

International Student-Athletes and the Globalization of the NCAA

Part 1: Introduction & Overview

Introduction

Hey everyone, my name is Dr. Hayden Coombs and I am a professor of sports management in the communication department here at SUU.

I attended BYU-Idaho for my undergrad, where I studied communication journalism and English creative writing. I attended school so I could be a sports writer, which I accomplished first by covering high schools sports for a local newspaper in SE Idaho, but achieved my dream of working in professional basketball when I joined BleacherReport.com in 2011 as an NBA Draft Analyst. I worked for B/R for four years, covering the 2011-2014 NBA Drafts, before coming here to SUU to be an assistant athletic director in late 2014. I worked for the SUU Athletics Department from 2014-2017, during this time I also completed my master's degree in professional communication. After completing my master's degree, I left the athletics department to become a lecturer here at SUU. At this time I started my terminal degree, which I completed in 2022. My doctorate is a Ph.D. in Education with an emphasis in Sport & Athletic Management from Northcentral University. Over the past few years, I have built a dedicated sports management and athletic administration program here at SUU in order to help SUU students get jobs in the sports industry.

My research interests are primarily in sports. I wrote my thesis on media framing and agenda setting in sports media coverage and my dissertation was on the socialization and academic barriers encountered by international student-athletes competing in the NCAA. While I primarily research international student-athletes and other issues related to collegiate athletics, I have also published papers on ESPN's coverage of the NBA Finals, Rudy Gobert's involvement with the COVID-19 Pandemic, NBA All-Star Voting Bias, and contributed 18 different entries to the Encyclopedia of Sports Management on topics including: Professional baseball management, BIRGing and CORFing, Cartel sports structure, Communication accommodation theory, Image repair, Ethnographic sports research, FOMO, health communication, international student-athletes, Kayfabe, Paralipsis, Peer mentoring, Peer review, Privilege, Professional wrestling management, Salary caps, and social identity complexity. Lastly, I am the originator and author behind a budding new theory in sports management called, "the theory of institutional athletic privilege," which states that student-athletes at certain colleges and universities possess inherent advantages over others due to superior resources, facilities, and support systems provided by their respective athletic departments.

Overview of Selected Reading and Videos

Before we get into the lecture, I provided Dr. Mulderink with a variety of resources that I wanted to review. First, there are a handful of readings. First, I listed my two most recent papers written on international student-athletes. They cover sociological and psychological topics, including social identities international student-athletes assume and the linguistic strategies they employ when adjusting to life at an American institution of higher education. The third paper was an ethnography written by a student from the Czech Republic who traveled all the way here to study the culture of North American college sports, which is a completely foreign concept to sports fans outside of North America. I also included a chapter from a textbook about international sports and an article about the European Sports Model, which we will be discussing today.

You should also have access to four documentaries about college sports and international sports. The first documentary entitled, “Schooled: The Price of College Sports,” investigates some scandals, corruption, and issues with the NCAA and collegiate amateur model of sports that we use here in the United States. The next video is called, “Icarus,” and starts as a documentary about doping in professional cycling, but ends up being the investigative report that blew open the Russian Olympic Federation’s doping scandal that got them exiled from the Olympics. The final two documentaries, “NBATV Presents: The Dream Team,” and, “The Other Dream team,” should be watched together, as one covers the famous 1992 US Men’s Basketball team, affectionately known as the dream team and regarded as the best basketball team ever assembled, while the other covers the 1992 Lithuanian men’s basketball team, which was the first team the small country of Lithuania fielded after the fall of the soviet union.

Part 2:

Amateurism

Before we get into international athletics, we need to define amateurism and why it’s an important distinction to make when studying the differences between European and American sports. So, what is amateurism? The most widespread definition of amateur sport is based on those individuals who practice sport casually, for pure pleasure and not by profession. It differs from professional sport, in that amateurs do not exercise this function as a way of life to earn remuneration, not receiving any financial benefit for their practice. In a contemporary way, the concept of amateurism defines the athlete who has never accepted money, or who accepts money under restrictions specified by a regulatory body, for participating in a competition. Historically, amateurism was prevalent in late 19th-century North American sports and was initially established in England to maintain class distinctions, preventing the working class from competing against the aristocracy. This segregation underscored the ethos of sportsmanship and amateur status, where earning a living from athletic endeavors classified one as a professional and thus ineligible for amateur competitions. The culture of amateur sports was particularly strong among upper- and middle-class men in private schools and universities, although it excluded working-class athletes due to their professional commitments.

The Olympic Games played a significant role in promoting the ideal of amateurism globally, barring professional athletes' participation until 1988. The transition from strict amateurism to the inclusion of professionals in the Olympics reflects broader changes in sports ideology and the challenges posed by state-sponsored athletes from Eastern Bloc countries, which disadvantaged self-financed amateurs from the West.

In the United States, various amateur sports associations, such as the National Federation of State High Schools Association (NFHS) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), manage amateur sports. These organizations are part of a broader amateur sports sector that involves significant financial activities, including fees, travel, and equipment expenses, highlighting the commercial aspects and inherent conflicts within the amateur sports industry. The evolution of amateurism reflects ongoing debates about the role of money in sports, the importance of maintaining sportsmanship, and the impact of commercialization on the integrity of amateur sports.

Amateurism in American college sports is a foundational principle that dictates that college athletes must not receive payment for their sports participation beyond scholarships and the cost of attendance. This concept is central to the NCAA, the primary governing body for college

athletics in the United States, which enforces the amateur status of student-athletes. The NCAA's adherence to amateurism is rooted in the belief that student-athletes should participate in sports as an avocation, balancing their athletic commitments with academic pursuits. The organization posits that this amateur status helps maintain the educational integrity of the institutions and ensures that the primary focus of student-athletes is their education, not financial gain from sports. Amateurism in the NCAA has several key components:

- Scholarships: While student-athletes are not paid salaries, they can receive athletic scholarships that cover tuition, room, board, and books. Recent adjustments now allow for "cost of attendance" stipends, which can cover additional expenses associated with attending college beyond what a traditional scholarship may cover.
- Education First: The NCAA emphasizes the importance of the student in "student-athlete," advocating that participating in sports is secondary to receiving an education. This principle is meant to ensure that athletes are prepared for life beyond sports.
- No Professional Contracts: NCAA athletes are prohibited from signing professional contracts or receiving payment for playing their sport. This includes endorsements, appearances, or being involved in commercial promotions.
- Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL): Recent developments have seen a shift in the NCAA's stance on athletes profiting from their name, image, and likeness. As of 2021, NCAA athletes can now earn money from endorsements, social media, and other activities related to their fame as athletes, though specific rules vary by state and institution. This change marks a significant shift in the definition of amateurism, although the NCAA maintains that direct pay-for-play remains off-limits.

The concept of amateurism in the NCAA has been a topic of considerable debate and legal challenges. Critics argue that the association's revenue-generating sports (like football and basketball) benefit disproportionately from the labor of student-athletes, who may not fully share in the financial rewards generated by their talents and efforts. Proponents of maintaining amateur status argue that it preserves the educational mission of college sports and ensures a level playing field across institutions. The evolving landscape of college sports, highlighted by discussions around athlete compensation, the transfer portal, and the NIL rights, continues to challenge the traditional notions of amateurism. The NCAA's role in this landscape is central, as it navigates maintaining its foundational principles while adapting to the changing dynamics of college athletics and its participants' needs and rights. Despite these issues, many people view amateurism to be an essential part of the collegiate sports model.

Amateurism holds significant importance in sports for several reasons, shaping the ethos and structure of athletic competitions, particularly in educational settings like colleges and universities. Here are some key reasons why amateurism is valued:

- Educational Priority: In the context of college sports, amateurism ensures that the primary focus remains on education rather than financial gain. This principle helps maintain the student-athlete's commitment to academic success and personal development alongside athletic achievement.
- Fair Play and Equity: Amateurism promotes a level playing field where athletes compete based on skill, training, and teamwork rather than financial resources. This ideal supports the notion of fair play and equity, where all participants have an equal opportunity to succeed.

- **Sportsmanship and Integrity:** The concept of amateurism is closely tied to the ideals of sportsmanship and integrity. It encourages athletes to compete out of a love for the game and respect for their competitors, coaches, officials, and the rules of the sport.
- **Access and Opportunity:** By focusing on amateurism, sports organizations can provide more individuals with the opportunity to participate in sports. This inclusivity is vital for fostering talent, promoting physical health, and encouraging social interaction among a wide range of participants.
- **Preservation of Tradition:** Many sports have a long history of amateur competition, with traditions that fans and participants cherish. Amateurism helps preserve these traditions by maintaining the sport's original ethos and the spirit of competition.
- **Development Focus:** Amateur sports often emphasize skill development, personal growth, and team dynamics over winning at all costs. This focus can lead to a more enriching and fulfilling experience for athletes, who learn valuable life lessons through their participation.
- **Cultural and Community Values:** Amateurism reflects broader cultural and community values, such as teamwork, discipline, and perseverance. Amateur sports can strengthen community ties and foster a sense of belonging among participants and supporters.
- **Preparation for Life Beyond Sports:** Especially in educational settings, amateurism prepares student-athletes for life after sports, emphasizing the importance of academic achievements, personal development, and the acquisition of skills applicable in various professional contexts.

While the principle of amateurism faces challenges and debates, particularly regarding athlete compensation and the commercialization of college sports, it remains a cornerstone of the sporting world. It upholds the ideals that make sports an integral part of personal development and community life.

European Sports Structure

The idea of amateurism is entirely foreign to sports fans outside of the US, but it does have a diminished sense of importance because of the European sports model.

The European Sports Model (ESM) represents a unique and structured framework that has distinctively shaped the sports culture first across Europe, then throughout the rest of the world. In fact, most all of the sports world ascribes to this model, leaving the US and Canada in the minority. The ESM is built upon a pyramid structure beginning with local clubs at the base, ascending through regional and national federations, and culminating at European federations. This hierarchy not only nurtures athletes from the grassroots to elite levels but also promotes widespread participation and competition, ensuring a broad base of involvement and high-level competition.

Intrinsic to the ESM is the dynamic system of promotion and relegation, which stands in stark contrast to the closed league models prevalent in the United States. This system ensures that teams rise or fall between leagues based on performance, maintaining a vibrantly competitive environment and incentivizing performance across all levels of play.

At the core of the ESM is a grassroots approach that prizes mass participation and the cultivation of talent from the community level upwards. Unlike the professionalized and commercial-centric sports model of the U.S., the European system thrives on the contributions of volunteers and

non-professionals. This emphasis on amateur sport and volunteerism bolsters the social function of sports, fostering community solidarity and enhancing social cohesion.

The ESM also places significant emphasis on national identity, with international competitions serving as stages for the expression of national pride. Despite the challenges posed by globalization, sports within the ESM remain a stronghold of national and regional identity, reflecting and contributing to the cultural diversity of Europe.

However, the European sports framework faces challenges, including the escalating commercialization of sports and the need to balance commercial interests with sporting values. Issues such as ultra-nationalism, racism, and intolerance require vigilant management to preserve the integrity and positive impact of sports.

Economically, sport under the ESM is a robust sector, contributing significantly to world trade and job creation. The interplay between sport and television, particularly the sale of broadcasting rights, has become a substantial economic driver. The European Commission has recognized the dual nature of sport as both an economic activity and an integral part of European identity, launching policies to protect the ESM's unique characteristics.

Furthermore, the role of sports federations has evolved, transitioning from regulatory bodies to entities that negotiate TV rights and act as commercial enterprises. This evolution raises questions about their effectiveness in representing the interests of both top athletes and grassroots participants.

The ESM's influence extends globally, with its structure and features adopted by various continents. As the sports landscape evolves, there is a concerted effort to retain the model's unique attributes while adapting to new developments, ensuring sport remains a powerful, inclusive activity across Europe.

In conclusion, in the European model, sports clubs often have a strong community focus, with many clubs starting as amateur and possibly remaining so, or moving to semi-professional or professional status depending on the sport and the level of competition. The system in Europe generally allows for a more fluid transition between amateur, semi-professional, and professional statuses. The integration of promotion and relegation systems in leagues also means that a club could potentially rise from amateur status to professional based on performance, which differs from the fixed league structures common in American sports. Furthermore, in Europe, there is a long history of clubs and athletes moving quite openly from amateur to professional status, with less of a clear-cut divide in terms of ideology. Sports such as soccer, rugby, and tennis have professional circuits that are highly commercialized and where athletes often start training and competing at a young age with the intention of turning professional.

Conversely, In the U.S., the concept of amateurism, especially in college sports, is tied to the student-athlete's identity and is regulated by the NCAA. This concept emphasizes that athletes should not receive direct payment for their sports performance, preserving the amateur status and the purported educational focus of college sports. However, as mentioned, this notion is increasingly under scrutiny due to the commercial success of college sports and the debate over compensation for student-athletes.

Part 3

Why NCAA Coaches are looking internationally

If you've been watching college sports recently, you've probably noticed that more and more student-athletes are not natural-born Americans, as had been the case since the inception of collegiate athletics in the US. Why is this occurring? Well, the trend of NCAA coaches recruiting more international athletes each year can be attributed to several key factors, reflecting the evolving landscape of college sports and the global talent pool. Here are some of the primary reasons for this shift:

- **Globalization of Sports:** The sports world is more interconnected than ever before, thanks to advances in technology and communication. Live streaming of games, social media, and international sports networks have made it easier for coaches to discover international talent. Tournaments, showcases, and camps held around the world also provide platforms for athletes to be seen by NCAA scouts. This global visibility has made the boundaries of talent scouting virtually limitless.
- **Competitive Edge:** Integrating international athletes into NCAA teams introduces different playing styles and strategies, which can give teams a competitive edge. For example, European basketball players often bring a strong foundation in fundamentals and team play, which can enhance a team's performance. Soccer players from Latin America or Africa might introduce different tactical approaches and skills. This diversity in playing style can make teams more versatile and difficult for opponents to predict and counter.
- **Academic and Cultural Diversity:** International student-athletes contribute to the goal of creating a diverse and inclusive campus environment. They bring new perspectives into classrooms and on campus, fostering a global learning environment. This diversity aligns with many institutions' missions to prepare students for a globalized world, making international athletes an attractive addition to the student body.
- **Scholarship and Roster Flexibility:** International athletes may have different expectations and needs regarding scholarships and financial aid. In some cases, the opportunity to study and compete in the U.S. can outweigh the need for a full scholarship, allowing programs to more effectively manage their scholarship allocations. Additionally, international athletes might fill roster spots in less popular sports or positions that are hard to fill domestically, providing teams with much-needed depth and talent.
- **Success Stories:** The success of international athletes in NCAA competition, such as basketball or track and field, has a ripple effect. These success stories not only inspire coaches to look internationally for the next star but also encourage aspiring athletes from those countries to consider the NCAA as a viable pathway to development and exposure. The professional success of former NCAA international athletes can also serve as powerful marketing for programs looking to attract global talent.
- **Specialization and Development Programs:** Countries with strong development programs in sports like tennis, golf, or swimming often produce athletes who have been training intensively from a young age. These athletes can bring a high level of expertise and professionalism to college teams. NCAA programs, recognizing the quality of training these athletes receive, are keen to offer them opportunities to compete at the collegiate level.
- **Networking and Connections:** Building an international recruiting network is crucial for NCAA programs. These networks can include connections with club teams, high schools, and sports academies worldwide. Coaches may also rely on relationships with international alumni or current international athletes to help identify and recruit new

talent. As these networks strengthen and expand, they lower the barriers to international recruiting.

- **Regulatory Changes and Resources:** Navigating the complexities of international recruitment has become easier thanks to more streamlined processes and resources dedicated to supporting international athletes. This includes assistance with visa applications, compliance with NCAA eligibility rules, and academic support to ensure athletes meet the necessary criteria. Improved understanding and handling of these issues make it more feasible for programs to recruit internationally.

The trend towards more international student-athletes in NCAA sports is a multifaceted development reflecting broader trends in globalization, education, and athletics. This shift benefits not only the athletes, who gain access to competitive sports and educational opportunities, but also the institutions that enrich their campuses and teams with global talent.

ISAs and the Obstacles they face

An international student-athlete (ISA) is a student who qualifies as both an international student living abroad in the United States and a student-athlete competing in a sport at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)-member institution. These students are unique, as they face the challenges inherent to college students, international students, and student-athletes. ISAs face a multifaceted adjustment process upon entering the U.S. collegiate system, where they must navigate the complexities of being both international students and NCAA athletes.

- **Academic Preparation and Dropout Rates:** ISAs often arrive better prepared academically than their domestic counterparts, a reflection of their strong educational backgrounds and possibly more stringent selection criteria for international admissions. However, the dropout rates for ISAs are higher. This paradox can be attributed to the multifaceted adjustments they must make, which extend beyond the classroom to include social integration and cultural acclimatization.
- **Cultural and Social Adaptation:** The adjustment to a new cultural environment poses significant challenges for ISAs, which include understanding different social norms, overcoming language barriers, and experiencing racial discrimination. These stressors can affect mental health and overall well-being, potentially impacting academic and athletic performance.
- **Perceptions of Athletic Participation:** The research indicates that ISAs and DSAs differ in their views of collegiate sports. ISAs may not see athletic participation as the ultimate goal but rather as part of a broader educational and personal development opportunity. This perspective can influence their level of engagement and performance in sports, as well as their expectations from the collegiate athletic experience.
- **Recruitment and Institutional Choice:** The recruitment process for ISAs is complicated by their limited ability to visit U.S. campuses, making them reliant on the representations and communications of coaching staff. Consequently, their choice of institution may be based less on a comprehensive understanding of the school's academic and cultural fit and more on athletic scholarship offers and the perceived supportiveness of the coaching staff.
- **NCAA Eligibility and the Concept of Amateurism:** Navigating NCAA eligibility requirements is particularly complex for ISAs due to varying global standards of amateurism. The NCAA's stringent amateurism rules often do not account for the diversity of international sports structures, leading to a high rate of amateurism violations

among ISAs. Moreover, the process of evaluating an ISA's amateur status is laden with investigations into their past affiliations with professional teams and agents, which may differ significantly from U.S. practices.

- Socioeconomic and Gender Issues: Socioeconomic status and gender play critical roles in the experiences of ISAs. Factors such as the financial ability to navigate the U.S. educational system, gender norms within sports, and the intersectionality of cultural identity with socioeconomic background can all impact the experiences of ISAs. Women, in particular, may encounter additional barriers related to gender expectations both within and outside the athletic domain.
- Support Systems and Institutional Responsibility: To address these challenges, there is a clear need for robust support systems tailored to the unique needs of ISAs. This includes academic support that accounts for language and learning differences, cultural sensitivity training for staff and students, mental health services that consider cultural and linguistic needs, and a transparent and fair process for assessing NCAA eligibility.

In conclusion, the complexity of the ISA experience requires a multidimensional support strategy from educational institutions. It necessitates cross-departmental collaboration among academic advisors, athletic departments, international student offices, and mental health services. By adopting a holistic approach that recognizes the diverse backgrounds and needs of ISAs, institutions can foster an environment in which these students can thrive academically, athletically, and personally.

Part 4

Conclusion

I hope you enjoyed this lecture on international student-athletes and the globalization of the NCAA. The integration of international student-athletes (ISAs) into the NCAA is a testament to the far-reaching effects of globalization on collegiate sports in the United States. The presence of ISAs within NCAA sports has not only diversified the talent pool, but it has also enriched the cultural tapestry of the institutions they attend. However, ISAs encounter distinctive challenges that range from cultural and social adaptation, academic pressures, and navigating the complex NCAA eligibility process, to the socioeconomic and gender issues unique to their experiences.

These student-athletes often arrive better prepared for the academic rigors than their domestic counterparts, but they face higher dropout rates due to a myriad of adjustment challenges. The varied perceptions of athletic participation between ISAs and domestic student-athletes (DSAs) underscore the different motivations and experiences within the collegiate sports environment. ISAs view participation not just as an athletic pursuit but as a holistic educational and personal development opportunity.

Furthermore, the recruitment and institutional choice process for ISAs is fraught with challenges due to their limited ability to visit and evaluate potential universities, making the role of coaching staff and scholarship offers even more critical in their decision-making process. On the other hand, DSAs often have greater accessibility and can make more informed decisions about their collegiate journey.

The also highlighted the pressing need for academic support tailored to ISAs, sensitive to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and mental health services that address the unique psychological stressors these athletes face. Institutions must adopt a comprehensive and multidimensional support strategy that fosters an inclusive and supportive environment for ISAs.

In conclusion, as the NCAA continues to globalize and integrate more international talent, it bears a significant responsibility to ensure that ISAs are not only recruited for their athletic prowess but are also supported throughout their academic and athletic tenure. By acknowledging and addressing the complex web of challenges faced by ISAs, the NCAA can truly embody the spirit of diversity and inclusion it promotes, facilitating a rewarding and successful experience for all student-athletes, regardless of their country of origin.

If any of you have any additional questions or would like to get involved with the sports industry, please feel free to reach out. My email address is just haydencombs@suu.edu, and I would be happy to chat with any of you. Thanks.