

Communication Barriers in a College Sport Culture

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Introduction

Currently in the collegiate world of athletics there has been a shift in intercultural athletes participating. "There are more than 20,000 international student-athletes enrolled and competing at National Collegiate Athletic Association schools" (Durrani, 2022, pg1). Marietta College does not have many international students in athletics, but with research completed there could be studies done to benefit the international athlete and American athlete involving their interactions and difficulties faced within their sport. International athletes and teammates of the International athletes face barriers like communication. With barriers within the team involving communication there could be an effect in the athletic performance of the athletes as well as cause different impressions of the American collegiate sport culture for incoming international athletes.

This is a significant study because there could be a better understanding on how to help student athletes when they first get to college and during to give them a better overall impression for sport culture in the United States, but also looking into the idea that does the barriers cause different performance from athletes and what can be done to help them. Researching international athletes and what causes different performances and feelings of a new culture as well as norms is important because there is an increase in the mix of international players within the American collegiate sport world, and this is a large topic of discussion in sport to investigate which we will be able to find some barriers as well as how can they be overcome. We would both like to work in sport upon graduation and by taking part in this research to understand international athlete barriers will help bring a better experience not only to the international athletes, but also the domestic athletes.

The goal of this study is that through research and interviews with current international as well as American collegiate student athletes there will be a better understanding on how language barriers impact individual team performance as well as team atmosphere. The interviews with the athletes will give more insight on how the American collegiate sports world is perceived by international and American athletes leading to what is different or what can be changed to help the overall experience within American collegiate athletics.

Literature Review

Language Barriers Leading to Lack of Team Chemistry

When international student athletes arrive in the United States to take part in a sport the athlete can go through difficulties communicating with their fellow teammates. Most student athletes come to the United States not knowing much English. Without knowing much English, the international student athletes and American student athletes might clash in their interactions as there is a barrier between understanding each other during sport and around the campus. Takahiro Sato et al., 2008 conducted a study to understand international student athlete experiences at an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). They would find out

that the international students were facing multiple struggles while concluding, “The international student athletes expressed difficulty understanding academic and athletic systems... Because of the lack of English proficiency, most of the respondents experienced problems when working with the Registrar’s office or understanding NCAA regulations. (Sato et al., 2008). If an international student athlete does not understand the language, there will be problems with team chemistry leading to mistakes in play on the court, field, or whatever the athlete is doing.

When a student athlete comes to the United States from a different country there are also communication barriers when it comes to norms in society. In the study from the HBCU it was stated, “International student athletes revealed that when the number of international student athletes increased, other athletes could not accept the new international student athletes’ cultural differences (practice habits and behavior pattern) during daily practice” (Sato et al., 2008). This can cause struggles in a team performance because if there is conflict in practice with accepting cultural differences, there will be problems in the sport. Students can accept other student athletes through coaches and staff members making a course or lecture for the athletes to go through to understand the cultures. If there were times for the athletes to understand the culture that each athlete is coming through then there would be better performances possible for the team, but also make the international student athlete feel welcomed leading to better team chemistry leading to better team outcomes.

Classroom Challenges

Interviews with former international student athletes showed that these athletes face challenges in the classroom which can sometimes transition to the sport and team atmosphere. The international athlete has an idea in mind of what the culture and norms are like, but the ideas that the athletes have are not always the way they thought they would be. Struggles in the classroom are going to happen due to different parts of the world having different sets of ideas on how something should be done. Multiple international student athletes said that they made multiple mistakes when it comes to the classroom, but when it comes to the sport, they know they have their teammates to guide them through the mistakes and show how to correct them. If a team builds a culture that is accepting and towards one goal, then the team chemistry will be better leading to better overall performance. One international student athlete said that team bonding along with team setting allowed for them to create and build connections in his sport. Pasuljevic had his teammates to help guide him into the new culture which allowed him to feel accepted and at home, leading to a better team atmosphere. Pasuljevic stated, “That’s just how my coach built that culture, it’s important to interact with each other. We’re all working together toward a common goal or when we lose, we lose together and we try and improve together, it’s all about the team” (Noriega 2018). If there is a focus on the team towards one goal, then there will be better transitions for student athletes coming to new norms and cultures.

The research done in this article really focuses on the “student-athlete” experience. “When I went to class, I did not know what the professor was talking about. Then, after the class was over, there was an assignment for each class, but I didn’t know what the assignment was. If I couldn’t do the assignment, I wouldn’t get any points for that class, and my grades would drop. I

had a lot of trouble with that in the first year.” (Matsuo et al). The confusion comes from that language barrier and makes academics a crutch. Since the students struggled in the classroom, they could not compete on their athletic team. The students in this survey said that they knew English, but in a learning situation it made it more difficult because they are learning about new content and the lectures were too fast for them to comprehend. So, the classroom struggles had a direct correlation with field performance in that the athlete was not allowed to participate.

International Student Athlete Adjustment Challenges

“Recruiting international athletes is a growing trend in American intercollegiate sport, and international student-athletes play an increasingly prominent role in NCAA competition.” (Pierce et al.) International athletes have the luxury of seeing playing time almost immediately when they decide to be an athlete in the United States. This is seen a lot at the Division I level of collegiate sports, but the problem of fitting within the culture still exists. Since the number is increasing the problem also is increasing of the athletes not being able to communicate, and that is not just simply speaking English. The article surveyed athletes from different countries and made sure to specify what year each student was in. The interesting part of the research was the conclusions found. These results are from 2012 and results were as follows. International students felt homesick, and when thinking about homesickness it can be hard to communicate that to somebody who does not understand the culture. Athletes who were homesick seemed to have an impact on performance due to not feeling at home. Homesickness was found mostly in first year and second year students. When the athletes became older and could cope better with homesickness, their performance was better. However, it is important to note that even with the decreased performance the international students would still get playing time due to being very gifted at their respective sports.

Another aspect this article has is the question “what advice would current international athletes give international athletes considering a move to the United States to participate in intercollegiate sport?” The responses included having dedication, hard work and being persistent within the sport. A response that did not show up in the research was “understand the culture of the area your college is in.” This shows that although there is a language barrier the student-athletes are valuing other things over having difficulties with the language.

Coaching Interactions

When international student athletes come to the United States there is a notice by the international student with the differences in the sport. In a study revolving around international student athletes and coaches there was a difference in the idea that “culture played a role within coach-athlete interactions because the U.S. collegiate training methods and systems were different than the systems from athlete’s home countries” (Alida, V., & Brandhoff, C, 2016). In other countries sports are played different than the United States. International student athletes noticed that the presentation of practice can be more intense, and delivery of coaching can be different as well. With the differences in presentation of a sport, an international student athlete must learn how to communicate with the coaching staff based on the new interactions they are not used to in their sport. Athletes in other countries outside of the United States typically say

they are not used to a structure like the United States when it comes to sport, so the international students must adapt to change within a sport that they grew up playing. By adapting to new changes, performance can be affected from the start. If the student athlete is trying to adapt to new ways of playing a sport based on practice or intensity of the sport, then there will be impacts on overall team performance. By allowing international student athletes to get accustomed to the new norms in collegiate sport then there will be a positive effect on the team performance, but it takes time to get used to the atmosphere like anything else someone would do.

Wanting to experience the “American Life” is something that the international student-athletes wanted when deciding to be a student-athlete in the United States. (Cenzual et al) When these athletes came to their campuses for the first time over half of them said that they had some sort of culture shock, and this was because of all the different slang and jargon they could not experience while living in their home countries. Out of the students who said the language was a problem nearly sixty percent of them went to a larger institution. While those who went to smaller colleges said the transition was much better since they were able to have more one-on-one conversations with native speakers. This shows that the athletes learn the culture best by being immersed in it, but also being in an environment where things are more controlled. In this study it is shown that without the help of US students and coaches the transition to becoming a better athlete could not happen. The “American Life” shown in movies creates a false reality as to what it is like to be an athlete in the United States, which can cause these culture shocks, but also create more of a barrier. Much of the struggle on the field comes from not knowing the different hand signals and slang terms on the field, or court.

Hofstede Value Orientations

Hofstede’s Value Orientations is a study based on cultures within the IBM company. This study researched how different cultures value distinct aspects, and at what level. There are five different values/dimensions that Hofstede examined. The first value is power distance, this is how countries respond to authority, and social inequality. The next value is masculinity, this is the application of social roles based on gender. Uncertainty avoidance is another value, and this is how cultures approach uncertainty, and share information. Long term/short term orientation has to do with if the culture does things for the present time or are built more towards the future. The last value is indulgence which is the newest value that has been researched. This value examines how happy people say they are versus how they truly feel. These dimensions can create a communication barrier because these values can only be learned by being within the culture. Language is deeper than just words, and this is seen with people from the same and even unfamiliar cultures. While these dimensions show what a culture would typically do it is important to realize that this theory cannot be taken into all situations. Some people may change the way these dimensions are based on situations, but also some people may go against the social norm which can then cause conflict. These values help to understand why athletes from diverse backgrounds could struggle with adapting to a new culture.

Based on literature review we pose the following research questions.

RQ1: How does the language barrier between international athletes and domestic athletes impact athletic performance?

RQ2: Do different culture norms and differences in society hurt the influx of international athletes within the overall experience with American collegiate sports?

Method

For the research portion an interview process took place. This was an appropriate method as it allowed people to answer in-depth questions that we were directly trying to research. People were able to give real world examples that they were part of first handily that allowed for us to look more into our research questions.

Participants

We interviewed five people. There were a total of two male and three females. They were all involved with athletics as an American either working with international or playing with international. Three of the interviewees were in the age range of 18-25, and two were in the age range of 45-60. Two participants are college graduates and three are working towards a college degree.

Procedure

We recruited people by talking to people we knew had some experience with athletes in different cultures, whether from different states or countries. There was not a thought about specifically a certain amount of each gender or race. There was more of the thought of the experiences with the different cultures rather than the statistics of demographics. The interviewees were from all around the country, so some interviews were conducted via email/phone and others were completed face-to-face.

Key Questions

Key questions related to the idea of language barriers and differences between social norms. The questions allowed for people to talk about experiences that they faced or were part of to showcase the research question of language and norms impact athletic performance and overall adaptation to American collegiate sport culture.

The following questions were asked.

1. Are there any challenges working with members from different cultures? If so, what is an example?
2. How about language issues from other members or coaches etc.?
3. How does the language issue affect your play, being a member, your performance, team performance?

4. What role does the sports play in adjusting to the U.S. culture, and what is your role within the team?
5. What kind of cultural differences do international athletes experience in the American collegiate sports context?
 - a. Different training style?
 - b. Different communication style? Between athletes, or between athletes and coaches
 - c. Any value differences?
 - d. Similarities?
 - e.

Post Interview Evaluation

After the interviews, we evaluated the answers to the questions to look more into the research questions we had. From there, we established the barriers and social differences that athletes face when interacting with another person from a different culture.

Results

RQ1: Does the language barrier between international athletes and domestic athletes impact athletic performance?

Result: Based on literature review and interviews the results related to the idea of not knowing the same language to the same level can result in miscommunication and lack of team chemistry. A variety of the responses revolved around the same idea of language impacting the team. For example, an interviewee said, “It is easy to become withdrawn in team settings. Not being 100% fluent makes it harder to be involved in group conversation which flows quickly and makes it difficult to keep up.” This shows that if there is a barrier by not having conversations between teammates then it will translate to the play in whatever sport it is you are taking part in. The interviewee above supports Takahiro Sato et al. 's research that “Without knowing much English, the international student athletes and American student athletes might clash in their interactions as there is a barrier between understanding each other during sport and around the campus.” Teammates might not be on the same page if there is no communication. If there is no communication, then the response during the sport will negatively impact the rest of the team due to not being on the same page or excluding a player in general due to lack of knowing how to communicate with each other.

Another interviewee said “Over time I learned more about my teammates' culture as well as them learning mine. We would find ways to communicate through words slowly as they were learning the language. At first it impacted me because I did not know how to respond, but as we became comfortable, we learned different things and ways of communicating which benefit the relationship.” This highlights that language was a problem at the beginning because they did not know how to respond to each other. By taking time to learn more about the teammate, they were able to find ways to communicate which can benefit the atmosphere of the team and the overall performance by being able to be on the same page even if the communication is through the

same hand gestures. Taking this time supports Gordon Allport's Contact Hypothesis which states that, for cultures to blend, and for others to understand, there must be interactions in a similar situation.

RQ2: Do different cultural norms in society hurt the influx of international athletes within American collegiate sports?

RQ3: What are the cultural differences for international athletes while experiencing American collegiate sports context? (Different training styles/ Coaching)

Result: Based on literature review and interviews the results related to the United States have more intense and structured sports culture from an early age compared to international countries. An interviewee said, "Americans take sports more seriously. Everyone thinks they are going pro." Based on this response it highlights that international athletes might be intimidated based on the attitude that some American athletes have from an early age with their sport. This highlights a cultural difference because in the United States a sizable number of events and thinking go along revolving around sport. When it comes to international athletes, sometimes in their hometown sport is a secondary aspect of them compared to the United States athletes. The interviewee also stated, "Sports play a significantly larger role in America than overseas. You can start playing sports at an early age, whatever sport it is, and sometimes that is not available in other countries." This can translate into another interviewee's thoughts stating, "Based on pictures and observation the United States has high end facilities compared to some other countries. This can relate to the idea that sports impact the United States and there can be distinctive styles of coaching an athlete. If an athlete plans to go DI, their coaching will be more vigorous since they are playing at a higher level. The facilities allow for a variety of different training due to having more resources available whether that be nutrition or equipment." The literature review supported the statements by the interviewees by stating "culture played a role within coach-athlete interactions because the U.S. collegiate training methods and systems were different than the systems from athlete's home countries" (Alida, V., & Brandhoff, C, 2016).

There was not enough evidence to support or not support directly from international athletes if there are cultural differences, but based on American athletes there was evidence to support the American athlete standpoint of there being differences in facilities, training, and more.

From interviewees, we established new ways to improve the international student athlete adapt to the American sport culture as well as American culture in general. The majority of responses were to have funding for translators. One of the interviewees said, "Google is good or whatever but again when having conversation, it is harder to keep up and stay tuned." If schools offered translator positions, it would help the athlete learn the language which can help with language barriers within team culture. Another interviewee said, "In my internship there were host families for the players, so that helped adjust to the culture." At the DIII level such as Marietta could keep up with having the foster families program like how men's basketball does. This could help international students as well as athletes because they would have someone that could help with their adjustment to the new culture where they might be traveling from far away.

By implementing this, it would allow for the athletes to feel more accustomed to the culture, which might allow for athletes to feel more relaxed when playing their sport. The foster families could help with adjustment to the culture as well as help with learning language if they are able to.

Discussion

Looking at our literature review and some research with athletes that have worked with intercultural individuals, we were able to see the differences that people face whether that be social norms or language barriers. Research showed that athletes can see the differences and we should implement resources to help the overall atmosphere of American sport for both international and American athletes. Future implications for this research would be that there could be more in-depth observations while individuals of different cultures interact in an athletic atmosphere. There was a look into what athletes' face and how does it impact performance, but if there was real life research watching the interactions there could be more understanding behind the answers of the athletes. The thing that was surprising was that American athletes are not the international athlete but can see the barriers. If the barriers are being seen, we should implement ways to better help the athletes which might lead to better team chemistry.

We feel that the research will allow collegiate coaches to see what barriers are faced within their team culture, and finding ways to implement an overall experience that could be beneficial for the performance of the individual athletes as well as team. The research will benefit the collegiate sport community because it will allow for coaches and players to see the barriers or different norms that teammates are facing. This will allow for talk to occur at the collegiate level to find ways to make an overall experience enjoyable as well as benefit performance by knowing what might be occurring behind the scenes with language barriers and different social norms.

We have been able to learn that sometimes social norms and language barriers are not seen from the average fan or even sometimes within a program. The difficulties intercultural athletes face can affect performance due to learning curves, but if athletes and coaches are open to knowing the differences, they could find ways to improve/ help with them.

The most challenging part and weakness of this project was finding a group to interview. International students are rising, but sometimes we cannot find as many in the sport culture depending on location. This was a challenge and a weakness for us because we were not able to interview as many as we would have liked to get the best possible research for the project.

The strength of the research was our dedication to finding answers. We both would like to work in collegiate sports, so our drive to understand the research and literature allowed us to have strength in establishing the findings to our research questions.

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