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Understanding the Role of Motivation in Professional Athletes

Michelle Gacio Harrolle

Melissa Klay

Abstract

Our study examines the overall motivation of professional athletes in an effort to assist sport organizations in understanding their most important asset, the players. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the experiences and motivations of professional athletes within a team setting. Researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 13 professional American football players. Seven themes were present within the data including a love of the game, self-motivation, sense of community, professional development, engagement with fans, assist the league, and lack of financial support, which was identified as a deterrent to motivation. Teams should increase investment in the professional development of players as valuable human resources to increase overall organizational success.

Keywords: *American football, human capital, motivation, professional athletes*

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Introduction

Professional sport teams function within a three-pronged organizational structure: the front business office, team operations (i.e., coaches, trainers, and scouts), and players/athletes (Hoye, Smith, Nicholson, Stewart, & Westerbeek, 2009). Within this unique work environment, human resources are the most important asset to the entire organization, which creates a human resource management challenge. From a human capital perspective, professional athletes are the foundation of and an integral aspect to the success of sport organizations, as their distinctive skills cannot be duplicated (Husin, 2012). The development and retention of high-caliber athletes provides a strategic, competitive advantage for sport organizations (Taylor, Doherty, & McGraw, 2007). If coaches, owners, and league officials can better understand their players, teams would be able to increase player satisfaction, retention, and performance. By understanding motivations (Mak & Sockel, 2001) among players, teams and leagues could improve their organizations' overall success.

Purpose and Research Questions

Previous research within multiple segments of numerous industries (e.g., Danish & Usman, 2010) has shown that employee satisfaction and retention are based on a multitude of factors (i.e., rewards, recognition, and motivation). Within the current scope of sport management literature, little to no research has examined professional players' motivations in the workplace environment.

Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences and motivations of professional athletes within a team setting. To advance the understanding of players' motivations, researchers sought to answer the following question: How do professional athletes define the role of motivation in their decision to play professional sports? This research will assist sport professionals in comprehending a major component of their human capital (i.e., the athletes).

Literature Review

The main theory guiding our study is the reinforcement theory of motivation. The following section contains the relevant literature and a brief discussion of the theory that provided the framework for our analysis and findings.

Deci's Model of Intrinsic Motivation and Extrinsic Motivation

By applying the principles of operant conditioning to motivation, one can examine reinforcement of behavior within the context of Intrinsic Motivation (IM) and Extrinsic Motivation (EM; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Since the initial conception of IM and EM (Deci, 1972), researchers have expanded upon the theory of current research on motivation. Within the context of sport, IM and EM are important principles for understanding motivational processes (Medic, Mack, Wilson, & Starkes, 2007).

People tend to repeat behaviors that are rewarding. IM “involves doing a behavior because the activity itself is interesting and spontaneously satisfying. When intrinsically motivated, people perform the activities because of the positive feelings resulting from the activities themselves” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 15). On the other hand, EM involves people “engaged in an activity because it leads to some separate consequence. The clearest examples of extrinsically motivated behaviors are those performed to obtain a tangible reward or to avoid a punishment” (p. 15). When an individual is engaged in a rewarding experience, the IM is found to be more important to motivation while EM tends to reduce the motivation. For instance, if someone is given an extrinsic reward for accomplishing a typically intrinsic activity, the intrinsic value of the activity is challenged (Deci, 1972). The effects of rewards on IM are still being researched by motivational researchers and sports psychologists (Medic et al., 2007). The interest in better understanding human motivation has expanded with Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination theory (SDT) which identifies different types of motivation and has been published in the applied fields: sports, education, parenting, work, psychotherapy, and health care (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In addition, a few extrinsic motivators have been identified to increase intrinsic motivators such as autonomy, competence, and positive performance feedback.

Another motivator to increase intrinsic motivation is positive performance feedback (e.g., fan engagement), because it provides one with a sense of competency (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Negative feedback, on the other hand, can decrease intrinsic motivation by reducing one’s perceived level of competency and thus leaving them completely unmotivated (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Methodology

The qualitative method used to better understand the role of motivation for professional athletes is phenomenology. Phenomenology focuses on understanding human experience through one’s reality. The researcher identifies the “essence” of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). This qualitative research methodology is useful when examining the experiences of professional athletes (Douglas & Carless, 2014). During the interviews, players were asked questions related to their experiences as professional athletes (e.g., “What keeps you motivated to play professional football?”; “What do you enjoy the best about playing with the [team name]?”; and “Could you please explain what you enjoy least about playing with the [team name]?”).

Sample

The Arena Football League (AFL) was selected as a purposeful sample, because its players are an essential part of the professional league’s success. Therefore, the AFL represents a league where an opportunity for the professional and personal growth of its players exists. In 1986, the AFL was established with four teams.

Over the past decade, the number of teams has fluctuated from four to 18. While conducting the study, there were eight AFL teams. Currently, the AFL has five teams with core owners and plans to expand in the next two years (Gelman, 2017). The league provides a unique environment to examine the motivations of professional athletes as the vast majority of players commit for six months to teams based on a desire to reach the National Football League (NFL). During the off-season, most of the players are working in other occupations unrelated to sports.

Data Collection and Analysis

Researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 13 AFL players. Out of the 13 players, all eight AFL teams were represented. The players were randomly selected with no other criteria besides being an AFL player. The player's length of AFL participation varied from one to 11 years. Seven participants moved to the AFL after college football, while five participants played for other leagues such as the NFL, Canadian Football League, and Indoor Football League prior to the AFL.

Once the interviews were completed, the data was transcribed by one co-researcher; natural meaning units were highlighted and coded; and a list of aspects was created for each player (Giorgi, 1997). To increase reliability, the data was independently coded by the two researchers and cross-referenced to ensure the coded data and themes were similar. Themes were then identified amongst the players and combined across all of the data. Seven themes were present within the data including a love of the game, self-motivation, sense of community, professional development, engagement with fans, and assist the league. Lack of financial support was further identified as a deterrent to motivation. The following are descriptions of these key factors contributing to player's motivation including both intrinsic motivators and extrinsic motivators.

Findings

Love of the Game

Out of the 13 participants, 11 expressed "embracing" the game and putting their "heart" into the sport. The "love of the game" was a strong motivator for the participants. Brad stated, "I love the game. I enjoy everything about it. It's not perfect, but I would do it all over again." Peter also summarized his love for the game by stating it is the "most excitement of my life. Being able to play the game."

Self-Motivation

Five players attributed self-motivation to their successful professional career. "It is the player that wants to achieve them (goals/records)." Jack stated, "I am pretty self-motivated. I want to prove to everyone, especially those who doubted me, or even people that continue to motivate and support me, that I can play." For some participants, self-motivation and a positive attitude are related. Nine participants identified a positive attitude as reinforcement to one's motivation.

The league is seen as a job opportunity leading to internal rewards. As Preston expressed, "Come in and play the game you love and do what you got to do to be successful."

Sense of Community

One of the common themes across all of the 13 players' motivation was the sense of community shared between players. Riley described the sense of community as a positive experience in the following way, "Good thing about Arena Football is the camaraderie with the guys. The guys that you see and you fight during training camp. The guys on go-away trips." Other players described the sense of community as a bonding experience and team chemistry. Ryan specifically stated, "We are bonding real well and getting to know each other... The team chemistry is the best (part) about playing with a team." The sense of community reinforces not only the individual but also the group.

Professional Development: Play in the NFL

The players' passion for professional development was another important factor considering 10 participants saw the AFL as a way to pursue the NFL. Motivated to play in the NFL, participants found the AFL as a way to "remain active," "continue playing," and provide other leagues up-to-date skill level footage. As Vance stated, you "don't train for the job that you have, (you) train for the job that you want." While pursuing a career in the NFL acts as a motivator for playing in the AFL for 10 of the participants, the remaining three have accepted maintaining a career in the AFL.

Engagement with Fans

For most of the participants, the relationship with the fans was a motivating factor to their continued participation in the league. Tom described the relationship as "personal," stating, "You always get that interaction with the fan(s). You can look behind you and hand clap the 5-year-olds at the game." These special relationships were also described as motivational to Landon who stated, "After the game...we have an autograph session. Someone coming up to you and asking for your autograph. I think that is a great thing that the AFL did. It is more fan oriented." The personal connection with fans provides the players with positive feedback and/or reinforcement.

Another commonly shared theme among the participants was their willingness to engage with fans on social media for team and league marketing. While only five participants used social media for personal and/or professional purposes, all 13 participants were willing to participate in social media to engage with fans for marketing purposes.

Players Motivated to Help the League

Whether the athletes have accepted their current role in the AFL or have continued to pursue their goals of playing in the NFL, all of the participants

voluntarily offered suggestions to help improve the AFL and wanted to see the league succeed. Paxton stated, "I am very willing to do what it takes just to see this league grow."

Lack of Support from the League

The lack of support experienced by 12 of 13 participants is determined by internal and external factors. For instance, players verbalized salaries, lack of health insurance, and off-season unemployment being unsatisfactory. Steve stated, "The offseason is tough. You don't get paid like they do in the NFL, so you go back home and have a job just like a regular person working... You have to train like an NFL guy, you have diet like an NFL guy." Ralph agreed with Steve. "The fact is that the guys come out, and we play hard, and we give them a good product on the field and we are not getting compensated enough." During the season players continue to face challenges starting at training camp. Most players do not receive paid transportation to and from camp and/or paid housing. Equipment and training facilities are also detrimental, and most players felt both were "worn down" and even "hazardous." While participants feel a lack of financial support from the teams, they are able to identify other intrinsic and extrinsic factors previously mentioned which provide the motivation to continue playing.

Discussion and Practical Applications

Our study examines the overall motivation of professional athletes in an effort to assist sport organizations in understanding their most important asset, the players. The identity of these athletes as football players and their love of the game further contributed to their intrinsic motivation to continue to play while striving to compete at even higher professional levels. The intrinsic motivation that comes from a player's love of the game provides an opportunity for the player to increase their self-motivation, to increase their self-identity as a professional athlete, and to increase their overall success. This motivational relationship influences the professional athlete's performance. Successful teams start with recruiting successful athletes; thus coaches and teams should work to recruit players (Taylor et al., 2007) who love football and see their self-identity integrated into professional sports.

Beyond the need to gain a living, players were overwhelmingly motivated by their relationships with other players. The sense of community among players provides a nurturing environment that provides intrinsic motivation (Taylor, et al., 2007). Similar to previous research on the motivations of elite track and field athletes (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004), we found professional athletes perceive themselves as belonging to an exclusive group and are motivated by that camaraderie. Additionally, the individual-group relationship must be strong and rewarding in order for a team to maintain a positive sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). While sport teams traditionally and continuously engage in team building activities, teams and the league office could develop a

formal mentorship program among teams and across the league to continue to foster a sense of community.

A player's identified self-motivation is an important contributor to his career and motivation to play professional sports. To help increase self-motivation, the league may market to prospective players as a league where players can obtain specialized training and gain professional development leading to higher professional levels of play. Self-motivation may be maintained or strengthened by increasing the number of player biographies, including videos, on the team and league websites, as well as the player's statistics. In addition, honoring a player more frequently with league honors, such as an "MVP of the Week" may be a key motivator for the player and the team. A Player Appreciation Event for the players and their families and/or a Former Players Appreciation Day may also help address players' competency and provide positive performance feedback (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Engagement with the fan base is an important contributor to players' motivation to work and supports the reinforcement theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Players are overwhelmingly willing to participate in marketing initiatives to increase fan engagement. While many teams currently host fan appreciation days and allow close access to the players for fans, teams should be encouraged to increase the level of engagement with their fans. As the community can indirectly influence the affairs of a team through their support (Chelladurai & Riemer, 1997), the provision of more fan and player interaction through social media and league events, can reinforce the players' motivation and the organization can continue to expand.

The deterrents to motivation may be addressed in numerous ways. One suggestion focuses on salaries and training. While funds to pay players may be difficult given the smaller number of teams and lower revenue figures within the AFL, an increase in salary can impact job satisfaction (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004). By providing incremental increases in salary based on tenure, the league will increase motivation and direct players' focus toward the accomplishment of goals. Offering opportunities for players to obtain specialized training may help them gain the skills necessary to reach their goals of becoming NFL players.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of the study is that the results are not generalizable to other athletes or other sports. While our study only focused on players' motivations in the AFL, the research provides a benchmark for examining athlete motivations for all levels of sports ranging from minor league or feeder teams to the highest levels of professional teams. Future studies should examine the motivations of players within other major professional sports (e.g., Major League Baseball, National Hockey League, and Major League Soccer) where a feeder system exists. As a counterpoint to motivation, future research should explore the factors that influence burnout. While the organizational structure of sport teams includes the front and back of the house (Hoye et al., 2009), future studies should also

examine the differences between the different organizational structures within the professional sport industry (i.e., on the field and in the front office).

Conclusion

The players will always be an essential component contributing to the success of any sport organization's goals (Taylor et al., 2007). By understanding what influences a player's personal motivation across the themes presented in our research, teams and leagues will see an increase in organizational commitment and player satisfaction resulting in overall improved performance and revenue.

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