Attitudes of Student Athletes toward Career Transition: Preliminary Examination with Student Athletes in Japan

Sagatomo Tokuyama

Shigakkan University
55 Nakoyama Yokone-machi Obu, Aichi 474-8651, JAPAN
tokuyama@sgk.ac.jp

[Received April 16, 2015; Accepted October 5, 2015; Published online October 19, 2015]

It is no doubt issues of athlete career transition exist and it has been left unsolved in Japan. While many studies have been conducted looking at the issue, the focus of these studies has been on professional and top athletes, not student athletes who seem to have a difficult time in career transition, similar to top athletes. Therefore, the present study aimed at examining attitudes of student athletes toward career transition, including anxiety related to career transition and their plans and goals for their post sport career. The major finding regards to ‘gaps’ in student athletes’ attitudes toward career transition, namely “think vs. do” and “know vs. need to know,” suggesting it is important to provide objective and concrete career information from various perspectives for student athletes.

Keywords: student athletes; athletes’ career transition; second career

1. Introduction

Athletes’ career transition has been recognized as a current social issue in Japan. Accordingly, many studies have been conducted looking at issues of athletes’ second careers. These studies examined what players think about their career after retirement and how they prepare for their second career (Ishimori and Maruyama, 2003; Kubota et al., 2002). Also some studies focused on support systems for players provided by sport leagues and associations, such as the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) and Japan Professional Football League called J-League (Mochizuki and Yokoyama, 2005; Yoshida et al., 2006). While a great deal of research exists, the focus of these studies is most likely on professional and top athletes, not student athletes. Thus, issues about student athletes’ career transition have been left unsolved. The word ‘career’ is usually associated with a job. However, it also means ‘background’ and the issues more likely existed because of intense sport background. In this sense, the present study operationally defines athletes’ career transition as ‘time in career planning for individuals who have intense sport background.’ All athletes face the inevitable time of ‘sport career termination’ and, in general, many athletes face that time when graduating from college. Accordingly, it seems important to make an investigation targeting student athletes on the issues.

1.1. Student athletes in Japan

“Aren’t student athletes supposed to be students first before being athletes?” This kind of argument has frequently been made in Japan (Tamaki, 2006; Tomozoe, 2006). Indeed, the reality seems different. Student athletes tend to position sport involvement as their priority over academic and other life activities (Kubo, 2006; Takamine, 2010). Many student athletes, including not only top ones but also lower level athletes, are committed to their sports full-time. Accordingly, student athletes are more likely to give up many things for their sports, such as part-time jobs and internship experiences, that general students complete (Ooba and Tokounaga, 2000; Shimizu et al., 2010).

When the issues about student athletes’ career transition are addressed, a university admission’s system is necessary to be discussed at first. In Japan, college applicants must take university entrance examinations, and those individuals with higher scores have a greater likelihood of being admitted. Thus, for those high school students who want to obtain a
college education, they understand the importance of dedicating themselves academically during high school to increase their odds of being admitted to their desired higher education institution. Also, many universities have an admission category called ‘sport enrolment’ that is advantageous to student athlete applicants (Tomozoe, 2006). The academic requirement in the examination for athlete applicants is minimal, with more emphasis being placed on the applicant’s athletic abilities. Even if academic ability does not reach the minimal level each college sets for general applicants, high school student athletes could be enrolled if they have high athletic abilities (Shimizu and Shimamoto, 2011). As this system seems an easier way to enter a college, many high school student athletes wish to utilize the category (Kubo, 2006). Thus, unlike general high school students who study hard, they tend to make a strong commitment to sport involvement to improve their performance. Consequently, their academic abilities tend to be low.

Unfortunately, this trend often continues at college. Since student athletes’ academic abilities are low, college education is never easy for them to follow, drawing them further from their academic work and getting even more involved in sports as a result. Also, schools have an influence on this trend. Many schools tend to think of college sports as part of their business, utilizing it to gain wide publicity (Tomozoe, 2006). Since many student athletes enter a college through a sport enrolment admission category, schools’ interest in student athletes tend not to be academic success but schools highly expect them to play well, which student athletes are more likely to be aware of (Kubo, 2006). Tamaki (2006), a sport journalist, pointed out that the first duty without doubt as students is to acquire academic knowledge to prepare for their career, not to play sports. It is a clear trend that student athletes neglect their academic responsibilities.

Results from Takamine’s study (2010), which conducted an attitudinal survey with student athletes, give a snapshot of the problems: a) about 42% of respondents indicated they do not know what and how to study; b) about 38% answered they are worried about time after graduation; and c) about one third indicated they do not know what they need to do after graduation. However, the study also indicated some contradictory findings—they think that they want to get an ideal job (79.8%) and they have strong willingness to work hard for their careers (72.2%). Despite these results, about 57% of the respondents indicated they want to prioritize sports over academic work. It seems like they are capable of identifying problems but they just do not know how to deal with these difficulties. The researcher concluded academic and career support systems are clearly needed for student athletes.

Another aspect deals directly with career transition for student athletes. In the past, individuals with intense sport experience were traditionally favored over non-athletes in the job market due to characters developed from sport engagement, such as team-working and self-disciplined (Okamoto, 2006; Ohtake and Sasaki, 2009). However, with changes in industrial structure (e.g., industry sophistication and merit systems), another fact is that individuals with only those social skills are becoming less attractive (Kasai, 2012; Shimizu et al., 2010). Rather, businesses require job seekers to have adequate level of academic ability and specific occupational knowledge to successfully do a job (Mochizuki and Yokoyama, 2005; Ohtake and Sasaki, 2009). Obtained social skills through sports become advantageous only when student athletes are intelligent enough to compete with non-athletes in the job market (Kasai, 2012). Thus, the aforementioned situations could be described as ‘wider entrance to a college, narrower chance getting an ideal job for student athletes.’

1.2. Studies on athletes’ career transition

As issues regarding athletes’ career transition in general have been recognized, researchers have conducted studies focusing on athletes in Japan. In their study with professional soccer players, Kubota et al. (2002) examined their attitudes toward career after retirement and how they prepare for their second career. Results indicated most players could see the reality that player’s professional career is short and unstable. In fact, 80% of study participants expressed ‘anxiety’ regarding their second career. However, most players spent little time preparing for their retirement and, not developing occupational skills. Ishimori and Maruyama (2003) also conducted a study using professional soccer players and provided similar findings. Results indicated: a) although there were career support agents, players were less likely to utilize these agents in spite of
having anxiety about their future and b) they were passive to think about their second career during their playing days. Most likely players know they need to do something, but they do not carry out or avoid making efforts.

Other studies have been conducted on athletes from other sports besides soccer. For instance, in a JOC study (2004) with athletes competing at the international level, about 50% indicated they did not prepare much for their second career and they identified a financial aspect as one of their major concerns. In a Nippon Professional Baseball study (2013) with younger professional baseball players, about 70% indicated they were worried about their future. And to a question 'who do you consult with discussing about your second career,' about 70% answered 'family,' indicating most of them were not getting objective advice from professionals. Similar findings have been reported with other sports such as wrestling, volleyball, skiing, and rugby (Aoishi and Sasaki, 2010; Yoshida et al., 2006). These studies continue to suggest the importance of effective career support systems being in place by teams and leagues to educate players regarding their second career (Ishimori and Maruyama, 2003; Kubota et al., 2002).

Acknowledging the importance, a number of support systems have been established both by teams and leagues, and the system running by J-League, called Career Support Center (CSC), is considered as the model system for others (Mochizuki and Yokoyama, 2005; Yoshida et al., 2006). The center is accessible for all players and a variety of educational programs are available, ranging from business manner seminars, technical skills classes (e.g., pc & presentation skills), to internship programs. However, not many players participate in these programs, implying the level of their attitudes about their second career is low. The researchers pointed out that CSC is a good system but the system would work better if players’ attitudes and objective knowledge about their second career are improved. Following J-League, other systems have been also established, such as by NPB in 2007, JOC in 2008, and Nippon Sumo Kyokai in 2011, providing similar services to J-League’s.

1.3. Purpose of the study

Similar to top athletes, student athletes practice hard spending a great deal of time in their sports, giving them little time to study and have various experiences (Takamine, 2010). As a result, many student athletes face a difficult time when they start looking for a job because their academic ability is low and they have obtained few job skills. Thus, top athletes and student athletes share similar situations facing difficult time in career plans due to intense sport background whether it is for the first or second career. Although a number of studies have been conducted looking at the issues, the focus of these studies has centered around top athletes. Media and findings from these research works have been helpful at some level for top athletes. On the other hand, only limited attention has been paid examining the issues for student athletes, which represents the gap in the literature. Since most student athletes are unable to continue on in an athletic career, they need to be prepared for entering a non-sport career after graduation. Mochizuki and Yokoyama (2005) noted that precise recognition about the issues as early as possible is a key to avoid difficulties in athletes’ career transition. Kubota et al. (2002) explained the ability to obtain an ideal job will greatly depend on how well the athletes had prepared for this life transition, while still actively participating in sports. The need for further research studies on student athlete development still exists, and there is little data available on what student athletes think about their career transition. The present study seeks to determine student athletes’ perceptions of the issue, including views and feelings. The present study used the word ‘attitudes’ to simply be representative of those perceptions. Therefore, serving as exploratory research, the purpose of the present study was to gather the preliminary data which could be used for further investigations by examining attitudes of student athletes toward career transition, including anxiety regarding career transition and their plans and goals for the time after their sport career is done.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Study participants were student athletes from a university located in the Central region of Japan. The school has many sport teams and some of them compete at the national competition level. The school does not have an athletic department, and
Table 1
Sample characteristics.

| Gender | Age (school year) | Performance Level | Plan after graduation |
|--------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| A Female | 21 (3rd) | International | Get a job |
| B Male | 21 (3rd) | National | Run as a job |
| C Female | 20 (2nd) | Regional | Get a job |
| D Male | 20 (2nd) | Regional | Get a job |

Table 2
Reasons to feel anxiety.

| Reason |
|--------|
| A I have not been working hard anything rather than running, so without job skills, I am worried if I can get a job. I also do not know what I need to do making myself competitive to get a job. |
| B I hope to be a paid athlete, but there is no assurance for it. And even if I could get that job, I am also worried how long I can keep being in that status. |
| C I know there is little paid coaching job available, so I need to get a job which is not related to T&F. It is never easy for me because I know things about T&F very well but I do not have enough knowledge about business. And I have even no idea what kind of job skills are necessary to obtain. |
| D Running has been my focus. I can talk a lot about T&F. But I know I need to obtain specific job skills. Without having these skills (and not sure if I could get them before graduation and how to get them), I do not even know what kind job I want to do now. So I am very worried. |
job, and even if he could, how long he can be in that status (Table 2).

Next questions were related to their career goals and plans after retirement from T&F. Regarding career goals, all participants said they do not have any, indicating they have not considered what they want to achieve from a long-term perspective in their career. In terms of their plans after retirement from T&F, which represent short-term career goal, participants were asked if they have any and what they are. Participant A plans to finish her running career when graduating from college. She is planning on going back to her hometown and obtain a job there. However, without having occupational skills, she was not sure what kind of job she could get. Participant B plans to pursue a running career after graduation. Thus, his best scenario was to be hired by a company first as a paid athlete and then continue to be employed by the same company after his athletic career is complete. However, he questioned if his lack of sufficient job skills would impact the company’s desire to hire him upon completion of his athletic career. The following question was asked to them if they ever do anything to make their plans happen. Both stated ‘not much.’ It seems that they have given some thoughts but it may not be at serious level, so they were not confident regarding their plans.

Participant C & D said ‘not yet’, and were asked to tell when to start. Participant C had no idea when to start yet. She knows she should have at least some directions at this point but explains to probably start thinking it right after athletic career is done knowing it must be too late. Participant D also had no idea when to start. He knew non-athletes usually start thinking about future as early as possible. Also they want to tell young athletes to start thinking it right after athletic career is complete. However, he added, “As I need much more career information so I can find a direction for future and I may start working hard on academic activity.” Participant D explained he wants to prioritize running because he entered this college to run, not to study. The following question was asked regarding influential significant others—“Do parents, coaches or school administrators tell you to prioritize running because you entered this college as an athlete?” He said “I have never discussed this with them. I just feel I need to prioritize running myself because I entered this college using sport enrollment examination category. Maybe I need to talk with them and get some advices.” Each participant has their own reasons, but it seems they do not think what they do is quite right. And there are some gaps between what they know and what they need to know, implying objective career information may be necessary to be provided.

Next, the participants were asked to give a message to young athletes on the topic based on their experiences. No participants suggested the same path they have taken to young athletes. Rather, they basically want to tell young athletes to start thinking about future as early as possible. Also they want young athletes to notice the importance of academic knowledge to acquire for occupational career (Table
Table 3  Messages to young athletes.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| A | Although I knew all athletes face the time to retire from sports sometime so all need to prepare for it, I have neglected to look at the fact. No mater you are wishing to be professional athletes or not, you should try to find the time and study as necessary. It is better to start it earlier. |
| B | About our life, no one would ensure for us. It is important to consider about future, the time you are no longer an athlete, as early as possible. |
| C | If you value sport engagement, you should be in it. However, it is also important to understand you cannot do only what you like. So find your career goal not as an athlete before getting too late, and spare time to study to achieve it as you play sports. |
| D | There is only a handful of athletes without worrying the time after retirement. You have to be aware of it. It may be tough to work hard on both sport and academic activities, but you have to use time wisely. And you should obtain study habit from younger age because to start making commitment on studying from college time is never easy. |

3). Their messages may represent their regrets that they have not studied much in school. They are still active athletes, but they are aware the time for ending athlete career would come sooner or later. They seem to understand that it is too late to start thinking about career transition when their sport career is terminated or close to the end. Thus, here is also a gap between what they think and what they do.

Lastly, the participants were asked to discuss regarding a support system in the school. All participants did not have many opinions about it. They were asked if they have consulted with school administrators, including coaches, regarding their career transition. All expressed ‘no’, saying they had no idea whom to see. It may be a cause that the school does not have an athletic department as it is a rare case to have it in Japan. So all participants did not even know what athletic department is and its role for student athletes. Also they were asked if they have any requests to the school regarding career transition. Participant A, B, and D said ‘none’, but they asked back to the interviewer to provide some examples. It seems they had no idea what kind of support they could possibly take. Participant C indicated she hopes there is career counseling sessions where concrete and objective career information are provided which are suitable just for student athletes. In addition, she hopes she could take these sessions individually, so she can ask any questions without caring others. She explained “that way, I could obtain necessary information to consider career direction and then I know what I need to do.”

4. Discussion

The present study aimed at gathering the preliminary data for further investigations by revealing attitudes of student athletes toward career transition. Overall, results indicated student athletes were more likely in school to be athletes, not students. They were worried about their future, but they did not have a clear career goal from a long term-perspective at all. It also tended they have not given sufficient considerations even for their short-term career plans. On the contrary, they gave an advice to young athletes, telling them to start thinking about future as early as possible, implying they know it is too late to start thinking about it when their sport career is terminated or close to the end. In addition, it became obvious that there is lack of information necessary for student athletes which could be influential factors on the issues.

The major finding of the present study regards to ‘gaps’ in student athletes’ attitudes toward career transition. The first gap represents between “think vs. do.” Although they know they have not been able to obtain sufficient occupational knowledge which is deemed necessary in the job market, they tend not to put academic work as their priority to develop job skills. Instead, they choose sport activity as their priority. Two have short-term career plans, but they are not confident to the plans as they seem not to give sufficient consideration. For the other two, they do not even have short-term career plans although they know they should have at least some by then. Despite knowing all are in status that they need to do something, they actually neglect to take actions to improve their situations. As a result, they feel anxiety regarding their future. However, when asked to give a message to young athletes, they do not suggest focusing just on sport activity as they have done. Instead, they want young athletes to know the reality and work hard on academic activity to get ready for a future career as early as possible. Accordingly, it seems obvious that they are able to identify problems, which refers to “think,” but they
are more likely to look away from these problems and not take any actions, which refers to “do.”

Another gap represents between “know vs. need to know.” Although all possess some knowledge related to the issues, their knowledge seemed very limited. For example, they know job skills are necessary to be competitive in the job market. However, they do not know what and how to obtain these skills. Another example related to their assumption. A participant answered ‘running’ when asked her priority as a college student. Her reason was because athletic career is only two more years. However, she missed to see another simple fact that it is also two more years to be a student. She admitted she was not able to see such an easy fact until pointed out clearly. Another participant also indicated ‘running.’ He feels it is responsibility to prioritize running because he entered this college as an athlete. However, he was not sure whom he is responsible for. In fact, he has never discussed this matter with others. It seems obvious that they are able to explain situations with very limited knowledge, which refers to “know,” but some pieces of important information are more likely to be missing, which refers to “need to know,” that could give them better views to deal with their career transition.

In order to close these gaps, providing objective and concrete career information from various perspectives could be a key as previous studies suggested (Takamine, 2010; Ooba and Tokounaga, 2000) since their ability to gather these important pieces of information seems limited. For example, all participants did not know the reality and facts regarding athletes’ career transition issues clearly even though it has become a social issue in Japan. As they indicated that earlier is better to start thinking and preparing for the future, which is similar results to previous studies (Aoishi and Sasaki, 2010; Kasai, 2012), information of the issue should be provided in details and let them understand it as early time in college as possible. That way they may have a feeling of fear which could be a motivator to start thinking about their future seriously. In fact, this is consistent with practices being executed around the world. Yoshida et al. (2006) reported that successful systems in some countries provide career support which is given primarily to current athletes, including athletes at young age, not retired ones. Also, they seem to have the ability at least to identify problems. As Takamine (2010) pointed out, concrete career information could help them find a better way to deal with these problems and possibly lead to taking actions. In fact, a participant stated “I need much more career information so I can find a direction for future and I may start working hard on academic activity.” As supplementing their limited knowledge with accurate information and facts they do not see clearly, they could clarify what to do to improve their situations. Thus, as they are provided necessary information in timely manner, they may start taking actions as they think it is necessary.

4.1. Directions for future studies

Findings of the present study are useful as preliminary information for future examinations. Although the present study identified potential attitudes of student athletes toward career transition, there are several limitations to be considered for future studies. It is obvious sample size was small and only study participants were selected from one university and one sport—track & field. Also, only student athletes were targeted although career planning is important for general students as well. To generalize findings, future studies need to include student athletes from other sports and other universities with a bigger sample size, and studies should examine different characteristics in career planning between student athletes and general students. Further, one important notion regarding sample characteristics that needs to be discussed is study participants’ school year they are in—two were 2nd year students and the other two were 3rd year students. It is possible that 3rd year students have higher level of attitudes toward career transition than 2nd year students, as they are closer to the time for job hunting. In fact, slightly different results were observed in this study. For example, 3rd year students had some ideas regarding short-term career goal, but 2nd year students had none. Therefore, future studies should look at different characteristic for each school year students.

Another major limitation is related to research design. Since the present study was exploratory in nature, the study was designed without theory based frameworks. Based on findings from the present study, a theoretical framework referred to the CASVE Circle provided by Sampson et al. (1992) seems to be useful for future examinations. It discusses conceptual perspectives regarding career
problem-solving and decision-making skills and it has been utilized in career counseling service for college students. The CASVE model includes components of “communication, analysis, synthesis valuing, and execution” (Sampson et al., 1992, p.68). The present study focused on how student athletes think about their career transition, which seems to be related to components of communication that includes individual’s internal states and analysis that includes examination about self. For comprehensive understanding of the issues, future studies should incorporate this framework and examine aiming at testing the model.

In addition, the present study indicated that there is lack of career information for student athletes. Surprisingly, no study participants had clear career goals, possibly illustrating a key problem on the topic. This may imply career education they have taken so far has not worked well. In fact, a participant indicated she wants career counselling sessions where objective and concrete career information are provided which are suitable for student athletes and contents of the sessions should be flexible depending on individuals’ needs. Previous studies also suggest importance of counseling sessions for athletes (Ooba and Tokounaga, 2000; Takamine, 2010). Thus, future studies need to examine what kinds of information are useful for student athletes as well as how these pieces of information should be delivered to them.

In relation to examinations regarding student athletes themselves, different perspectives should also be incorporated to a framework for comprehensive solutions (see Figure 1). It is no doubt student athletes themselves are the primary stakeholder for the successful transition. (Aoishi and Sasaki, 2010; Ishimori and Maruyama, 2003). However, there are also significant others surrounding them who are influential individuals in sport careers, such as coaches. In the present study, all said they have never consulted with their coaches about career transition. Since some studies pointed out the role and understanding of coaches are critical on the issue (e.g., Mochizuki and Yokoyama, 2005), studies examining attitudes of coaches toward student athletes’ career transition are necessary to be conducted.

Furthermore, roles of school seem to be critical. While student athletes tend to prioritize sport activities, schools are more likely to overlook it as they expect student athletes to play well to gain better publicity. Recognizing pressure by school, some student athletes may not be able to openly say they want to study more or spend enough time for career planning even if they do want to. Schools should be responsible for not making them feel that way. Also, college athletic activities are supposed to be controlled and administered by school. However, since few schools have an athletic department in Japan, the reality is that each sport team administers their activities independently, including participation eligibility and practice frequency. As team’s focus is more likely on team performance, values for education and career development are less likely to be high priorities. These situations need to be changed. Since all athletes and coaches must belong to a school, school should take the initiative for solving the issue. As learning about how support systems work in different countries such as the NCAA in the U.S. (Kubo, 2006), future studies should look at how college athletics system in Japan need to be changed, in order to provide better career support services for student athletes.

References
Aoishi, T. and Sasaki, K. (2010). A study on second career developing of top athletes in Japanese corporate sports team: A case study of players belonging to rugby club. J. Res. Lifelong Learn. Career Educ., 6: 37-46. (in Japanese)
Ishimori, M. and Maruyama, T. (2003). A study on the occupational re-socialization model and its applicability for professional athletes: A case of professional soccer players. Sendai daigaku daigakuin sports kagakuenkyuuka kenkyuronbunshu [Collection of papers, graduate school division of sports science, Sendai University], 4: 9-17. (in Japanese with English abstract)
Japanese Olympic Committee (2004). Second career ni kansuru ishikichousa [A study regarding attitudes toward second career]. Olympian, Summer: 34-41. (in Japanese)
Kasai, K. (2012). A study on the features of the business persons who were in sports clubs in their college days: Why those people are highly welcomed by business society. Bull. Fac.
Name: Sagatomo Tokuyama

Affiliation: Faculty of Health Sciences, Shigakkan University

Address: 55 Nakoyama Yokone-machi, Obu, Aichi 474-8651, Japan

Brief Biographical History:
Sagatomo Tokuyama is an assistant professor in the Department of Health and Sport Sciences at the Shigakkan University (2010/9). His main research interests include sport consumer behavior and market segmentation. He also has interests in sport governance and athletes’ career transition.

Main Works:
• Ohno, T., and Tokuyama, S. (2015). A Study Associated with Organizational Characteristics of Sport Systems in Japan: Preliminary Examination of Governance Systems for Establishment. The Journal of Gifu Keizai University, 49(1), 21-41. (in Japanese)
• Tokuyama, S., and Greenhalgh, G. (2014). Soccer Participants as Potential Consumers of Professional Soccer Games: Segmenting based on General Characteristics. Journal of Contemporary Athletics, 8(1), 53-64. (in Japanese)
• Tokuyama, S., and Greenwell, T.C. (2011). Examining Similarities and Differences in Consumer Motivation for Playing and Watching Soccer. Sport Marketing Quarterly, 20(3), 148-156.

Membership in Learned Societies:
• North American Society for Sport Management
• Sport Marketing Association
• Japanese Association for Sport Management