Sport Labor Migration and Collegiate Sport in the United States:  
A Typology of Migrant Athletes

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The global migration of athletes has been increasing in a variety of sporting contexts around the globe. Notably, the past decade has seen a nearly threefold increase in the number of international athletes coming to the United States for the purposes of participating in collegiate sport. In accordance with such growing internationalization, a body of research in the area of sport labor migration has developed. The purposes of the current study were to improve our understanding of the forces that lead athletes to the U.S. in order to participate in collegiate sport and to explicitly connect research on international collegiate athletes to the broader context of sport labor migration research. In doing so, we utilized the typologies of migrant athletes developed by Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002) as a conceptual framework for analysis. Based on findings from qualitative interviews with international collegiate athletes, we present a revised typology including the categories of mercenary, nomadic cosmopolitan, settler, returnee, exile, and ambitionist to help understand the diversity of factors and experiences associated with the migration of athletes in the context of U.S. collegiate sport.

Introduction

Globalization has become one of the most prominent research concepts in both sport studies specifically and the social sciences more broadly (Houlihan, 2008). One of the defining features of globalization processes is “internationalization,” which refers to the international migration of people (McGovern, 2002). In the general context of globalization and human movement, there has been growing internationalization with respect to the athletes involved in many sporting leagues around the world. In settings as diverse as professional soccer in Europe, professional baseball in the United States, and professional cricket in India, significant numbers of athletes are crossing national borders for the purposes of sport. For example, by 2008, the top professional soccer leagues in six European countries – Belgium, England, Germany, Greece, Portugal, and Russia – were importing more than 50 percent of their players from other nations (Besson, Poli, & Ravenel, 2008). In Major League Baseball, meanwhile, more than 27 percent of players on opening day rosters in the 2010 season were born outside of the United States (Nightengale, 2010). During the inaugural Indian Premier League cricket season in 2008, approximately 35 percent of the rosters in the eight-team league were comprised of players from...
countries other than India (Engineer, 2008). Such internationalization is an important component of broader processes of globalization taking place in sport.

Given the extent of internationalization in sport, it is no surprise that a body of literature examining such labor migration has developed. Specifically, sport labor migration research has explored the international movement of athletes in a number of sporting contexts ranging from soccer (Lanfranchi, 1994; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Magee & Sugden, 2002; McGovern, 2000; 2002; Stead & Maguire, 2000a; 2000b), basketball (Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Maguire, 1994; Maguire & Peartson, 2000a; 2000b; Maguire & Stead, 1998), cricket (Hill, 1994; Maguire & Stead, 1996; Stead & Maguire, 1998), baseball (Klein, 1994; Takahashi & Horne, 2006), rugby (Williams, 1994), ice hockey (Elliot & Maguire, 2008; Genest, 1994), and handball (Agergaard, 2008), to more specific contexts such as the migration of Kenyan athletes (Bale & Sang, 1994; Chepaytor-Thomson, 2003), the migration of athletes to Finland (Olin & Penttila, 1994), migration in Latin American sports (Arbena, 1994), and the migration of talent from Eastern Europe (Duke, 1994). Despite this collection of literature, Maguire (2004) stated that sport labor migration research was still in its “relative infancy” when compared to many other areas in the sport studies, both at a conceptual level and with regard to empirical inquiry. Such a state of development suggests the need for continued research in this area as well as expansion of this research to additional sporting contexts.

Migrant Athletes in U.S. Collegiate Sport

The trend toward increasing internationalization has also been taking place at the level of collegiate sport in the United States. According to a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) study, there were 10,395 “nonresident aliens” participating in Division-I athletics during the 2008-09 academic year, comprising 6.2 percent of all athletes in the NCAA’s top division (Zgonc, 2010). This figure represents nearly a threefold increase from 1999-2000, when a total of 3,589 international athletes comprised 2.4 percent of the NCAA Division-I student-athlete population (Zgonc, 2010). In certain sports, the number of migrant athletes is particularly striking. For example, 36.8 percent of women’s tennis teams and 35.5 percent of men’s tennis squads were comprised of athletes from outside of the U.S. in 2008-09 (Zgonc, 2010). Both the growing number of international migrant athletes in U.S. collegiate athletics as well as their particularly high concentration in certain sports presents a number of interesting issues for sport studies scholars to explore.

Much like the “relative infancy” of sport labor migration research in general, academic inquiry into the topic of labor migration in U.S. collegiate sport appears to be at a similar stage of development. There are, however, a handful of notable studies on the topic. One of the first major works focusing on the presence of migrant athletes in U.S. collegiate sport was a book-length study by Bale (1991). Through methods including survey results and interviews, Bale sought to provide insight into such questions as the number of international athletes attending American universities, where these individuals were coming from, how they were recruited, and how they adjusted to American life. Bale’s work is notable for its detail and its status as a “pioneering” piece of research on the topic, and aspects of his research will be further addressed later in this paper. Research subsequent to Bale’s work, however, has been relatively sparse. Studies on the topic of migrant athletes in U.S. collegiate sport can be grouped into two general categories: (a) those focusing on the experiences of international athletes on American university campuses (e.g., Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a; 2000b; Popp, Love, Kim, & Hums, 2010) and (b)
those focusing on the motivations of international athletes in coming to American universities (e.g., Berry, 1999; Garant-Jones, Koo, Kim, Andrew, & Hardin, 2009). Bale’s (1991) work, meanwhile, explored both of these areas.

On the subject of international athletes’ experiences on U.S. campuses, Ridinger and Pastore (2000a; 2000b) analyzed the adjustment of international athletes to American colleges, comparing their experiences to those of international non student-athletes and domestic student-athletes. Later, Popp et al. (2010) further refined the initial model of student-athlete adjustment developed by Ridinger and Pastore (2000b). Chepyator-Thomson (2003), meanwhile, specifically sought to explore the experiences of Kenyan scholar-runners in U.S. universities using both telephone interviews and survey questionnaires. In the other general category of research, studies by Berry (1999) and Garant-Jones et al. (2009), focused specifically on examining the motivation of international athletes participating in U.S. college sports. Among the motivational factors identified in such studies are the attraction of receiving an education with an athletic scholarship, the high level of competition in U.S. collegiate sports, the opportunity to receive well-organized training by expert coaches in American colleges, the high quality of training facilities located on American college campuses, and the attraction of the United States itself.

While these studies have provided some important insight, research is still necessary to improve our understanding of issues raised by the increasing number of migrant athletes coming to American universities. Further, much of the existing work has not made an explicit connection to research in the broader context of labor migration in sport. Thus, this paper has two primary purposes: (a) providing additional insight into the motivations of migrant athletes coming to U.S. collegiate sport and (b) making an explicit connection between research on internationalization in U.S. collegiate sport and the broader context of sport labor migration, which has been largely lacking up to this point. The next section of this paper will introduce the typologies of migrant athletes developed by Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002), which we use as a conceptual framework for our analysis.

**Conceptual Framework: Typologies of Migrant Athletes**

Because an important aspect of this study involves extending previous research in the area of sport labor migration, our analysis will be guided by a comparison of the perceptions of migrant college athletes involved in our study against the previously developed typologies of Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002). Maguire’s (1999) typology, developed through interviews with athletes in such sports as soccer, basketball, cricket, and rugby, included the categories of mercenaries, settlers, nomadic cosmopolitans, pioneers, and returnees. Magee and Sugden’s (2002) typology, developed through interviews with professional soccer players in England, also included the categories of mercenary, settler, and nomadic cosmopolitan, but added to that the categories of ambitionist, exile, and expelled. Below is a brief description of each category from typologies that form the conceptual framework for our analysis.

b. Nomadic Cosmopolitan: Magee and Sugden’s (2002) description of the nomadic cosmopolitan includes individuals who are “motivated by a desire to experience different nations and cultures” (p. 432). Maguire (1999), meanwhile, describes “nomads” who are “motivated by a cosmopolitan engagement with migration” (p. 105). Such athletes, “embark on a quest in which they seek the experience of the ‘other’ and indeed of being the ‘other’” (p. 105-106).

c. Settler: Magee and Sugden (2002) describe the settler as “someone who has moved to English football and remained in England for a sustained period, of four or five seasons or more,” and that “the most advanced settlers stay in England beyond the finish of their playing careers” (p. 431). Maguire (1999) simply describes settlers as “sports migrants who subsequently stay and settle in the society where they perform their labor” (p. 105).

d. Returnee: As Maguire (1999) explains, “some cosmopolitans, along with pioneers, mercenaries and even long-term settlers, act as ‘returnees’ in the global process. The lure of ‘home soil’ can prove too strong” (p. 106).

e. Exile and Expelled: Magee and Sugden (2002) describe the exile as “someone who, for football-related, personal, or political reasons (either voluntarily or through domestic threats to his career, his liberty, or his life), opts to leave his country of origin to play abroad” (p. 432), whereas the expelled is one who is “forced” to leave his/her country of origin.

f. Ambitionist: Magee and Sugden (2002) describe three dimensions of the ambitionist category: (a) the desire to achieve a sport career anywhere, (b) the preference for playing in the certain location as compared to elsewhere, and (c) the desire to improve one’s career by moving to a higher-quality league. In response to Magee and Sugden’s typology, Maguire (2004) noted that, although research by himself and colleagues had found the ambition to play at a high level to be an important part of athletes’ explanations for migrating, they believed that such ambition transcended several of the categories, rather than comprising a category of its own.

g. Pioneers: Maguire (1999) describes pioneers as individuals who possess “an almost evangelical zeal in extolling the virtues of ‘their’ sport” (p. 105). Further, the words and actions of pioneers “can be seen as a form of proselytizing by which they seek to convert the natives to their body habitus and sport culture” (p. 105).

It is important to emphasize, however, that the categories in these typologies are not rigid, but rather “in the lived experience of migrants, the different dimensions overlap and shade together in different combinations” (Maguire, 1999, p. 105). As Maguire (2004) further explains, “typologies are ideal type representations of the real world,” and “it would be foolish to see their categories as either mutually exclusive or set in stone” (p. 480). It is in this spirit we present our findings; we seek to understand the multiple dimensions of motivation that lead athletes to make the decision to come to the U.S. for the purposes of competing in collegiate sport rather than trying to group individuals into any one specific category. In addition, by explicitly comparing
our findings with the previously identified typologies, we hope to add to the depth and meaning of the categories that exist in sport labor migration as a whole. As Maguire (2004) points out, “it is important that typologies continue to be checked against new data to ensure their adequacy” (p. 479). Thus, this paper serves not only to help us better understand the motivations of international athletes competing in U.S. collegiate sport, but also to add depth to the existing typologies of migrant athletes developed in other sporting contexts.

**Methods**

The current study is based upon interviews with 12 individuals who migrated to the United States in order to participate in collegiate sports. We employed a purposive sampling method, selecting participants who were either undergraduate students currently participating in collegiate sport or graduate students who had recently completed their collegiate athletic careers. All interviewees had been involved with sport at the NCAA Division-I level at institutions in the Football Bowl Subdivision, which represents the highest competitive classification of college sport in the U.S. The 12 participants were selected from a variety of sports, including tennis, volleyball, soccer, basketball, swimming and diving, and track and field. The participants came from a range of nations, including Australia, Brazil, Congo, England, Germany, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Spain, and consisted of five male and seven female athletes.

Interviews ranged in length from approximately 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers. As a validity check, each participant was e-mailed a copy of the transcript of his/her interview to review; none of the individuals elected to make any changes to their transcripts. During the interviews, we began with broad, open-ended statements, such as “tell me about the process that led to you coming here,” or “tell me about the factors involved in your decision.” These general statements were followed by more specific questions asking participants to expand on or clarify information they had previously mentioned. Using the concept of information redundancy (Taylor, 1994) as a guide, we expanded the number of interviews conducted until clear patterns in the participants’ motivations and experiences emerged. In the process of our analysis, we used techniques involving analytic induction and comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to find common themes present in the participants’ responses. In the next section of this paper, we present our findings using the typologies of migrant athletes developed by Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002) as a conceptual framework for analysis.

**Analysis: A Typology of Migrant College Athletes**

Our discussion will begin with a focus on the three categories that exist in the typologies of both Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002) – *mercenary*, *nomadic cosmopolitan*, and *settler* – before going on to note the relevance of additional categories included in just one of the two typologies.

The first category included in the typologies of both Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002) is the *mercenary*. Given the fact NCAA rules prevent collegiate athletes from being paid *per se*, it may seem logical upon initial consideration to think the category of *mercenary* has little relevance in understanding the motivations of migrant collegiate athletes coming to the U.S. For instance, unlike the professional soccer players in Magee and Sugden’s...
study, who may receive quite large salaries, American college athletes are only allowed to receive a scholarship that provides tuition and a stipend designed to cover living expenses. However, although the athletes in our study did not appear to be primarily motivated by large-scale economic reward, the category of mercenary still has relevancy in helping us understand their motivation. As a case in point, a tennis athlete from England described how attempting to play tennis at a high level in his home country carried a significant financial risk. He explained:

I could have gone professional and played the whole time, but that would have cost a lot of money, especially in England. It could have been a huge risk, because if it hadn't worked out then, you know, without a degree it's tough to get a good job.

He went on to explain that, due to the scholarship the university was going to provide, playing collegiate tennis in the U.S. was not a financial risk. In addition, he felt the opportunity to obtain a college degree could be financially beneficial in the long run. Thus, even though he was not going to be earning a salary per se, this individual felt playing his sport collegiately in the U.S. provided an immediately better financial situation than attempting to play the sport professionally in his home country.

While the previously mentioned tennis player’s comments reflect concern for an improved financial situation in the short term, some migrant athletes were focused on improving their long-term economic situations. For example, an athlete from Romania explained the difficulties she perceived of “getting ahead” in her home country:

If you don't know a lot of people, if you don't have a lot of money, it's really hard to get around [in Romania]. And even if you finish school, a really good school or a really good college, nobody guarantees that you're going to have a future there. I wanted to have a future.

She explained that she felt living in the U.S. offered better opportunities for her future than living in Romania. Overall, like the athletes in previous studies from which the typologies were developed, many of the migrant collegiate athletes in our study were seeking an improved financial situation for themselves (either immediately or in the long term). Thus, the category of mercenary has relevance in helping comprehend the motivations of migrant collegiate athletes in the U.S.

The second category described in the typologies of both Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002) is the nomadic cosmopolitan. Although the collegiate athletes in our study are certainly different in many ways from individuals such as Jürgen Klinsmann and Ruud Gullit, soccer stars who have lived and played in numerous “world cities,” cited by Magee and Sugden, they are similar to the extent that part of their motivation in coming to the U.S. was related to a desire to experience different nations and cultures. For example, an individual from Slovakia explained that a part of their excitement in coming to the U.S. was that she “knew about America only from movies,” and that she would now be able to experience it for herself. Another individual, meanwhile, described that, although he had traveled around Europe quite a bit, he had only been to the U.S. once as a young child. He explained:
Something I quite enjoy doing is, it's quite interesting to me to see different cultures and stuff. Also, I feel like it gives me a lot better viewpoint of viewing the world. Like, I don't feel like I'm so judgmental now because, you know, I've seen a lot more of the world.

He described this cosmopolitan engagement as being an important part of his motivation in making the decision to come to the U.S.

In another area related to the nomadic cosmopolitan category, for many individuals coming from countries where English was not their native language, an important aspect of experiencing the culture in the United States was the English language itself. For example, an athlete from Spain noted the importance of the English language in his motivation for coming to the U.S. He explained: “Because, you know, to know another language is good. And when you try to find a job, it's good to know another language. Like in Spain, they value if you speak another language.” These comments also show how the English language was not only a part of the cultural attraction, but some individuals also felt improving their English skills would be beneficial in terms of helping them find employment in the future. Thus, while the attraction of learning about a new culture was a part of the draw in coming to the U.S. for the migrant athletes in our study – giving the nomadic cosmopolitan category relevance in understanding their motivation – a portion of this cultural attraction (the English language) was also seen as being beneficial beyond simply learning about a new culture – thus, illustrating the overlap of categories such as nomadic cosmopolitan and mercenary.

The third and final category identified in the typologies of both Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002) is that of the settler. All of the migrant athletes in our study could be classified as settlers to some extent, as all of them had been in the U.S. for at least two academic semesters. Some of the athletes were current graduate students and might be classified as more advanced settlers given the fact they chose to remain in the U.S. after completing their competitive careers as collegiate athletes. Given that all of the migrant athletes in our study can be classified as settlers to some extent, and given the fact any individual who competes all four years of his or her athletic eligibility at a university is a settler, the category of settler certainly has relevance to understanding the motivation of migrant collegiate athletes. What is more informative, however, is to consider the migrant athletes’ attitudes regarding “settling” in the U.S. and the ways in which these attitudes may have shifted during their time as collegiate athletes.

In the course of interviewing the migrant athletes involved in this study, we found that very few entered into the process of coming to the U.S. with the intent of remaining beyond their college careers. Some individuals indicated they did not come to the U.S. with a specific plan about what they wanted to do after graduation. For example, an individual from Australia described:

I think that when I left [to come to the U.S.] I hadn't sort of decided at the end of it. I think that I kind of left it open. I was like, "this door opened, I had to take the opportunity, and wherever it leads me is where I'm meant to be.

Other individuals, however, described coming to the U.S. with a specific plan of returning to their home countries after receiving their degrees. For instance, an athlete from Brazil described:
My very first year here, I was going to go home [after graduating]. I was going home, I didn't care. I was ready to go. Once I graduated, I was going home. I'm done with this, like I don't want to do this. And now, it's like I want to get a good job and stay.

A common theme across all of the participants in our study was that each of them indicated they hoped to remain in the U.S. for some time after their graduation. Some migrant athletes hoped to pursue graduate school in the U.S. (in fact, some of the participants were currently pursuing master’s degrees), while others hoped to find employment in the country. This trend is notable because few of the participants indicated they initially had a specific plan or desire to stay in the U.S. beyond their graduation. As previously mentioned, some had initial plans to leave the U.S. after graduation, while others planned to “just see what happens.” During the course of their time as collegiate athletes, however, each individual appeared to have his/her plans change or had their lack of a plan shift into a choice to remain in the country. In other words, while the migrant athletes in this study indicated they did not come to the U.S. with plans of being advanced settlers, all of them became or planned to become advanced settlers by remaining in the U.S. beyond the end of their collegiate sporting careers.

In contrast to the category of settlers, Maguire (1999) identifies a category of migrant athletes who become returnees in the global process. Because the participants in our study were currently residing in the United States, none had yet become returnees. However, despite the fact all these individuals intended to or actually had remained in America beyond their collegiate careers, many did feel they may return to their countries of origin some day. Thus, although none of the individuals in our study would be currently classified as returnees, the lure of returning to “home soil” certainly has relevance to understanding the experiences of migrant college athletes.

Two categories included only in the typology of Magee and Sugden (2002), meanwhile, are the exile and the expelled. While no individual in our study migrated because of threats to his/her liberty or life, these athletes did, in a way, face “threats” to their athletic and/or educational careers. Specifically, all of the individuals in our study commented that, in their respective home countries, it would be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to play a sport at a high level while simultaneously attending a university as a full-time student. The system that exists in the U.S., however, allowed them to continue playing their sport at a high level while also working to obtain a university degree. In other words, the athletes in our study were “exiled” or “expelled” from their home countries by the fact that if they wished to both play a sport at a high level and attend a university, they felt they had to come to the U.S. Thus, the categories of exile and expelled provide some insight to understanding the various factors driving migrant athletes to leave their home countries to come to the United States for the purposes of participating in collegiate sports. Because of the similarity of the two categories, we grouped them together under the term exile in our typology, which we believe captures the sense some athletes feel of being forced from their home countries in order to simultaneously compete in sport and study at a university.

The final category included in the typology of Magee and Sugden (2002) is the ambitionist. While we feel Maguire’s (2004) suggestion about ambition overlapping several categories is reasonable, we chose to include ambitionist as a separate category due to the unique ambition that migrant college athletes have to both play their sport at a high level and obtain a university degree. Another theme in the ambitionist category expressed by some individuals in our study was an ambition to move away from home and prove they could “make it on their own.” In other words, some migrant athletes felt that coming to the U.S. was a way for them to
“grow up.” This ambition, as well as the distinctive opportunity provided by the American system to achieve the objective of both competing in sport and obtaining a university degree, is a unique aspect in the motivation of migrant athletes coming to U.S. universities. Finally, a category identified solely in the typology of Maguire (1999) is that of pioneers. Given the examples of pioneers provided by Maguire – the 19th-century Turner movement and the 20th-century YMCA movement – the pioneer category does not appear to have significant relevance to the experiences of the individuals in the current study. In turn, we have not included this category in our typology of migrant collegiate athletes. We do, however, note that the category may be of relevance to someone conducting research on the earliest migrant athletes to participate in U.S. collegiate sport.

In summary, our typology of international migrant athletes in U.S. collegiate sport is illustrated in Figure 1. The overlapping of each category with all other categories represents the idea that, as previously mentioned, the categories are not rigid or mutually exclusive, but rather shade together in different combinations for different individuals. In the final section of this paper, we further analyze our typology in reference to existing research on international migrant athletes in U.S. collegiate sport.

Figure 1 - A Typology of International Migrant College Athletes
**Discussion and Conclusions**

Overall, the primary objectives of this paper were twofold: (a) to provide additional insight regarding the motivational factors that drive migrant athletes to come to the U.S. for the purposes of collegiate sport and (b) make an explicit connection between research on international athletes in U.S. collegiate sport and research in the broader context of sport labor migration. In order to do so, we utilized the existing typologies of migrant athletes developed by Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002) as a conceptual framework for analysis. We share Maguire’s (2004) view that such typologies are but a “symptom of a beginning” that will help to situate further work in the future (p. 480). In concluding this paper, we note instances in which our findings either complement or contradict those of previous studies in key areas while making suggestions for further research on this topic. These comments should be interpreted in light of the limitations arising from the fact that participants in this study attended NCAA Division-I Football Bowl Subdivision institutions, which tend to have stronger financial support, better facilities, and more support personnel than university athletic departments at lower competitive classifications.

In regard to the *nomadic cosmopolitan* category, Maguire (1999) notes that such athletes, “embark on a quest in which they seek the experience of the ‘other’ and indeed of being the ‘other’” (p. 105-106). With respect to the concept of seeking out the opportunity to be the “other,” many athletes, particularly those from England, indicated that they perceived advantages to being the “other” in the United States. For example, an English athlete in our study indicated American students “quite like the English accent.” Similarly, an athlete in Bale’s (1991) study described that being English was somewhat of a “novelty” to American students and that he experienced “positive discrimination” as a result (p. 182). Such “positive discrimination,” however, may not be limited only to English athletes; a Romanian athlete in our study described how many people on her college campus were “intrigued” by the fact she was European. She explained that some individuals, upon finding out she was from Europe, would make comments such as, “that is so cool, tell me more.”

It would certainly be a mistake, however, to think that being an “other” resulted in positive outcomes in all cases. For example, that same athlete from Romania recalled a situation in which she overheard a comment by a student who was upset that “Asians and Europeans were invading the campus.” Chepyator-Thomson (2003), meanwhile, reported that many of the Kenyan runners in her study experienced exclusion from their American teammates and that “American teammates are often unsupportive and view their African teammates with jealousy, treating them as other” (p. 37). Thus, the case of migrant athletes coming to U.S. collegiate sport highlights some of the complexities involved in engagement with a foreign culture. While the current study focused on identifying common themes and patterns in the motivations of migrant athletes in coming to the U.S., future research might further investigate how the experiences of migrant collegiate athletes differ based upon such factors as race, national origin, and gender.

Another item related to the *nomadic cosmopolitan* category as well as the *exile* category is the relative importance of the athletes being attracted by the unique nature of the U.S. collegiate sport system compared to the relative attractiveness of the United States itself. Considering a similar question, Bale (1991) noted, “if athletic scholarships were available in the Soviet Union or China, it would be interesting to see how acceptable they would be, compared with those in America” (p. 104). In our study, some individuals mentioned being attracted specifically to the U.S. (e.g., the Slovakian athlete who talked about wanting to see the America
she had seen in movies), while others were merely attracted by the opportunity to experience a culture different from their own (and perhaps not specifically the culture of the U.S.), while still others appeared to be attracted by the unique system of sport in higher education that just so happens to exist in the U.S. Further research may explore the relative importance of these factors and their implications regarding the experiences of migrant collegiate athletes.

A significant theme found in our research related to the ambitionist and exile categories is that, while the athletes all had a strong ambition to obtain a university education in the U.S., all individuals felt they would have been able to attend universities in their home countries if plans of coming to the U.S. had not materialized. Thus, while obtaining a university degree was important to them, it was generally not the primary driving force behind their motivation to come to the U.S. Rather, they tended to be attracted by the fact the U.S. system offered a unique opportunity to obtain a university degree while continuing to play a sport at a high level. Our findings, however, are somewhat different from those of Chepyator-Thomson (2003), who, in her study of Kenyan runners, suggested “the Kenyan scholar-runners’ chief aim for leaving the continent is the desire to pursue post-secondary education through running, using it as a means to an end” (p. 37). Further, she stated that “for many students it is the only means to obtain a university education as the present postsecondary system in Kenya cannot accommodate the large number of prospective students” (p. 35). Thus, the Kenyan athletes in Chepyator-Thomson’s study appeared to be drawn to the U.S. by the fact it provided them the opportunity to seek a university degree they would otherwise not be able to obtain, rather than the fact the U.S. system allowed them to both work on a degree and compete in sport at the same time. In other words, they were exiled by the fact they could not attain a university education in their home country, rather than by the fact they would need to give up a competitive athletics career if they chose to seek a university degree. Thus, this example illustrates how the categories of exile and ambitionist (as may be the case with all categories) may function somewhat differently depending on one’s background and country of origin. Additional research focusing on comparing the perspectives of migrant college athletes based on country of origin may bring further insight to this dimension of the typology.

A final key theme, which potentially cuts across all categories in the typology, is that all the athletes participating in our study indicated they were pleased with their decision to come to the U.S. and with the specific choice of the university they attended. All agreed that they would not hesitate to offer a strong positive endorsement if they were asked by a prospective recruit about the possibility of coming to the U.S. At the same time, however, many of the individuals in our study suggested that the universities to which international athletes are most commonly recruited are those seen as less desirable to American athletes. The practice of recruiting international athletes (who may be relatively unfamiliar with the U.S. and the American university system) to institutions seen as less attractive to American athletes raises questions of justice and exploitation. This situation is further complicated by the fact many migrant athletes agree to come to a given institution without having visited the campus. Yet, still these individuals were happy with their decisions and would make recommendations for other athletes to follow in their footsteps. The question, thus, arises, how can these migrant athletes be so content at institutions seen as undesirable to many Americans? Is this practice exploitative, in any way, of migrant athletes? Bale (1991) reasoned that international athletes might be “more appreciative of what is provided for them in situations which might be quite modest by American standards” (p. 99). Or perhaps there is a “false consciousness” at work encouraging the athletes
to feel content. Further work from a critical perspective may help shed additional light on these issues.

In addition, the extent to which an individual feels positive about his/her experience certainly bears a strong influence on the extent to which he/she becomes a settler or a returnee. As previously mentioned, although most athletes in our study indicated they did not come to the U.S. with specific plans of remaining settlers beyond their college careers, all, at some point, came to the conclusion that they wanted to remain in the U.S. after completing college. In contrast, Bale (1991) cites a study indicating that 75 percent of migrant college athletes “definitely” or “probably” planned to return home after their collegiate careers. Thus, we suggest further research should focus specifically on the processes involved in migrant college athletes’ decisions about remaining in the U.S. or returning to their countries of origin.

Overall, this paper represents an effort both to better understand the processes involved in individuals’ decisions to migrate to the U.S. for the purposes of collegiate sport as well as to connect this research to the broader body of work in sport labor migration. Our typology represents the idea that the motivation driving migrant college athletes’ decisions to come to the U.S. involves a complex and individually varying combination of factors, which include the desire for a university degree, the desire to play a sport at a high level (while training in good facilities with good coaching), the unique opportunity provided by the U.S. college sport system to simultaneously obtain a university education and compete in a sport at a high level, the desire to achieve a better financial situation for themselves, the desire to experience another culture and interact with others from different cultural backgrounds, the specific desire to experience American culture, the desire to improve English skills, and the desire to “grow up” by getting out on one’s own. It is our hope this typology can serve as a foundation for further research on the processes involved in labor migration in U.S. collegiate sport. While our focus was on identifying common themes and patterns in the participants’ responses, future research might more specifically investigate how migrant collegiate athletes’ experiences differ based upon such factors as gender, race, and national origin. Regardless, it is important that future research on migrant athletes in U.S. collegiate sport continues to make connections to research in the broader context of sport labor migration and research on globalization and sport in general.
References


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