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SCHOOL AS A SOCIAL AGENT FACTOR IN WOMEN'S CAREER

DECISION PARTICIPATION IN SPORT AS A CAREER

ABSTRACT

A career in sports is unique in that it requires a commitment very early in life. This study investigates the factors that influence young sportswomen's decisions to continue participating in sports and launch a professional career. We examine the role of Family support, school support and coach support in the decision of women to continue and participate in sport as a career. We conducted a quantitative study that surveyed 444 young male and female athletes, age 18 and above. The results indicate differences between the genders regarding the role of support from the school in the decision to continue participating in sports. Specifically, support from the school was a more significant factor in the decision to pursue a professional sports career for young women than for young men. Based on our findings, we recommend that policymakers collaborate with schools to support young athletes.

Keywords: Career Decision, School Staff Support, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Considerable research has been conducted about people's career choices and the factors influencing them. However, there are few studies that have investigated the role of support from one's school in such decisions. A career in sports is unique in that it requires a commitment very early in life. The important environmental factors for the child in this period are the family and the school [5][29][30]. While family is important for mental and financial support, the school plays an important role as a socialization agent and in providing equal opportunities for a successful start to careers in general and sports in particular [26]. Nevertheless, in many cases, school appraiser sports' achievement, given the young athlete motivation to promote himself [13][28]. The main objective of the current research is to investigate the significance of support from one's school compared to other factors such as support from one's family and coach for the decision to go into sports as a career. We also investigate whether athletes in the 18–21 age group need different forms of support than those aged 22 and above.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career in Sports

A career is defined as a sequence of encounters and experiences connected with the professional life of a person, comprising a professional path that includes achievements, successes, failures, changes and transitions [3]. In the case of sports, one may define a career as "the complex interaction between mind power and genetic, personal and environmental factors, voluntarily chosen by the individual, and culminating in a climax appearing in one or more sports event" [36].

The Decision to Pursue a Career in Professional Sports

Choosing a career is a complex and important decision that many regard as a part of their fundamental aspirations. Two dimensions influence the choice of career: internal factors (physical and emotional) and external factors (the reality in which the individual lives) [38]. During the last decade, a sports career has emerged worldwide as a widespread and meaningful occupation [25]. Those who choose such careers often begin early in life by gaining skills and experience in a social climate that supports sports activities, such as in the presence of an admired and important figure who acts as a role model. Once people have acquired experience, knowledge and proficiency, they must decide whether to continue in the sport as active participants, abandon sports as a career or become a coach. Making the last choice may involve acquiring additional professional and theoretical skills, which may include enrolling in a course of study and expanding their knowledge to make professional decisions.

It is evident that a successful career in sports depends on two groups of factors: internal, such as ability, practice and excellence, and external such as luck in competitions, financial backing and equipment. These factors play a central role in determining the athlete's career [2].

Factors Supporting Young Athletes

Researchers have explored the factors that influence young athletes' career decisions. For instance, many studies deal with the role of the coach [6], while other studies examine the contribution of the family in encouraging the athletes to continue to engage in sports [6][14][24]. More recently, Gledhill and Harwood (2015)[13] investigated the contribution of the school in this regard. Building on these studies, we focus on the factors that, in our opinion, are particularly important to the 18–21 age group, when young people decide whether to make a career out of sports.

Athletes' Perceptions of the School's Contribution to a Professional Career in Sports

One of the factors that influences young people's ability to function as professional athletes is the amount of support they receive from their schools [26]. Pupils who are ambitious athletes are expected to meet both the academic demands of the school and those of the sports activity in which they participate. The correspondence between these dual demands will influence the degree of their success in functioning and balancing the two worlds. The school plays an essential role in creating a situation that will enable students to successfully contend with and find the balance between these demands, while maintaining their identity as athletes [13][32].

The dual demands of scholar athletes may threaten their ability to advance successfully through the different stages of a professional career, possibly leading to their withdrawing from competitive sports activity. This dual load increases in high school where the pressure of examinations that determine their academic future may prompt teachers to push their students to favor their academic activities at the expense of the investment needed to excel in sports activities [13][28].

Research conducted in schools in the US and England found that a vision shared by all of the socializing agents involved with student athletes creates a supportive environment that helps their holistic development. Such an environment can help them academically and in their sports activities. These agents include the school principal, counselors, teachers, coaches and the athletes' family [13][17].

Shapiro, Grossman, Carter, Martin, Deyton and Hammer (2015)[35] found that high school students turn primarily to their teachers as advisors about careers. Indeed, 40% of girls stated that teachers were their main source of career information, while only 33% of boys did so [34][35]. In

their research, Gledhill and Harwood (2015)[13] stressed that the influence of teachers on the career decisions of their pupils may be an obstacle for young women making choices about a professional sports career. Their study of female soccer players in England determined that teachers thought that girls could not be professional soccer players because there was no structured program for them. This message, which was naturally transmitted to female pupils and to their parents, who tended to support the teacher's approach, prompted these athletes to focus on their studies rather than their sports activities, making their possibility of a professional soccer career much less likely.

Gender differences regarding a professional sports career are evident as early as junior high school. For example, gender-related messages from junior high school teachers influence how their students think about their future careers and their plans for the future [35]. The messages transmitted to young people usually reflect the traditional division of roles, which legitimizes sports activities for boys as part of a rationale that claims that such activities will help them in the future. In contrast, perceptions about girls' futures are not connected with sports activities [10]. As a result, girls tend to be interested in activities that do not include professional sports, which is considered the realm of men [20] Messages from teachers and counselors and the exposure of pupils to the broad variety of careers could make a difference to the perceptions of young people in this regard [35].

Athletes' Perceptions of the Contribution of the Family to their Professional Career

Social influences are amongst the most important factors in predicting behavior connected with sports. Many researchers in this field have concluded that the beliefs, values and criteria for success of significant others, such as parents, can influence the perceptions of athletes and their motivation to engage in sports [33]. Researchers consistently identify the parents as the leading

agents in encouraging their children to take part in sports activities. Significant others, such as parents, play an important role in the development of goals in their children [7][15][16]. When the children continue their involvement in sports, the parents act as role models, provide meaningful encounters, encourage participation in many ways and help interpret experiences for their children [11]. As a result, the children develop confidence in their own abilities, create certain expectations about themselves, and establish value systems associated with sports that are largely based on the influence of their parents. Research in the field of the psychology of sports and physical activity underscores the importance of the family unit as a vital factor in the development of young athletes. An environment that encourages and legitimizes sports activities is likely to contribute to the development of a professional career in this area and promote the talents and capabilities of the child [12]. One of the central roles of the family is to maintain the balance between the heavy demands that engagement in sports activities makes on young athletes and the resources of the young athletes, who are prepared to do everything to succeed in their chosen sport [9].

Parental involvement is key to the initial sports experiences of their children. Typically, they make the initial decision to enroll their children in sports activities and have an important influence on the many positive outcomes of their children's participation in sports. The primary role of the parents of young athletes is to supply emotional and financial support [42]. Adams, Coffee and Lavalley (2015)[1] indicated that athletes' parents play a vital role in supporting youngsters ages 14 to 20 as they move from adolescent sports to adult sports. However, they also noted that the extent of their support changes throughout the lifecycle of athletes [1]. Athletes who regarded the progress in their career as successful reported that their parents offered them more advice about sports and supported them emotionally than athletes who did not progress from one stage to the next in their career [41].

Previous studies that have examined the factors supporting young athletes' careers have indicated that family support is a key factor [5][9]. Further corroboration comes from Muchtar et al. (2013)[31] who documented that athletes noted that early in their careers, their family was very involved in managing their careers, making decisions and having ongoing connections with the professional staff. Some reported that this involvement diminished or ceased once they reached the professional stage. At this point, the family is expected to gradually reduce their professional involvement and allow the athletes to make their own decisions [31].

Athletes' Perceptions of the Contribution of the Coach to their Professional Career

Studies have also established that the coach is an influential factor in athletes' decisions to engage professionally in sports, especially in the younger age groups [22][39]. Furthermore, the degree of their influence is related to the role the coach adopts as a teacher and with the way in which he/she supervises and evaluates his/her athletes, his/her leadership style, his/her competitive and cooperative behavior, and his/her communications and social relationships with the athletes [21]. Finally, supportive coaches can help athletes become established in their chosen sport, persevere enthusiastically and have stable careers [40].

Kenow and Williams (1999)[23] claimed that athletes watch and interpret the overt behavior of the coach, which can lead to changes in their attitudes towards the coach and the sports experience. Indeed, people's perceptions about the behavior of others are more important than the actual behavior itself, and influences feelings towards and interactions with the other [23]. Carron and Bennet (1977)[8] suggested that in matching the coach and the athletes it is not only necessary to consider the personality and the behavior of the coach, but also to determine whether the athletes are interested in these attributes in their coach. Athletes who identify more with their coach sensed less negative cognitive and somatic influence as a result of the coach's behavior during games and

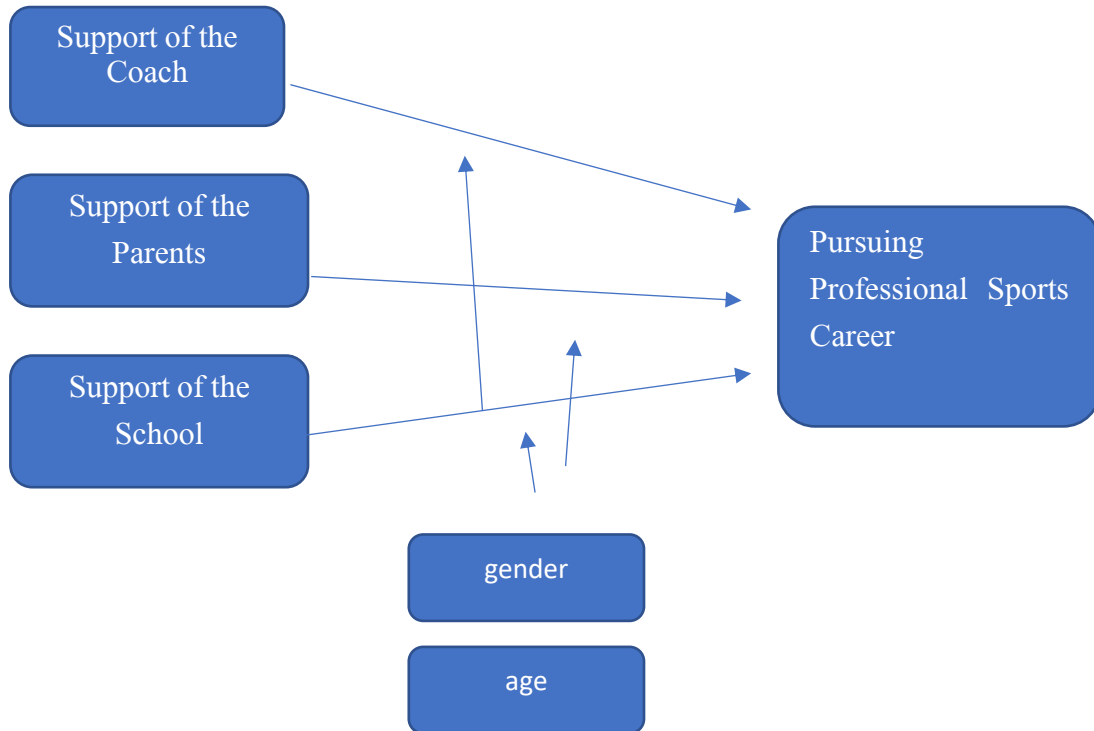
competitions [29][30]. In addition, those who identify with their coach feel that they received more support from the coach and regarded him/her as better able to communicate. In addition, the behavior of the coach influences the quality of life and level of anxiety of the athletes, which can affect their performance [27].

RESERCH QUESTIONS

Does support from a student’s school have as strong an influence on his/her decision regarding a professional career in sports as other external factors such as support from family or a coach?

1. Are there gender and age differences in athletes' perceptions of the importance of the support of the school in their decision about pursuing a professional career in sports?

THE RESERCH MODEL



RESERCH METHOD

Data Collection

The data for the research were collected during the months of June – September 2017 in Israel. Students conducting the study went to sports centers, professional sports unions and local competitions and distributed questionnaires amongst athletes aged 18 and above. The research participants were active athletes, past athletes and coaches. The questionnaire was about the factors influencing their decision to pursue a career in sports.

In order to avoid the need to obtain parental authorization for participation in the research, we focused on athletes over the age of 18, whom the Helsinki Accord defines as adults. It is important to note that the sample is not representative of the gender composition of the Israeli sports world. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics [19], at the end of 2016 there were 104,732 active athletes in Israel, of whom 20.5% were women.

Research Tool

To conduct the study, we distributed a questionnaire to the participants. The first part asked about their age and gender. The second part contained questions related to their perceptions of the support they received from their coach about pursuing a professional career in sports. The third part asked them about the support they received from their parents. The fourth part dealt with the support they received from the school and the fifth part comprised questions regarding the support they received from the coach.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was the decision to pursue a professional career in sports. We measured it using the responses of the athletes to the questions about their perceptions regarding pursuing such a career. Cronbach's alpha indicated that the internal consistency was 0.665.

Independent Variables

Our study contained three independent variables related to the athletes' perceptions of the influence of the support of the coach, their family and their school on their decision to pursue a professional career in sports. Measurements of these three variables using Cronbach's alphas indicated that the internal consistencies were 0.839, 0.834 and 0.618, respectively.

Control Variables

Our two control variables were age and gender.

Sample

Our sample consisted of two groups: athletes ages 18-21, most of whom were regarded as outstanding, active athletes, and those ages 22 and above. The sample included 248 women (56%) and 196 men (44%). Of these, 125 were in the 18-21 age group – 74 women (59%) and 51 men (41%). In the age group of 22 and above there were 174 women (54.5%) and 145 men (45.5%).

Data Analysis Methods

We used SPSS software to analyze the findings. We calculated the average and distribution indices and conducted Pearson and stepwise regression tests. The results appear in Table 1.

RESULTS

Table 1 – Correlations among the variables by age

Variable	Age	N	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Perceptions of the Coach	18-21	126	4.06	0.74			
	>22	321	3.98	0.73			
2. Family Support	18-21	126	3.45	0.84	0.175		
	>22	322	3.15	0.96	0.065		
3. School Support	18-21	126	2.65	1.08	0.095	0.203*	
	>22	322	2.43	1.06	0.021	0.185**	
4. Career Decision	18-21	126	2.53	0.92	0.217**	0.389**	0.233**
	>22	322	3.2	0.95	0.290**	0.234**	0.09

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 1 indicates that in the 18-21 age group family support ($r=0.389$, $p < 0.01$) contributes significantly to the decision to pursue a professional career in sports. In addition, the support of the coach ($r=0.271$, $p < 0.01$) and the support of the school ($r=0.233$, $p < 0.01$) contribute positively to this decision. In the age group 22 and above, the support of the coach ($r=0.290$, $p < 0.01$) and of the family ($r=0.234$, $p < 0.01$) are significant. However, the support of the school plays no role in this decision.

Table 2 – Regression analysis predicting the decision to pursue a career in professional sports based on the perceived support of the coach, the family, and the school according to the age and gender of the athletes

Respondents & Predictors		R^2_{change}	β	t	p	
Male	<age 21	First Step				
		Family	.163	.403	3.086	.003
		Second Step				
		Family		.420	3.327	.002
		Coach	0.73	.272	2.150	.037
R^2		.236				
Male	>age 22	First Step				
		Coach	.108	.328	4.141	.000
		Second Step				
		Family		.179	2.277	.024
		Coach	.031	.344	4.387	.000
R^2		.139				
Female	<age 21	First Step				
		Family	.160	.400	3.707	.000
		Second Step				
		Family		.304	2.706	.009
		School	.062	.266	3.373	.020
R^2		.222				
Female	>age 22	First Step				
		Family	.107	.327	4.518	.000
		Second Step				
		Family		.290	4.033	.000
		Coach	.039	.202	2.807	.006
R^2		.146				

The results of the regression analysis presented in Table 2 show that for men ages 18-21, family support contributes 16.3% of the explained variance in the decision to pursue a professional

career in sports. The perceived support of the coach adds a further 7.3% to the explained variance. Conversely, for men 22 years old and above, the perceived support of the coach accounts for 10.8% of the explained variance in this decision. The perceived support of the family adds a further 3.1% to the explained variance.

For women ages 18-21, family contributes 16.0% of the explained variance in the decision to pursue a professional career in sports. For women 22 years old and above, support from the family contributes 10.7% of the explained variance, and that of the coach adds a further 3.9% to the explained variance. However, the major difference between the genders appears with regard to the contribution of support from the school, which is a positive factor for women in the 18-21 age group, but not for men. Indeed, for the latter support from the coach appears most important, followed by support from the family. Finally, support from the school plays no role in the decision of those 22 years old and older in their decision about pursuing a career in sports, regardless of their gender.

DISCUSSION

Our investigation revealed that support from family, coaches and school all influence young people's decisions about pursuing a career in professional sports. However, our findings indicated that the impact of these factors varies depending on one's gender and age. We posited that support from one's school might play a role in the decision. We found that while such support does have an influence, its impact is stronger for young women than young men. Furthermore, while support from school does play a role in the decision for young women, it is not the main factor.

The contribution of support from the school to the decision to pursue a career in professional sports

We posited that support from the school would have a stronger impact on the decision of women athletes in the 18-21 age group to pursue a career in professional sports than it would for their male counterparts. Indeed, our findings indicate that the support of the school does have a moderate impact on this decision for those 18-21 ($r=0.233^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, such support has no effect on the older group. This finding accords with many other studies documenting the contribution of the school to athletes' careers [13][26][32]. Such support helps budding athletes balance the demands of schoolwork and sports activities [13][28]. However, by age 22, most of those pursuing a career in professional sports are no longer involved in educational pursuits. Therefore, support from school is no longer a relevant issue [5].

Indeed, the one area in which the support of the school has an effect is for young women in the 18-21 age group. As Table 2 illustrates, it accounts for 6% of the explained variance between genders. This finding can be attributed to the role of the messages transmitted by the teachers and the counselors to the female athletes, and their exposure to the career opportunities available to them [37]. As these messages become more egalitarian, and women are encouraged to seek occupations that are not defined as complying with their "traditional" role, we may see changes in how young women regard sports activities and the possibility of pursuing a career in them [13][35]. Hijaz, Tatar and Gati (2004)[18] and Bacanlı (2016)[4] documented that schools offer more support to boys than to girls thinking about pursuing a career in professional sports. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that increasing such support for young women might have a positive effect on their choices even after they have completed their schooling.

CONCLUSIOS

The contribution of the research

This study highlights the importance of support from young female athletes' schools for their decision to pursue a career in professional sports. To date, most research has focused on support from the school for young athletes in general or male athletes in particular [13][17][28]. However, our results indicate that such support is also significant for decisions that young women ages 18-21 make about becoming professional athletes. This finding is important because the school is a socializing agent and has an influence on changing gender stereotypes [20]. Based on our findings, we can conclude that support for young female athletes from their schools may likely lead to increasing the presence of women in a variety of sports activities at the professional level [10][35].

Limitations

This research has several limitations. The first limitation relates to the age of our participants. Due to legal and ethical concerns, we could not include participants under the age of 18. Had we conducted the survey with younger participants, we might have obtained different results. Furthermore, the ratio between the two age groups in the sample is not equal, which might impair statistical significance. Second, we conducted the research in one nation whose cultural values regarding careers and occupational roles are relatively conservative. It is important to extend the research to other cultures and nations. Finally, we did not investigate the effect of the variables on different sports. It is possible that athletes in different sports and those involved in individual sports rather than group sports might have different responses to support from their schools.

Theoretical recommendations

We recommend extending our findings by conducting comprehensive research on the influence of the schools' staff on young athletes. One study that is needed is determining how the school staff can create a climate that supports the choice of a career role without traditional influences. Cross-cultural research on the impact of the school climate on young athletes would be very beneficial.

Practical Recommendations

We have several recommendations for policymakers. First, decision-makers should recognize the importance of the contribution of the school to decisions that young female athletes make about their future in professional sports. Recognizing the impact that traditional gender definitions have on such decisions should prompt the adoption of gender-neutral curricula. On the national level, the Ministry of Education should design policies that include curricula that focus on managing social expectations regarding gender roles, breaking the boundaries of existing norms in relation to women's participation in sports activities in general, and choosing sports careers in particular [37]. Such a policy, implemented through practical tools, might increase the ratio of women who choose to pursue a professional career in sports. On the school level, in its role as the major socializing agent for young people, the staff should establish an infrastructure that promotes young athletes' choices about a career in professional sports.

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