty Shackleford suggested, "I feel since you played on university football team and this university's beloved in the South, when you're looking for a career there's probably plenty of alumni that will give you a job just because you played for this university. I'm really not worried about a job". However, as they proceed through college, the demands of Division I sports and the influence of the athletic subculture in a big-time program has a tendency to draw them away from academic life. Unfortunately, some discover that it is necessary to select "easy" courses and the "least challenging majors" if they are to meet coaches' expectations. After taking a number of these courses, it appears that most gradually detach from academic life and concentrate solely on football. As a result, many began to see themselves as athletes registered for courses, not as "student-athletes". Again, both athletes in the current study and in the Adler and Adler (1985) study described a similar "disconnecting" from themselves as "students".

As a result, seven of the participants in this study identified solely with the “athlete” role. They appeared to experience difficulty in balancing the “student” and “athlete” roles. They described a lack of “effort”, “motivation”, “application” and “confidence” when discussing themselves as “students”. Three of the participants appeared to espouse the big-time Division I football “party line”, attempting to convey the importance of being both a “student” and an “athlete” while not really feeling comfortable in the “student” role. This discrepancy became clear when they had difficulty trying to apply the “party line” definition of “student-athlete” to themselves. Interestingly, these were the youngest participants in the study (e.g., two freshmen and one sophomore). They wanted to be perceived as placing importance on obtaining an education; however, their goal was to play professional football.

One of the seven athletes who identified primarily as an “athlete” experienced a shift in his identity to “student” only after he was not being utilized as a football player. He was a senior who appeared disgruntled throughout the interview because his coach was no longer playing him. His focus, therefore, shifted from playing football/obtaining an NFL contract to graduating and attending a graduate program in Psychology. He came across as not understanding what it would take to get into graduate school, however, because his GPA was a 2.3 at the time of his interview.

The only participant to strike a balance between his academic and athletic life was George. George was consistent throughout the interview in his description of himself as both a “student” and an “athlete”. He was not only able to define what a “student-athlete” was, but he was able to reflect on how that definition was crucial to his identity.

He was both a junior with a 3.4 GPA and a starter on the football team. George was unique in this sample because he acknowledged that playing Division I football was a part of his life but not his entire life. In fact, he mentioned that he wasn't even considering playing football until, "It just panned out that way, I really wasn't focused on, 'I'm going to go to college to become a professional athlete'; it [just] happened that way". He purposely chose and worked hard in a difficult academic major. George was an exercise science major with a Pharmacy minor which is a pre-med major that he had to apply to and be accepted into his junior year. He also had high aspirations for continuing academics after graduating. His goal was to enter a graduate program in pharmacy, physical therapy or medical School.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, it is reasonable to conclude that some African-American male collegiate football players perceive their experience of integrating "student" and "athlete" roles as problematic. Difficulties lay in participants feeling completely connected to the "athlete" role while simultaneously being disconnected from the role of "student". Most were able to describe what a "student-athlete" was supposed to be; however, they were unable to apply this definition to their own identities. In fact, seven of the eight talked about their negative experiences related to academics, including feeling a lack of self-confidence.

A majority of these athletes appeared to engage in academics only to the extent that it kept them eligible to play. So, while a student-athlete success center was available and provided academic support such as study halls, tutors and academic counselors, it

could not guarantee that these athletes would be academically engaged. Research suggests that in big-time athletic programs, academic support may not increase graduation rates among athletes (Adler & Adler, 1958; Settles, Sellers & Damas, 2002). Further, attention is often focused solely on athletic performance, with few people expecting these athletes to identify themselves as “students”.

Future Recommendations

Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, several follow-up studies are recommended. Before replicating this study, a full study of an entire football team is necessary to see if differences exist amongst members of the same team. A cross-section of teams on a campus could also be interviewed to see if differences exist between different Division I sport programs at the same institution. A future study could be replicated with other Division I institutions to see if the same findings occur. Studies utilizing Division II, III, and NAIA players could also be undertaken. Racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation and other social difference categories could also be examined.

Applications for Coaches

Coaches should be aware that some student-athletes attend college for primarily athletic reasons. In fact, seven of the eight participants in this study were focused on becoming professional football players. Coaches could encourage and reward student-athletes for taking their studies seriously. They also could educate athletes that the odds of a college player turning professional are only about one in 1,222. For U.S. African-Americans between the ages of 15 and 39 years, the odds of playing in the NFL or NBA

are at least 10,000 to 1 and 20,000 to 1, respectively (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2001; the Government Accounting Office, 2001; NFL, 2001). In addition, coaches should recognize that the pressure they put on athletes to succeed so that their own careers can go forward needs to be minimized (see Appendix D for further details).

Applications for Parents

The same recommendations for coaches could apply to parents. If their children are interested in athletics, parents could encourage them to also take their studies seriously. In addition, several of the athletes in the current study mentioned wanting to play in the NFL so that, “I hope to be in the league one day. I can take care of my mother and my brother” (Paul Masson). If this rationale is being pushed by parents, perhaps educators could work with them to help them recognize the added pressure this puts on their sons. Parents should also encourage young athletes to play for the love of the game and not because there is the potential for an NFL career.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

FORM B APPLICATION

All applicants are encouraged to read the [Form B guidelines](#). If you have any questions as you develop your Form B, contact your Departmental Review Committee (DRC) or [Research Compliance Services](#) at the Office of Research.

FORM B**IRB #** _____**Date Received in OR** _____

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEEApplication for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

I. IDENTIFICATION OF PROJECT**Principal Investigator Co-Principal Investigator:**

Patricia Jones, M.S. Candidate
The University of Tennessee, HPER 336
1914 Andy Holt Avenue
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Faculty Advisor:

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Associate Professor
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1914 Andy Holt Avenue
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(865) 974-9973
lfisher2@utk.edu

Department: Department of Exercise, Sport and Leisure Studies**2. Project Classification: Thesis**

3. Title of Project: “Balancing Acts”: A Qualitative Investigation of Division I

Football Players’ Roles of Student and Athlete

4. Starting Date: Upon IRB Approval

5. Estimated Completion Date: August 20, 2008

6. External Funding (if any): None

Grant/Contract Submission Deadline: None

Funding Agency: None

Sponsor ID Number (if known): None

UT Proposal Number (if known): None

II. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

To examine through semi-structured interviews how African-American Division I football players balance their roles of “student” and “athlete”.

III. DESCRIPTION AND SOURCE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Participants will be adult male African-American Division I football players between the ages of 18-24. Eight to ten football players will be recruited from campus on a volunteer basis. Participation information will be placed in their lockers at the athletic facility on campus.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Those wishing to participate will contact the primary investigator via email or campus phone. The primary investigator will set up a time and location of each participant’s choosing. After explaining the purpose of the study and the procedures participants will be asked to sign an informed consent (see Appendix B). After signing a consent form participants will be interviewed (see attached Interview Guide) for approximately 30 minutes regarding their perceptions of balancing the roles of student and athlete. Sessions will be transcribed after being audiotaped and will be secured in a safety box and destroyed once the study has been created. Completed forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the HPER Building.

V. SPECIFIC RISKS AND PROTECTION MEASURES

Confidentiality forms will be signed by the participants. The primary investigator and her faculty advisor will be the only ones who have access to the raw data and who will review the data. Each participant will be asked to choose a pseudonym so that his identity will not be revealed.

VI. BENEFITS

It is hoped that participants will benefit from self-reflection related to these two roles.

VII. METHODS FOR OBTAINING "INFORMED CONSENT" FROM PARTICIPANTS

Information sheet constitutes right to participate in study.

VIII. QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR(S) TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

The primary investigator has taken graduate level courses such as Cultural Studies (CS) 560: Introduction to Qualitative Research and CS 480: Interviewing and Counseling Techniques which instructed her on how to conduct and analyze qualitative interviews and utilize audiotaping. She has worked directly with the student-athlete population at the Thornton Student-Athlete Success Center at the University of Tennessee for a year. Dr. Fisher has extensive qualitative interviewing experience.

IX. FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT TO BE USED IN THE RESEARCH

All interviews will be conducted at the location of the participant's choice. An audiotape device will be used for each interview.

X. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRINCIPAL/CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S)

By compliance with the policies established by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee the principal investigator(s) subscribe to the principles stated in "The Belmont Report" and standards of professional ethics in all research, development, and related activities involving human subjects under the auspices of The University of Tennessee. The principal investigator(s) further agree that:

- 1. Approval will be obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to instituting any change in this research project.**
- 2. Development of any unexpected risks will be immediately reported to Research Compliance Services.**
- 3. An annual review and progress report (Form R) will be completed and submitted when requested by the Institutional Review Board.**
- 4. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project and for at least three years thereafter at a location approved by the Institutional Review Board.**

XI. SIGNATURES

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE ORIGINAL. The Principal Investigator should keep the original copy of the Form B and submit a copy with original signatures for review. Type the name of each individual above the appropriate signature line. Add signature lines for all Co-Principal Investigators, collaborating and student investigators, faculty advisor(s), department head of the Principal Investigator, and the Chair of the

Departmental Review Committee. The following information should be typed verbatim, with added categories where needed:

Principal Investigator: Patricia Jones

Signature: _____ **Date:**

Co-Principal Investigator Leslee Fisher

Signature: _____ **Date:**

Student Advisor (if any): Leslee Fisher

Signature: _____ **Date:**

XII. DEPARTMENT REVIEW AND APPROVAL

The application described above has been reviewed by the IRB departmental review committee and has been approved. The DRC further recommends that this application be reviewed as:

☐ Expedited Review -- Category(s): _____

OR

☐ Full IRB Review

Chair, DRC: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:**

Department Head: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:**

Protocol sent to Research Compliance Services for final approval on (Date) :

Approved:
Research Compliance Services
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue

Signature: _____ **Date:**

For additional information on Form B, contact the Office of Research
[Compliance Officer](#) or by phone at (865) 974-3466.

Appendix B

Informed Consent

“Balancing Acts”: A Qualitative Investigation of Division I Football Players’ Roles of Student and Athlete

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by myself - Patricia Jones. I am a Graduate Student in Sport Studies. The purpose of this research is to understand the academic and athletic experiences of African-American football players.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

Participation in this study will involve a 30-minute interview. The interview will be recorded with an audiotape recorder and then transcribed. The interview will be conducted at the location that you prefer.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts if you agree to participate in this study. However, you are free to withdrawal at any time.

BENEFITS

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, the possible benefits of your participation in this study may be to help educate society and add to the body of knowledge on the experiences of African-American male athletes. In addition, it is hoped that you will feel that our time together gave you time for reflection.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The results of this research study may be published but your name and identity will not be revealed. I will do the following to maintain confidentiality of your records: (a) keep your name confidential by providing you the option of choosing a pseudonym; (b) keeping all the information in the study confidential (only myself and my advisor, Dr. Leslee Fisher, will have access to this information); (c) data will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet; (d) no reference to you will be made in oral or written reports. The records will be kept until the end of the study and then will be destroyed.

Your initials mean that you have read this page and will go on the next page.

_____ Participant's initials

COMPENSATION

I will not be paid for my participation.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT

CONTACT INFORMATION

Any questions that you may have concerning the research study or your participation in it, before or after your consent, will be answered by Patricia Jones, Department of Exercise, Sport and Leisure Studies, HPER 336, 1914 Andy Holt Avenue, Knoxville, TN 37996-2710, (865) 974-9973, pjones20@utk.edu, Dr. Leslee A. Fisher, Department of Exercise, Sport and Leisure Studies, HPER 336, 1914 Andy Holt Avenue, Knoxville, TN 37996-2710, (865) 974-9973, lfisher2@utk.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Office of Research at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at undue risk, you can contact the Institutional Review Board (Human Subjects Research Committee).

CONSENT

I have read the above informed consent form. I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. In signing this consent form, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be given (offered) to me.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Topic: Demographics

1. What is your name?
2. What pseudonym (false name) would you like to choose?
3. How old are you?
4. Where are you from?

Topic: Importance of Education to Family of Origin

5. Was/is education important in your family?
 - a. If so, how?
6. How did you know that education was important?
7. How many people are there in your immediate family who graduated from high school (father, mother and siblings)?
8. Are you a first generation college student?
 - a. If not, who else attended college in your family?
9. Has anyone in your family attended college?
 - a. If yes, who?
10. How many have graduated college?
 - a. If yes, who?

Topic: Importance of Athletics

11. Is athletics important to your family?
 - a. If yes, how did or do you know?
12. When did you initially become interested in sports?
13. What led you to continue to participate in sports today?
14. How long have you been playing football and at what level?
15. Are there any other collegiate or professional athletes in your family?
 - a. If so, what sport did or do they play?
16. Is football more important to you now then in high school?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. In what ways?
17. When you were in high school did you ever imagine yourself playing college football?
18. What made you decide to play football in college?
19. Have you encountered any barriers within your football career? Please explain.
20. Do you have any worries that relate to athletics?
 - a. If yes, what types of things do you worry about?
21. What difference did or has playing sports made in your life?
22. How do you feel when competing?
23. What's the best thing about being an athlete?
 - a. What's the worst?
24. How do you think your coach would describe you as an athlete?

Topic: Notions of Student-Athlete

25. What is your definition of a student athlete?
26. How do you view yourself?
27. Do you like being a student athlete?
 - a. What's the best thing about being a student-athlete?
 - b. What's the worst?
28. What is it like to be a student-athlete here at the University of Tennessee?
29. What is your major?
30. How did you choose your major?
31. What led you to choose this field of interest?
32. How do you feel as a student in the classroom?
33. How do you think your professors would describe you as a student in the classroom?
 - a. Why do you think that is?
34. How do you think your academic counselor would describe you as a student in the classroom?
35. How do you think your coach would describe you as a student?
36. Do you feel as confident in the classroom as you do on the field?
 - a. Why or why not?
37. How do you balance the roles of "athlete" and "student"?
 - a. If not, is there one role that's more important than the other?
 - b. Why or why not?
38. Where do you see yourself in the next five years?
39. Where do you see yourself in the next ten years?
40. Do you feel that your degree will assist you in the future?
 - a. In what ways?
41. Do you plan staying at the University of Tennessee to graduate?
42. Is there anything else about being a student-athlete that you think is important that I did not ask you about?
 - a. If so explain.

Thank you.

Appendix D

Initial Analysis

The purpose of this study was threefold: (a) to examine African-American Division I football players' perception of their ability to balance both the roles of "student" and "athlete"; (b) to determine how they were able to do so; and (c) how they were successful at doing so. I was also interested in any identity shifts that student-athletes experienced in their transitioning through college. Interestingly, various aspects of the student-athletes' lives became relevant to the study that went beyond balancing the roles of "student" and "athlete" in the classroom and on the football field. Many of these issues related to family, athletic and academic difficulty. This initial analysis describes those results. The six major themes were: (a) parental emphasis on education and sport; (b) "childhood dreams" versus sport realities; (c) reality check; (d) perceptions of student-athletes; (e) pressure to becoming a "man"; and (f) being a student-athlete. Subthemes are also presented

Parental Emphasis on Education

All of the participants discussed how their parents emphasized the importance of education from a very young age. The subthemes included sport as a "*way out*" and the *athletes sport potential as noticed by significant others*. Education appeared to be of a greater importance to the mothers of five of the eight participants who were single parents. In one case the participant's mother not only discussed the importance of education, but she demonstrated it as Lando Johnson shared:

It's very important (education) My mom, she preached that you have to have an

education to make it in life, period. Where we lived was not a real good neighborhood or whatever, I'm just going to put it like that, and I was in a zone for a high school which was all the same people my momma was trying to keep me away from. Like all my friends, we all cool. I kicked it with them, it wasn't nothing like that but she didn't want me doing the same thing they were doing. So she sent me to this private school and they gave, pretty much almost paid for me to go there. Like, we couldn't afford this, like 13,000 dollars a year so we definitely couldn't. They pretty much paid for me to go there and we did that. That kept me away from a whole lot of stuff me being all the way out, 30 minutes away from my house-you know what I'm saying?

The three participants raised by both their mother and father were encouraged to focus on education as well. Rusty Shackle explained how his father encouraged him to focus on education when he stated:

Because my dad said... the only thing that you come up here for is to get your books I don't care if you play a dime of football... as long as you get your paper (degree)...that's all I want.

John's parents demonstrated the significance of an education as well through their actions:

My mom and dad have a masters' degree. My mom is a professor and my dad is a computer engineer. Their attitudes were like, stick to your schoolwork. They weren't real sports people, stick to your schoolwork and don't worry solely about sports... They didn't want me to play football because they thought it was a waste of time and it was going to take away from my school time and how I was going to get an academic scholarship when I'm worried about this football stuff...

The importance of sport as a "way out". A majority these student-athletes began participating in sports when they were in elementary school. As George disclosed:

I've been playing football since I was seven. So that's what 13, 14 years? And, I mean, I've been playing at every level from peewee [to] junior high to high school to college, the collegiate level. Yeah, basically that's all I know. I've been a student-athlete since I was seven years old.

Participating in sports kept many focused on school and out of trouble. As Lando

Johnson continued:

When everybody else, when they get out of school they get out of football practice they right back home on the corner or whatever while I'm still out 30 minutes away. I got to wait for mom, I don't get home until 9 o'clock at night, 10 o'clock at night when I'm trying to do my homework, go to sleep, I'm tired after football practice. So, sports really, it really just helped me, help keep me away from a lot of stuff that I really didn't need.

At a very young age parents got their children involved in sports to keep them off the streets, switch their focus and avoid the street life (e.g., drugs, alcohol or juvenile delinquency). For example, Rusty Shackelford stated:

I would say, cause that was the way that would keep us off the streets and stuff like that. So, my father encouraged us to play sports. It made a very significant change in my life because without sports or anything I could be like my cousins and stuff-either in jail or selling drugs or probably even have a child. Not gonna say that's wrong or anything, but I'm saying, you know, I probably be making bad decisions and stuff like that without football...football was like my consciousness setting, whatever; it wouldn't let me do anything wrong or too bad because I didn't want to jeopardize my career and stuff and football.

Potential noticed by significant others. Even though participants were introduced to their sport early, it did not appear to become important to them until after a significant other noticed their potential at playing football. As George stated:

It just panned out that way, I really wasn't focused on, -"I'm going to go to college and become a professional athlete" type thing. It happened that way, 'cause I just got better and keep getting better and everything was just a flow. It was really a shock to me "cause I really didn't know how many people really watch you, 'cause people were watching me since I was in the 7th grade and I didn't even know these people. So, that how I really fell into it.

At first, participants' rationale for playing football was to have fun, socialize and as a means of escaping the environment they were in. This attitude changed once a significant other took time out to explain and discuss how football could lead to bigger things such as playing at the collegiate level and ultimately go professional.

“Childhood Dreams” vs. Sport Realities

The second major theme was “childhood dreams” versus sport realities. The two subthemes of childhood dreams focused on the transition from high school to college football as “big business”. While many of the parents focused on the importance of providing a proper education for their children, the participants first focused on playing football for fun and then later focusing on their lifelong dream of playing professionally. As stated by Paul Masson, “I’ve always liked sports, childhood dream to play in the NFL” and Diamond Ice said, “I wanted to play since I was little, I wanted to play in the pros. That’s what every athlete wants to do, so I would be lying if I said I wasn’t” Freedom Rider also agreed, “It’s just been a lifelong dream of mine.”

However, the transition from high school to college football was an eye-opening experience for many of the participants. During high school, they focused on sports as a time for play. However, this dramatically changed immediately following signing their college letter of intent. As, Lando Johnson shared:

To play here, once you sign that letter of intent to play college football, you signed your life away. Like, you no longer, you, when you get to college, you’re not going to be a regular student.

Participants had to adapt to the transition from playing high school to college football. What once was fun and exciting swiftly changed to a more professional setting which created pressures not only to perform but to maintain their spot on the team. He went on to state:

Ah, only thing I can say about being a student-athlete is, “Be careful, look out for yourself because it’s not like high school football.” High school football was more fun and you know what I’m saying, you out there you just having fun and a

lot of people get lost in college football because college football is a business and them coaches, it's about business with them.

Participants talked about the pressure that coaches regularly placed on them.

Freedom Rider discussed this as he talked about how he felt about the transition from high school to college:

Uhm, you got people's jobs and careers riding on how you do and how you perform and that takes away from a lot of the fun of the game and its purity. And it's just the pure essence of the game is missed and it dwindles as you go higher up in the ranks because it's popular and people like to see it. And then you get into the politics and the money and once money is involved it all corrupted. But, in high school it was just purely for the love of the game. I still love the game but there's a lot more that goes into it. I think now football is about 10% of what I put into the sport; the pure game is 10% of what I put into it.

Reality Check

The third theme revolved around the reality check or serious athletics.

Participants came to a turning point when their focus switched from placing no or little focus into athletics really ramping it up. This shift occurred at various times in participants' lives. Diamond Ice's moment came when a fellow college teammate challenged him to really play football prior to his passing away. He described this encounter as follows:

Actually, it's kinda crazy. I had one of my teammates ... I used to hang out with, he got into a car accident and died. He use to always tell me to play football... I used to play basketball because I was lazy... once that happened [he died], I started playing football.

Lando Johnson explained how his college teammate confronted him:

What really got me to start taking it serious was, ah, I had a teammate ... he pulled me to the side ... "I'm going to need for you to take it seriously" ... that really made me get serious about it.

However, this experience occurred in reverse for one participant after he no longer was getting playing time. This made him switch his focus from athletics to academics. Rusty Shackle shared:

He (coach) said I was multitalented, I can play any position. But, yet, he won't let me play...

When asked where he would see himself in the next 5 years he stated, "Grad school". At no point during the interview did this participant discuss playing professional football like so many others. His focus was on graduating and attending graduate school.

Freedom Rider decided that he would step into his father's shoes and do what his father was unable to do by playing professionally. As he stated,

My father played one year of professional football before he decided to walk ... and he regrets it to this day.

Even though the reality checks developed in various forms and at various times within participants' lives, it aided them in their process of matching into football players.

Perceptions of Student-Athletes

The fourth major theme focus on others' perceptions of student-athletes and included the subthemes of fellow classmates' perspectives and professors' perspectives. Participants encountered stereotypes when performing in the classroom. They felt unfairly judged, labeled and criticized because they were athletes. These criticisms came from fellow students, as well as professors, and occurred on a fairly regular basis. For example, when Mike Jones was asked what the worst thing about being a student-athlete was, he stated:

Stereotypes. Social stereotypes, as far as for me as a male. You're stereotyped, sometimes, you know in big classes not so much singled out but in smaller classes,

it's like I said earlier, it can be a good or bad thing...you're singled out as far as, "There's so and so-his a football player."

Mike Jones added:

I think the criticism by your peers as a student and the lack of recognition about how much work you put into being not just an athlete, but a student-athlete.

After a long pause, Freedom Rider shared:

People think that you're on this free ride and you didn't earn what you have. And, it just vexes me because if they had to go through what we went through they wouldn't even think twice about saying what they say. You know? When they're talking about, "We just getting a free ride", and they're not waking up with us at 6 in the morning and running, lifting weights, going to class, then after class we got practice, after practice we got workouts again and that's during the season. In the off-season we're working out three times a day and still going to school. And, then when they're at home with their families we're going to summer school because we have to go to summer school, you know? It's very disheartening seeing people judge us so harshly... it's tough. I know it comes with the territory, but people think we get this free ride and people think this and people think that. But, at the end of the day, we people just like they people, and they don't get that.

Not only did participants disclose how their peers viewed them on campus, but they also discussed how these attitudes and beliefs are taken up in the classroom by professors and teachers. As Freedom Rider stated:

We got a lot of stereotypes about how we are uneducated and we're stupid and we're just dumb jocks and we get by and we get a lot of this and we get a lot of that.

Another example of this was shared by Rusty Shackelford who said:

When you step on campus you're a football player already... you have stereotypes of being a dumb jock... you have to work twice as hard you have to work twice or maybe three times as hard, as the regular student...you can point out who's an athlete ... their bodies are way bigger and most likely they're black.

Freedom Rider went on to explain the difficulty he faced while in the classroom:

The belief is that teachers just let us pass when in fact about 75% of the teachers do not like us because we are football players. They look down at us and they

think that we're getting a free ride like everybody else thinks and 90% of the time we spend our time defending ourselves and trying to prove them wrong.

In another instance, Diamond Ice explained how some people assume that athletes want special treatment, but from his perspective, this was not the case:

Teachers think you're an athlete and automatically, you want something given to you. And, that kinda makes it hard. That can stress a student out dealing with problems yourself if he thinks his teachers don't really think he a good person when he really do the same thing regular college students do. But, they [teachers] just really focused on that [being an athlete] can make a difference between a college athlete getting good grades and not getting good grades.

Pressure to Become a "Man"

The fifth major theme focused on the pressures of becoming a man with the subthemes of providing for *immediate family*, for *extended family* and other *worries*. This was a big concern voiced by participants the pressure that they are under to provide not only for themselves but their biological family and the staff of the athletic department (e.g., their extended family). Each participant felt an obligation to provide money and resources to his immediate family and many took on the role of provider. This pressure had a direct effect on how they performed not only on the field but in the classroom as well.

Providing for immediate family. In order to provide for their immediate family, participants felt they had to perform on the field and in the classroom in order to maintain their athletic scholarship. An example of this was shared by Lando Johnson:

When I'm competing, I feel like, if I don't do my job right here we not going to win. I feel like this dude right here, he taking money from my hands if I don't kill him, if I don't demolish him right here, he'll be taking money out of my hands, so I got to get him, I got to get him.

They believed that athletic scholarships afford them monies to send home to help their families every month and ultimately lead to playing professionally. By making it to the professional level, many participants believed that they could undoubtedly take care of their family. For example, Lando Johnson continued to say:

Like, what's keeping me playing is, I see people who I play with who are millionaires now, you know what I'm saying, and they done bought they momma and them houses and they done bought they momma and them cars and I want to do the same thing for my momma.

This is the same goal that Paul Masson has:

I hope to be in the league one day. I can take care of my mother and my brother. And even if I'm there for a year or two or however long I'm there I can get enough money to start something else. Hopefully, I will have enough money where I can have a couple maybe one or two businesses started.... And that would provide me with a very stable financial future.

Providing for extended family. In addition to their immediate family, participants believed that they needed to assist their extended family by performing on and off the field. By performing just enough in the classroom to maintain their eligibility, they were allowed to play, to maximize their performance and then the athletic staff would be satisfied. This pressure also began once they signed the letter of intent as John explained:

You represent this school... this school is on your back... once you sign those papers to come here, you are put into the leadership role and so you have to maintain that and respect the fact that you're here on a full scholarship.

Freedom Rider discussed the same thing after a long pause:

The fact that you have young men in college, I might of touched upon this, but you have young men -not men but young men- in college with so much riding on them. We're talking peoples jobs, we're talking peoples careers, we're talking families riding on what these young men do, how they perform on the field, how they perform in the classroom, how they act in society. Knowing that they're young men and young men are very fragile they make mistakes, they, you know, they're still learning. They're still, you know, testing the waters. Uhm, and the

fact that we so much responsibility put on us whether people believe it or not. It's just like, man, every now and then I just want to call the people that are calling in talking about us. Like, are you fucking serious? Like I am a young man -we make mistakes. We go through this, we go through that.

This pressure directly influenced how they performed on and off the field as Lando Johnson shared:

They're [the coaching staff] trying to feed their family and you trying to get to the next level because you trying to feed your family. They're not going to play with us. If anything happens they'll let you go and get somebody else. They tell you they care about you and a lot of them do. But, most of them, they got to put food on they family table, they got to feed they kids. So, if you act up, they'll let you go quickly and not think nothing else about you and get the next player.

Worries. Along with the pressure of wanting to provide for both their immediate family and extended family participants worried about being successful. They not only worried about failing themselves those around them. As George said:

Is it considered to be a failure if you don't make it to the NFL? Is it considered to be a failure if you don't play after? At your school and you're on scholarship as a player what is the definition of failure?.. none of it is really a failure. You made it this far but the percentages get lower and lower at each level you go up so what is considered a failure? That is my thing. Like, at first, I was believing, telling myself I was failing because I wasn't playing as much as I wanted to. But, you have to look at the big picture. My concern is failing my family, my friends and people that really look to you...

Freedom Rider had a similar concern: "Sometimes, I worry if I'm going to succeed or not." For Mike Jones, his focus was on his failing future health:

The only worries that I have are probably injuries later on down the line. Not so much right now. I know I have a lot of aches and pains as a 21-year-old but when I get older I know it will get worst. I want to play with my kids and put them to bed and move around and stuff in that context.

Lando Johnson also voiced concern when it came to injuries and his health: "Pretty much injuries that's probably like the only thing..."

Being A Student-Athlete

The last theme centered on what being a student-athlete meant and consisted of the subtheme of defining and balancing this. Interestingly, when asked to define student-athlete, a number of the participants questioned what was meant. They separated the two by asking whether I wanted them to define “student” or to define “athlete.” When the question was repeated, they gave their definition. Mike Jones shared: “[a student-athlete is] a person that goes to school and participates in athletics” whereas Diamond Ice described it as:

It’s when you handle all the things you’re supposed to as far as your school work academically and still being able to handle the fame in college that you’re dealing with. Knowing that you have to keep getting your stuff done to be a student-athlete. It’s like two words so it two parts and being one of those.

Freedom Rider described it as:

This is probably going deeper than what I should in regards to this question but, athletics and athleticism is a type of a intelligence. This is proven in psychology classes. And, so I look at athletes as students in their craft and so I don’t view or I don’t just categorize a student-athlete as going to school to getting an education and playing athletics. I believe athletics is a school in itself just in a different way.

Difficulty balancing. Many openly admitted the challenge they had in balancing both roles of “student” and “athlete”. For instance, Rusty Shackelford stated, “Yeah, well, trying to balance academics and football is really tough.” Mike Jones described being a student-athlete as:

It taught me how to push through things when your tired and you don’t feel like you can go on or do more, not only athletically, physically. But, as far as the balancing act of school and athletics, too, sometimes, it’s hard to do both-student and athlete-being able to do both is hard.

Diamond Ice not only emphasized the difficulty of balancing the two roles, but he suggested:

Like, we never really have that much time. So, it's hard to balance that [being a student-athlete] between your family, your personal life, and academics.

Summary

There is a gap in the literature and a need which exists to study African-American male collegiate student-athletes to identify their experience of trying to balance the roles of student and athlete. Student-athletes' experiences are similar to the general student population; however, they have additional commitments and restraints that have to be taken into consideration. One issue that arises with student-athletes is that people perceive them mostly "athletes", when they are in fact students, sons, fathers, cousins, uncles, friends and companions. Parents played a major role in participants' educational aspirations. The majority were raised by single mothers. At a very young age they were enrolled in sports. This was to prevent them from negative influences which existed within the community they were raised in. Many parents went to extreme measures to provide an alternative such as private schooling or sports. This was the beginning of their athletic career.

Playing sports became an escape, a way to socialize and have fun. However, as they grew older, playing sports became a lifelong dream to become a professional athlete. When others began to realize their potential, the more the dream became a reality. While transitioning from high school to college, participants experienced pressures to learn how to adjust from the life they once knew to college where playing became more of a business. This is when reality set in that they were no longer children and had others

depending on them. Playing football became a means of providing for their family as well as those within the athletic department.

Participants also discussed how they were stereotyped as “dumb jocks” and underachievers who were given a “free ride” from both classmates and professors. While other stereotypes were given to them. These were the two that stood out.

VITA

Patricia Yvette Jones was born in New Castle, Pennsylvania, to the parents of Curtis Patrick Jones and Leona Yvette Body. She was the second child in the Boyd family that consisted of four girls and two boys.

Her formative education began at Lincoln Elementary Lorain, Ohio. Her secondary education was at Southview High School. After her high school graduation, she entered into the United States Army for four years and continued on to complete four additional years in the United States Army National Guard.

Immediately after joining the United States Army National Guard she attended The Ohio State University. In May 2006, she would receive her undergraduate degree from The Ohio State University.

Upon graduating from The Ohio State University, she went on to graduate school at the University of Tennessee in August 2006. While at the University of Tennessee, she expects to receive her graduate degree in May, 2008. After graduation she will be applying for a PhD in Clinical Psychology or Law School. Presently, she and her son, Zion, reside in Knoxville, Tennessee.