

THE NECESSITY OF THE NETWORK:

*Why a Successful Career Services Program for Athletes
Must Be Tailored to the Unique Opportunities for Athletes*

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In the article *The End Game: How the NCAA Has Failed in Preparing Student-Athletes for Careers After Sports*, author Maggie Wood argues that college athletics and current career services do not do enough to prepare college athletes for careers after sports. The author suggests that this is a result of a lack of requirements and penalties requiring that student-athletes utilize career services. The author then proposes the NCAA pass a mandate that sets a minimum career services requirement and establishes a penalty system.

In this note, I suggest that athletics provide student-athletes with unique opportunities for career development after college. Additionally, because of the unique identity student-athletes hold, a mandate regarding conventional career services may still be inadequate. Therefore, a successful “career services” program for student-athletes should focus on the athlete’s ability to understand his or her role is progressive, that being an athlete is being more than a player, and to see his or her athletic career as a process. In doing so, the focus should be on teaching student-athletes what unique knowledge, opportunities, and skills they have that can help them find fulfilling careers after sports. The focus should not solely be on access to conventional career services, but should also be on career services unique to the identity of student-athletes.

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I. ATHLETES' UNIQUE IDENTITIES PROVIDE UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES

Although it may be true that a mandate should be in place to ensure student-athletes are participating in career services, the mandate suggested by the author would do little more than require attendance for career counseling and internships. Such a requirement still fails to consider the unique needs of student-athletes. In addition to the mandate, there should be a career services model that considers both the unique identity of student-athletes and the unique opportunities available to student-athletes.

A. Athletes' unique identities

As stated by a former athlete, “[o]ur careers as athletes may be sidelined to old trophies and medals; our titles may shrink to unofficial ones. It is crucial, though, that no matter what jobs we find or what shapes our new lifestyles take we never lose what we shared in those five hours on that typically-sunny California afternoon: We must never stop playing, and we must never stop wondering.”¹ It is therefore important that career services opportunities take into consideration this unique perspective. Conventional careers may not meet the student-athletes’ desire to never stop playing, and therefore career services must be creative in both giving students career services while at the same time maintaining the element of the game.

B. Issues with Identity after college

The issue with athletes after graduation is not necessarily a lack of direction in their degree or the fact that

1. Emily Layden, *As We Know It: Life After College Athletics*, HUFFPOST C., http://www.huffingtonpost.com/emily-layden/college-athletes-graduation-_b_1701138.html (last updated Sept. 25, 2012, 5:12 AM).

they did not attend meetings or seminars on how to find success; the issue is leaving the identity of athlete behind and forging on as someone new with all the ailments of time past. The issue is actually going from “athlete” to graduate and leaving years of competition and athletic identity behind.² Many athletes struggle with this identity shift after college, which may result in those athletes not being interested in conventional careers.³ It is therefore important to focus on the students’ unique identities and the opportunities presented to these students. It is equally important to provide career services targeted at opportunities unique to the athlete that make the transition easier.

C. Unique Opportunities for Athletes

The author states that, because many students do not go on to play professionally, and because many of those students who do play professionally have short careers, it is imperative that athletes receive career guidance while in college. However, providing general career guidance alone overlooks many unique opportunities presented to student-athletes as a result of the people they meet and the experience they gain on the field or the court. It is important that the skills and value of a college athletic career are highlighted in career services programs when preparing students for careers beyond sports and academia. While many student-athletes do not necessarily end up with minor or even major league careers, their status affords them unique opportunities of which they can take advantage.⁴ Career services for athletes should help them.

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. Russ Hafferkamp, *Unique Opportunities for Collegiate Athletes*, CAREERBALL (Feb. 7, 2012), <http://careerball.net/college-and-elite-athletes/unique-opportunities-for-collegiate-athletes/>.

Students should look at careers in sports that may allow them to alter their athlete identities rather than forgo them completely. For example, careers in sports include working with athletes, being a sports agent, working in college athletic departments, sports sales or marketing, health and fitness, coaching, and field maintenance.⁵ Student-athletes have an advantage here, because they love sports.⁶ They have been on the field, have earned the credibility, and have met many of the people that can lead to successful careers in sports. It is important that students start thinking of these careers earlier on, because networking is the key to a successful career.⁷

II. CASE STUDY – EXAMPLE

My husband played professional baseball in college and was drafted to the MLB before completing his college degree. After two “Tommy John” surgeries, and 10 years between the minor league and independent leagues, my husband decided it was time to retire the dream and start a career. Although this was not an easy decision, he began to see that other opportunities might be more stable. After he retired, he spent the academic year coaching a high school baseball team and his summers coaching a college summer league. He also contracted with an organization to coach at college baseball camps and got a job with a local MLB team as part of the grounds crew. At the same time, he finished his degree with the help of a scholarship through the Association of Professional Ball Players of America

5. *Sports Industry Jobs FAQ*, SPORTSCAREERFINDER, http://www.sportscareerfinder.com/sports_jobs_faq.php (last visited Apr. 11, 2015).

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

(APBPA).⁸ Thereafter, he was able to get a job as a crew leader doing field maintenance. This job did not come as the result of any education he received; it came through a groundskeeper he had known while playing baseball. His bachelor's degree was just an achievement necessary to check a box prior to the interview. He has since built on this career and has been able to elevate his career position.

This is not to say that every athlete will have the same experience, and it may be difficult for many to decide what to do after college. However, what made the transition easier for my husband were the opportunities that he took advantage of while playing sports. Anytime the team was holding a coaching clinic for local youth or hosting an event to promote the team, he participated. He also never hesitated to lend a hand to the grounds crew after the game or when they were preparing for an event. He has since won field of the year on every field he has maintained.

The unknowns after college are a reality that all students must face, whether or not they are athletes; and no amount of academic rigor is going to prepare a student for a career after college. The key is taking advantage of opportunities and networking — that is how people get jobs — and playing college sports provides athletes with opportunities beyond the classroom. Additionally, when former athletes are struggling and unable to find jobs, they have large networks to tap into, acquired through sports.

III. CONCLUSION

8. *Roland Hemond and the Association of Ball Players of America (APBPA) Scholarship*, UNIV. PHOENIX, http://www.phoenix.edu/tuition_and_financial_options/scholarships/institutional-scholarships/prospective-students/apbpa-scholarship.html (last visited Apr. 9, 2015).

In conclusion, the author's proposed mandate and plan is a good suggestion toward reaching a uniform required system that prepares college athletes for careers. The current lack of policies and penalties requiring that student-athletes utilize career services allows the student-athlete career preparation inefficiencies to perpetuate.

However, a mandate may not be enough. It may be necessary, in addition to a uniform mandate, to provide student-athletes with unique opportunities for career development after college. Because of the unique student-athlete identity, a successful "career services" program for student-athletes should focus on the athletes' ability to understand their athletic experience as progressive. Such a program should assist the player in understanding that being an athlete is the beginning of a greater career. In doing so, the focus should be on teaching student-athletes what unique knowledge, opportunities, and skills they have that can help them find fulfilling careers after sports. The focus should not solely be on access to conventional career services, but should also be on career services unique to the identity of student-athletes and their networks.