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Born to Play or Paid to Play

Introduction

“I had a job on college campus. I lost that job, but on my way home I heard an inner voice that said go out for the baseball team. I was a walk-on, and I was actually petrified as a walk-on because you're not an athlete.”-Lou Brock. College athletes have been a big topic of discussion over the years. But, rarely walk-on college athletes and scholarship athletes are discussed and how they are treated, compared, and influenced by. How does their identity affect them, their social life, and their schoolwork?

My whole life I played volleyball competitively. Eat, sleep, play was my life. The whole point was to get a scholarship to play in college but as it came closer and closer, that wasn’t my dream anymore. I could have been a college athlete on scholarship or I could have been a walk-on. A little piece of me has always wondered what it would have been like to continue playing at the next level. In the back of my mind, I always thought it would be embarrassing to be a walk-on athlete because I thought that would mean I wasn’t good enough to receive a scholarship. But, I think my passion for volleyball ran dry and I wanted to be realistic and focus on a career and be a normal kid. To be a walk-on athlete, you have to love the sport, be dedicated with passion and hard work. This guided my research and why I found this topic interesting.

History

Scholarships for college athletes had not always been around in fact it was looked down upon. This was because college was a place for academics not sports and when given a scholarship for a sport, it took away from academics, which is the purpose of college. Although, the NCAA set regulations and requirements to regulate scholarships, it didn’t take long for those to become more and more strict. These policies, rules, requirements, and regulations changed over and over again. Requirements, for example, having a certain GPA and certain test scores, which rose over time (Ruben).

The first college sport event was in 1852 and the first athletic scholarships given were in the 1880s (Ruben). At first, athletes were considered amateurs who could balance both academics and sport easily. Over time, big universities became like businesses, seeking profit from college sports. Eventually, athletes became more like professionals and to receive a scholarship for college was simply based on pure talent rather than academic achievement. College athletes with a scholarship didn't succeed as well in school compared to non-scholarship athletes. “Student athletes recruited for athletic talent felt more pressure to focus on athletics over academics, were less intrinsically motivated in the classroom than their walk-on teammates, and earned much lower grades than walk-on student athletes”(Ruben). The identity of the college athlete has changed over history. An athlete on scholarship was for those who financially needed it whereas now it is based on performance level and it proves ones talent. Today, the NCAA makes it so the college athlete on scholarship must do well in the classroom too, whereas before that wasn’t the focus.

Characteristics

College athletes tend to have stereotypes and are held to certain expectations. “One pressure facing college athletes on a college campus relates to the negative stereotypes that faculty, traditional students, and administrative personnel hold about them,” Harrison explained. Researchers have continuously called student-athletes and oxymoron because being an athlete and being a college student tends to have a negative impact and often times referred to as dumb jocks (Stone). Stereotypes come from generalizing a group of people based on often occurrences of how a particular group behaves and why the term “dumb jock” can be said. This has become apart of some athletes identity and they can chose to either accept it or change it.

Megan Poth, a college athlete on scholarship at Flagler University is hardworking and balances school and soccer fairly well although at times she has had to skip class for her games. She feels everyone views her as a college athlete and more times than not she is asked if she is on a scholarship. “All of my good friends are athletes and when we go out we are referred to as the soccer girls,” she stated. College athletes on scholarship or not are either sleeping, eating, working out, going to class, practicing, or going to their games. Balancing a social life in between can be difficult and meeting new people can be challenging as well. Athletes find themselves having teammates as their good friends rather than non-athlete because of their tight schedules.

Football college athletes with no scholarship showed more fatigue and anger compared to players on scholarship. College athletes who participate in a sport at a small college with no scholarship show more depression and confusion. Their moods correlate with their position, scholarship or non-scholarship, starting or not, and big college or small college (Newby and Simpson). Personally, I would much rather play at a big college and have a starting position on scholarship. My mood and attitude would definitely depend on those variables. Athletes who play at a small college or a big college is apart of that athletes identity and can let it define them or let others define them based on what college he or she goes to and the size of the college. Also, different positions receive more attention than others. For example, in volleyball the hitters receive the most attention and that is what fans love to see in general. Same thing in football, the quarterback is the most valued player to fans usually.

Influences

“Player preferences of coaching behavior can affect both their attitudes toward their sport experiences and team performance.”(Stewart and Owens). The influence coaches have over their players is very high and it can affect how the players perform and interact with one another. Treating the certain athletes differently will and has affected their overall experience, work ethic, passion, and performance. This only gives those certain players a prestige role that won’t make the team as a whole work or achieve goals. Horne and Amorose point out that athletes who are playing for intrinsic motivation (pleasure, fun, etc.,) have a better attitude and a coach’s ideal player. These players aren't being rewarded to play for money (scholarship,), which can affect their attitude, behavior, and work ethic. Interestingly, coaches have a major role intheir player’s motivation based on the achievement reward system.

“I work hard on and off the court, but it not because I’m a walk-on. To get better at my game, I go to the gym, on my own time, to work on my weaknesses. In the classroom I work very hard because there is a life after basketball and I need to be prepared for it,” Said Terrance. Terrance, a walk on athlete, has a love for the game of basketball and works hard to achieve his goals. He has intrinsic motivation to do well both on and off the court. They also state that college athletes on a scholarship have less intrinsic motivation than non-scholarship athletes. If an athlete has a full scholarship, their research founds results of higher intrinsic motivation due to not having pressure.

“Scholarships are based on performance level. The better athletes get more scholarship money. I don’t think the coach treats players with scholarships differently; he just has higher expectations for them because they should have a higher impact on the team,” Poth points out. A general assumption most people have about sports is that their coaches treat scholarship athletes better and that these athletes treat non-scholarship teammates poorly. Coaches have higher expectations from those on scholarships because they should technically be better. An athlete has to prove him or herself to get playing time or to start, no matter if he or she is on a scholarship or not. Unfortunately, that doesn’t stop coaches from having “favorites” or rewarding or disciplining certain players differently than others.

Parental involvement or interference in their children’s sport has very much influenced athletes. Positive or negative, there is an impact on the behavior, mood, attitude, and performance. How parents react to their child’s performance and playing time is the most obvious. Parent’s attendance at their child’s game can play in affect. “Parents, at times, cross the line between helping and hurting their child,” Schumacher stated. Children look up to their parents as role models and are highly influenced by them. This will affect how they are when they are ready to play at the college level. Parents should be positive role models that encourage and support their child without verbal abuse (Schumacher).

Conclusion

College athletes face challenges everyday that influence them and can affect how they see themselves. Stereotypes and peoples interference or involvement influences them as well, scholarship athlete or non-scholarship athlete. A walk-on college athlete has more intrinsic motivation and does better in the classroom. He or she also has to prove themselves like everyone else.

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