Education for Social Transformation

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Social Mobility in Sports: A Source of Motivation for Budding Athletes

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Abstract

Social mobility in sports is a natural phenomenon. Sports leaders and media representatives have argued that sports provides a readily assessible avenue for upward mobility, especially for those from middle or lower class background. This paper examined the meaning of upward and downward movements in sporting career, and the consequences of these movements. It equally considered the possible horizontal movements and some constraints to such movements. It concludes that, since downward movement is an unpleasant phenomenon, preparations should be made towards preventing its occurrence. It was recommended that athletes must acquire formal education as they pursue their sporting career so as to be able to consolidate on their social and economic gains after their exit from active sports.

Introduction

The term social mobility refers to any movement of individuals, families or groups between different sectors of the society (Benton, 1994). *New Webster's Dictionary*, (1980) defined it as

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movement of individuals from one social group to another social group. Thus, it includes movement from one occupation to another or from one region of a country to another.

Taking occupational preferences into account helps to explain why some individuals remain within their parents' social class, while others experience upward or downward mobility. It may also explain why some individuals who originate from the working class remain in the working class while others experience upward mobility especially when there is no difference in their academic aptitude.

How sports facilitate social mobility

The motivation to move upward is influenced by two factors. The first one is from the societal point of view, where any expansion in the number of roles available at one rank, especially if combined with a decline in numbers at lower rank, leads to upward mobility. For example, the expansion of the Nigerian professional football league with the inclusion of the premier league has created new positions and therefore opportunities to move from the minor league to the major leagues.

If expansion in the number of rank does not occur, any upward mobility must be accompanied by an exchange process in which someone moves down within the system (e.g. to a minor league team) or moves out (e.g. retires). This inter-exchange is most likely to occur in a highly competitive racket.

Literature on occupational preferences reveal that they are formed between ages 14 and 18, when individuals' attitudes and behaviours influence career choices (Rojewski and Yang, 1997). It is during the adolescence that important life-long decisions are made in regards to occupation. Young people learn to prefer one job over another based on the information they are exposed to (Cook, Church, Ajanaku, Kim and Cohen,

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1996). This mobility can occur between generations (the son or daughter improves on the father's status) or during the career of a specific individual.

In sports, depending on specific roles or specific situations, both modes of mobility may operate either independently or in combination. However, it is not clear whether structure of inequality greatly limits the degree to which contest mobility actually occurs. Although systematic evidence is lacking for most of the hypothesized mobility mechanisms, a few studies have attempted to examine the process as it operates in the sports system.

Loy, McPherson and Kenyon (1988), affirmed that there are at least four ways in which active sport participation can facilitate upward movement. These are:

- The early development of sports' skills may facilitate recruitment and entrance directly into professional sports.
- Involvement in sports may lead to receiving an athletic scholarship which may directly or indirectly enhance educational attainment.
- Participation in sports may lead to "occupational sponsorship" in which top athletes are given preference in hiring or promotion.
- Involvement in sports may result in learning attitudes and behaviour patterns (e.g. achievement, orientation, leadership traits) considered important in the occupational world.

Inequality of opportunity appears to exist among individuals with low level educational qualifications and appears not to exist among individuals with higher level educational qualifications (Hout 1988, Guzzo 2002, 2003). In other words,

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social origin affects one's social destination, for example, when an individual possesses higher level educational qualifications, such as a degree. For instance, many Nigerian athletes have excelled at international sports competitions. Many times, we only measure the material achievement of these stars and fail to follow up the athlete's life style and status after retirement. Many athletes that have not been successful in their career are not recognized. People tend to ignore the many cases in which success have not characterized the athlete's career. In addition, there have been reports about star athletes rising from an impoverished background to attain elite status in professional sports. Notable among them are soccer stars like Kanu Nwankwo, Austin Okocha, Obafemi Martins, Chioma Ajunwa and others like Falilat Ogunkoya have also excelled in track and field.

This analysis indicates that social and economic gains made by athletes during the playing career are often lost soon after retirement. One reason is that most of these athletes have not reached an educational level that would permit them to function outside the sports system. Only few of the top athletes that have represented Nigeria at international competitions in the past are still relevant today. This is due to the fact that many did not acquire formal education and had their careers on a note of downward mobility.

The greater the level of perception by a person that he or she is capable of success in educational and occupational terms the more likely he or she will succeed. (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Capara and Pastorelli, 2001). Thus, the greater the self-confidence, the higher the occupational aspirations and the commitment to the aspirations.

Literature on the social mobility of athletes suggests that while there is an upward mobility during the playing career, the achieved status often is not permanent (Bandura et al, 2001). This status reversal seems to occur for two reasons. First, these

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athletes have not attained a level of education sufficient enough to permit them to move horizontally into another career at about the same prestige level. Eitzen, (2004) noted that exiting a sports career can be relatively smooth or difficult. Some athletes have planned ahead, preparing for other careers either in sports or some non- sport occupation. Others have not prepared for this abrupt change.

Frank, (2002) equally stated that, frequently, athletes are so caught up in the excitement of their career and on developing the necessary skills and techniques to succeed in their sports career, that they do not anticipate what may occur when their sports career ends. Although, being involved in sports or athletics during high school and college years may enhance mobility, unless a college degree is earned or some level of education is completed, the individual lacks the necessary skills to compete with peers in the labour force outside sports. However, if they graduate from college they are likely to be successful in their chosen career.

Ambitious, dedicated, well-paid working individuals, regardless of social origin, can achieve success and ascend in the social hierarchy, attaining high status and material rewards, while those who do not move upward simply might not have worked hard enough.

A second factor resulting in subsequent downward mobility may be the athlete's inability to manage his or her financial affairs. While this situation has prevailed in the past, it may be less likely with current changes in the sports world as athletes now hire management consultants and lawyers to ensure that their financial gains will be intact at the end of their playing career.

According to Frank (2002), the termination of sports career can be easier or harder depending on the athlete's preparation for termination and how it is handled by those around him or

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her. She further stressed that if the athlete has engaged in retirement planning, which includes developing plans for another career for future financial stability, and handling other people's reactions then the termination of a sports career occurs more smoothly. Many athletes now become actively involved in the day-to-day management of their financial affairs so that they acquire business skills that can be utilized in a post-playing career.

Conclusion

Sports provides an avenue for upward social mobility. Comparing athletes on the basis of their educational and socio-economic status with non-athletes or peer groups is not enough. This has made it impossible to determine whether mobility occurred due to success in sports or because a particular person improved his/her socio-economic status through social change.

Mobility through sport for the lowest classes and status groups may in fact stop at the comfortable level of the middle class. In this sense, the structure of rewards is not so much a ladder on which individuals may continue to climb but rather a tree wherein a specific climb spells the absolute extent of upper travel.

Recommendations

In order to help athletes to be socially relevant, whether they are still in active sports or not, the following recommendations will assist in making them consolidate on the social and economic gains made during their sporting career.

- Athletes must be encouraged to acquire formal education simultaneously with their sporting career. This will prepare them for alternative careers after retirement.

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- Career planning programme must be incorporated in the athletes' training programme from the onset. Athletes must be made to realize that it is certain they will retire one day. This will assist them in preparing them for a sport or non- sport occupation.
- Sports administrators, managers and sports psychologists should be involved in helping the athletes plan for investment to make them be in control of their financial affairs.
- Athletes should hire sports psychologists that will personally attend to their career plan. The psychologists will develop in them the necessary skills needed for their post-playing career.
- Sports administrators, coaches and sports psychologists should play supportive roles, by taking athletes through counseling sessions and making them realize that career termination or mobility in sports is a normal experience which they cannot avoid

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