ABSTRACT

THE PROMISE OF PROFESSIONAL PLAY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DRAFTED HOCKEY PLAYERS

by Ryan C. Graham

This study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of hockey players who have been drafted by a professional organization while in college. Participants consisted of five drafted college hockey players representing five Division I NCAA hockey programs. The players participated in semi-structured interviews during which they shared their personal experiences while in college. Four overarching themes emerged from the interviews. These themes and the participants’ experiences are discussed at length. Additionally, participants’ experiences are compared and contrasted to findings in contemporary literature focusing on the student-athlete population. Limitations as well as potential directions for future research are also addressed.
THE PROMISE OF PROFESSIONAL PLAY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DRAFTED HOCKEY PLAYERS

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by
Ryan C. Graham
Miami University
Oxford, OH
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Advisor _____________________________
Robin S. Vealey, PhD

Reader ______________________________
Peter M. Magolda, PhD

Reader ______________________________
John A. Ward, PhD
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The Promise of Professional Play:
A Qualitative Study of Drafted College Hockey Players

On June 12, 2009 the Pittsburg Penguins defeated the Detroit Red Wings to clinch the Stanley Cup. One day shy of exactly three years later, the Los Angeles Kings capped off their improbable playoff run by defeating the New Jersey Devils and claiming The Cup on June 11, 2012. The common denominator between these two cup victories was the collective effort, the blood, sweat and tears of 23 men culminating in the ultimate prize. A lesser known common denominator was Rob Scuderi. In game six of the 2009 Stanley Cup Finals the Penguins were on the brink of elimination. In the closing seconds of the game with a tenuous one goal lead the Penguins were reeling in their own zone after a sustained offensive onslaught by the Red Wings. At one point their goaltender made a save that pulled him out of the net, but a rebound bounced right onto the stick of a Red Wing forward. With the puck heading into the empty net Scuderi was able to get his stick on the puck and deflect it, but right back onto the stick of the same Red Wing forward. Two more attempts at the empty net found Scuderi’s skate before the Penguins were able to clear the puck and preserve their one goal lead forcing a game seven where they were able to clinch the series. Fast forward to game six of the 2012 Stanley Cup Finals to find the Los Angeles Kings team reeling after dropping two straight games to the New Jersey Devils who entered the game with all the momentum. Early in the first period Scuderi was protecting a puck against the boards when he drew a boarding penalty resulting in a five minute power-play for his team. The Kings scored three goals during this power-play to set up a route of the Devils, and the end of the series. For his heroics Scuderi was rewarded with the opportunity to hoist hockey’s most coveted prize, hold it high above his head, and take the iconic victory lap around the ice. Scuderi enjoyed this sweet, coveted reward twice in three years.

Before Rob Scuderi was a two time Stanley Cup champion, however, he was a college hockey player attending Boston College from 1997-2001. He was drafted in the 5th round, 134th overall in the 1998 NHL entry draft. Every year dozens of young men who are drafted by NHL teams choose to attend college, and play college hockey as the next step of their development. For the 2012-2013 school year there are 186 college hockey players who have been drafted by an NHL organization competing in the NCAA (www.collegehockeynews.com). It is likely that each of these 186 young men have ambitions to move on to the NHL and have stories that mirror Rob Scuderi’s.
College students are faced with a unique situation of attempting to attend to numerous competing responsibilities, desires, and relationships while simultaneously making choices that will affect the rest of their lives, armed with little more than inexperience and enthusiasm. Add to this the extreme time commitment necessary to compete in high level athletics, the inimitable pressures associated with competition, and the romanticized lure of fame, fortune, and professional sports and the experiences of student-athletes can begin to be taken in context. Of course, for the overwhelming majority of student-athletes, they are no closer to professional sports than when they were daydreaming in their backyards as children. There are, however, an exceptionally talented, well-equipped few, such as the aforementioned 186, that are within reach of the pros. With such an incredible opportunity in the forefront of their minds that may be constantly influencing their perspective, college and all that comes with it may be a totally different experience for these individuals.

A cursory examination of historical and contemporary literature reveals that the idea of student-athletes differing from the general student population in terms of their experiences is both well-founded and extensively supported. Chances are, for the majority of student-athletes, participation in sport has been a substantial influence for the majority of their lives. From influencing how they view themselves and who they choose as friends, to choosing what college they are going to attend and how they might pay for it, sport is often one of the foundations on which student-athletes base their decisions.

Although their sport participation is a consistent and powerful influence on their decisions and behaviors, it does not ensure that athletes will make responsible, thoughtful choices. Research has shown that many of the proclivities of student-athletes can be detrimental to their sport participation and overall success in college. For example, athletes have been found to participate in higher instances of heavy episodic or binge drinking than non-athletes (Martens, Dams-O’Connor, & Beck, 2006) as well as risky sexual activities (Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, Hendershot, & Larimer, 2007).

Although findings such as the aforementioned are important in understanding student-athletes’ college experiences, it should not be implied that athletes vary from non-athletes solely on risk-taking or destructive behavior. Research has supported myriad differences between athletes and non-athletes, many benign or favorable of athletes. This research should be utilized when attempting to understand the holistic experiences of student-athletes. In order to understand
the holistic experience of the athlete, it is crucial to acknowledge the multiple roles they assume and the interaction that each has on the other. While it is impossible to even acknowledge every role an individual fills, let alone gain an in-depth knowledge of them (not even the individual is cognizant of every role or their impact), there are common roles that are often filled. These individuals can be understood as athletes, students and social beings. Understanding the individuals’ sport and academic performance, social interaction, and overall well-being, as well as the interaction each has on the other, would be a good foundation for understanding their holistic experience.

**My Research Question**

The existing literature is primarily focused on how student-athletes differ from their non-athlete peers. Researchers vary on the emphasis they place on understanding individual differences between athletes. Many of the generalizations made about athletes from the research are helpful in understanding student-athletes as a culture, but do very little to offer even a superficial understanding of a student-athlete as an individual. I am seeking to gain a deeper understanding of student-athletes as individuals as well as their unique experiences in college. The specific research question of interest in this study is: what are the experiences of college hockey players who have been selected in the NHL draft while in college? I am especially interested in gaining a deeper understanding of how the individuals’ experiences of this phenomenon impact their sport and academic performance, social experiences, and well-being.

The participants represent a number of prestigious hockey programs that consistently include top college hockey players. A number of hockey players from these universities have been selected as draft picks by NHL organizations either prior to, or during their college career. These players are held in high regard by the university community, NCAA hockey, as well as various professional organizations. Attending college under these circumstances, along with the omnipresent thoughts of expected future success looming over them, undoubtedly leads to incredibly unique experiences for these athletes. There are countless ways in which their expectations to move on to professional hockey may influence every facet of their lives. Based on the uniqueness of their situation, there are a number of intriguing questions that may allow for a deeper understanding of these players’ perceptions of their lives in general, and their experiences while in college specifically. Do these athletes consider themselves college students or professional hockey players making a brief stop at the college level? Is getting an education a
priority for these athletes? How much pressure do they feel to perform well on the ice as well as in the classroom based on their drafted status? Are these individuals likely to change the way they behave both on and off the ice based upon their drafted status? What are their thoughts and feelings associated with their decision to play at the college level rather than alternative developmental leagues? Where do they see themselves in five years, in ten years, and is there a difference between where they would ideally be and where they realistically expect to be?

To attempt to gain some measure of perspective on the context within which these athletes are living, a cursory examination of some numbers is helpful. A player selected in the NHL Entry Draft is one of just over 200 selected annually from around the world (www.nhl.com). Simply being selected in the draft is not a guarantee of having a career in the NHL, but it almost guarantees the opportunity to play professional hockey at some level, and a legitimate shot at becoming a fulltime NHL player. If a player is selected in the first round of the draft, then their chances of having a career in the NHL rise dramatically. Of first round picks between 2001 and 2005, 78% went on to play at least 100 games in the NHL (nhl.com). A large percentage of these players actually went on to play hundreds of games, and become top stars in the league. For every player drafted, regardless of NHL status, there is great incentive to play professionally. A drafted player can expect to be offered either a one-way or two-way contract from the NHL organization that drafted them. A one-way contract, which is rare and generally reserved for players with the highest potential, ensures that the player makes the same salary whether they play in the NHL or the AHL. The more common two-way contract offers players one salary rate for playing in the NHL and a lower salary for playing in the AHL (www.totalsportsmgmt.com). The league minimum salary for a player in the NHL for the 2011-2012 season is $525,000 (www.nhl.com). A typical salary for an entry level player in the AHL with good potential to move up is $65,000. The players are paid based on a daily rate that is determined based on a 192 day season. This means that for a player earning the league minimum, every day they are with the NHL club they are earning $2,734.37. For every day they are with the AHL club they earn $338.54 based on the $65,000 salary. Depending on the potential of the player and the skill with which their agent structured the deal, an entry level player can make up to $850,000 through their first three seasons in the NHL. After three seasons the entry level contract is up and the player can make as much as the team values their worth. It is not
uncommon for highly valued players in the NHL to earn between two and ten million dollars a season without even considering endorsements and incentive bonuses.

With the athlete surely aware of such potential earnings, not to mention near celebrity status that goes with professional athletics, it is likely that they will approach life with a unique perspective. Some of the players were drafted by an NHL organization before even deciding to attend college, let alone select which college to attend. These eighteen year old young men are offered the promise of professional hockey, an offer that certainly weighs on every subsequent decision they make. What made these players decide to attend college rather than play junior hockey or attempt to go straight to the pros? What was their reasoning for deciding to attend the college they did? The implications of their particular situations are nearly limitless in terms of how they might influence the athletes in their various roles. This study hopes to gain an in-depth, sincere understanding of the myriad factors that contribute to shaping these individuals’ lives.

**Research Approach**

A great deal of useful knowledge has emerged in the field of college athletes’ experiences based on valuable quantitative research that has been conducted. Such research has produced convincing explanations of college athletes on various levels. Generalizations can be made regarding differences between college student-athletes and non-athletes, athletes in solo sports and athletes in team sports, athletes in contact sports and athletes in non-contact sports, and many other variables. These types of generalizations are hugely beneficial in building a foundational knowledge base, but in order to build upon that foundation, qualitative methods can be an effective tool. Qualitative methods allow for an in-depth and thorough examination and description of information in a more holistic manner. Rather than reducing information to specific, often isolated variables, qualitative research is based on open and unrestricted description provided in the words of the participants. With a qualitative approach, rather than being represented by a score or set of scores on selected measures, the participant is represented by their own thoughts, feelings, and interpretations, and an in-depth understanding can be accomplished.

One popular approach to conducting qualitative research is the phenomenological research approach. Researchers utilizing a phenomenological approach seek to understand the meaning that their participants place on given events or phenomena (Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2009). The emphasis of such an approach is on the experiences of the participants and their
perceptions of these experiences. Phenomenological approaches do not rely on set theories or ideas to interpret data, rather an inductive approach is employed where the data is used to build a knowledge base (Pringle, Hendry, McLafferty, 2011). The main goal of this type of approach is to understand the unique worldview of the individual experiencing the event, phenomenon or experience of interest.

Method

Participants

The present study consists of 5 ice hockey players from 5 highly competitive NCAA Division I programs who have been selected by a professional organization in the NHL Entry Draft. The participants vary in age between 18 and 23 years, and in classification of year in school from Freshman to Seniors. Participants also vary on round in the draft in which they were selected. The participants have diverse backgrounds in terms of hockey experience, leagues competed in prior to entering the university, geographic locations and even what country they hail from.

Procedure

After receiving approval to proceed from the Institutional Review Board, I contacted the eligible players via e-mail, gave them an overview of the proposed study, and a description of what their participation would entail. E-mail was utilized as the initial communication media as it was least likely to connote any type of pressure to participate further, and also allowed the athletes their own timeframe for consideration. The players that expressed interest in learning more were provided with specifics regarding the study and their involvement, and their preliminary consent to participate was sought. At this point the players had a basic understanding of what participation might entail and were assured that their agreement to proceed in no way prohibited them from discontinuing their participation at any point.

Consenting participants were contacted via the method of their choosing to set up a time and place that we could meet when a face to face interview was possible. These participants were given the opportunity to choose the time and location of the interview. For the interviews that could not be conducted face to face, I solicited the participant’s preference for method of interviewing. The viable methods were via telephone, or video chat software. Once the participant’s preference was obtained I gathered the necessary information for conducting the interview via the agreed upon media, and a specific time was set. Upon meeting for the interview
(either in person, on the telephone or video chat), I provided the participant with a more in-depth explanation of the study. I provided an informed consent form for face to face interviews, and had the informed consent form filled out prior to contact via an electronic signature for interviews over the phone or video chat. I then reminded the participant that their consent to continue participation in no way prohibited them from discontinuing at any point for any reason, without penalty. One interview was conducted face to face, another via video chat, and the remaining three over the telephone.

Next, I initiated conversation with the participant with the aim of building rapport and establishing some degree of connection before beginning the interview. Interview questions were then posed to the participant. I posed the questions in a manner that allowed the participant to guide the interview towards whatever content they believed to be important. I encouraged the participant to provide as much or as little depth or emphasis as they saw fit when responding to questions. Follow-up questions were utilized when I felt it necessary to expound on specific content or reiterate a question that was not fully answered. I used a general prompt initially, in an effort to allow for free-flowing transmission of information with little to no influence from me. The subsequent interview questions were open-ended in form and open to interpretation as the participant saw fit, as is consistent with the general interview guide approach to qualitative data gathering (Patton, 2002). Following the interview, the participant was debriefed, thanked for their participation, and encouraged to contact me should any questions arise. The interviews ranged from 35 to 50 minutes in length.

Each interview session was audio recorded in its entirety using digital audio recording equipment. From this audio recording, I created full transcripts for each individual participant’s interview session. After transferring audible interview media to written transcript I deleted the audio recording. Each written transcript was coded and any evidence of the identity of the specific athlete was removed to ensure anonymity. Information provided by the participant that could be reasonably expected to reveal their identity relative to the other participants was also withheld from analysis and inclusion in final results. Any mention of their specific draft situation such as the round in which they were drafted, or the NHL organization that selected them was withheld. Similarly, any mention of their age, year in school, or any information that points to their particular school was withheld. Given the extremely small size and uniqueness of the population of drafted college hockey players, it was important to withhold any potential
identifiers so as to ensure anonymity to the best of my ability. It is very possible that any combination of information containing potential identifiers, aforementioned or otherwise, would have been unique to that one particular individual. With this in mind, I erred on the side of caution relating to what information to withhold.

I read through the interview transcripts in their entirety, multiple times, in order to get a general idea of the content before attempting to analyze them. After reading through them for a general understanding, I sorted through the transcripts attempting to identify themes within the discussion. I accomplished this by selecting statements that were particularly significant in understanding the participants’ experiences.

**Measures**

I developed a semi-structured interview guide as a prompt for conducting an open-ended discussion with each participant. The interview guide contained questions to foster discussion, but was not adhered to strictly in terms of order of questions, amount of time or emphasis dedicated to each question or limiting questions to those included in the guide. Questions were open-ended in nature and allowed the athlete to interpret and respond to them in any manner that they were inclined. Follow-up questions were employed when attempting to expound on an answer or reiterate a question. Examples of sample questions from the interview guide are provided in Appendix B.

**Role of the Researcher**

Unlike research utilizing quantitative methods where the researcher’s main initiative is to be an unobtrusive observer who has no effect on the participants or the data, qualitative methods place the researcher in a much different role. Many qualitative researchers insist that their role is as the data collecting tool. In this sense, the impact of the researcher, and the relationships forged with participants are essential to the final product. The researcher’s ability to be clear about their impact, both with themselves and with readers, is essential to produce a quality product. Bracketing has been an accepted standard for achieving such clarity, but as defined, bracketing seems insufficient for this task. Bracketing is when “investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Bracketing out experiences is insufficient because it is based on the assumption that an individual is capable of setting aside their experiences, which short of a type
of memory removal seems to be a disingenuous assumption. As Creswell (2007) astutely observed:

How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research. All writing is “positioned” and within a stance. All researchers shape the writing that emerges, and qualitative researchers need to accept this interpretation and be open about it in their writings. (p. 179)

Moreover, I would add that the way we interact with participants is a reflection of the aforementioned influences, as well as how we write. My personal perspective, which is the essence of Creswell’s statement, is that qualitative researchers have a responsibility to be as transparent as possible, with themselves and readers regarding their “stance” rather than feign attempts at approaching objectivity such as is implied with bracketing. As is such, I have attempted to provide readers with insight into the lens through which my experiences, with participants and this research study in general, have been filtered. Such instances of inserting my lens and disseminating my experiences are found throughout this write-up wherever I felt my perspective was likely to influence interactions, analyses or the final product.

**Analysis**

I analyzed the responses of the participants, identified themes within each participant’s responses and across individual participants. I utilized the themes to gain an understanding of how the participants experience college in the context of their academic and athletic performance, social interactions, and well-being. An overall understanding of the participants’ experiences while in college was gained by understanding their experiences in the various roles they fill, the interaction of each, and how they all contribute to the overall experience. Themes were compared across individuals to identify any common experiences or beliefs.

Each interview session was transcribed in its entirety. I then thoroughly analyzed the transcriptions of each interview session. I analyzed and coded the data provided from the interview sessions in an inductive manner, with the intention of accurately representing the lived experiences of the individuals, consistent with the aim of phenomenological analysis (Patton, 2002). Firstly, I identified significant statements from each participant’s responses, then grouped the statements based on similarity. Then, I identified themes within each interview transcript based on the significant statements. I repeated this process for each interview then identified
themes that appeared consistently across individuals. I combined themes that seemed redundant or parallel. Lastly, I utilized the themes in an attempt to provide a rich description of the experiences of the individual participants through a combination of my personal analyses and their own words.

**Findings**

From the transcribed interviews I extracted 148 meaningful statements that I proceeded to group into 4 overarching themes.

**Theme 1: Hockey is Top Priority**

*Getting an education is important, but hockey is the top priority*

It was obvious that every participant considered having the opportunity to get an education to be very beneficial, but it was viewed as a nice contingency plan. One participant expressed this sentiment; stating, “If hockey doesn’t work out for me then I will hopefully be able to get a very good job because of the education.” Whenever priorities were addressed, there was little ambiguity surrounding the belief that hockey was of the utmost importance as is evidenced by one participant explaining, “In terms of prioritizing I think that in cases where the two overlap hockey is prioritized.” In instances when education was mentioned as a priority it was noted that the team kept track of grades or that grades had to be kept up to ensure eligibility to participate in hockey.

Although the participants held the fervent belief that hockey took precedence over getting an education, they also had an undeniable appreciation for their scholastic opportunities. A cyclical relationship emerged within the hockey/school relationship in which they viewed hockey as an opportunity to go to school, and going to school as an opportunity to play hockey. A particular statement that illustrated the first half of this relationship was, “I wanted to use hockey to help me go to a school I probably wouldn’t be able to go to without it.” This individual was well aware that he was attending an extremely prestigious academic institution that he would have likely never been accepted to if it were not for his on-ice contributions. On the flipside, participants also acknowledged that playing college hockey provided them a number of advantages in their development. In addition to receiving high quality training from supportive coaching staffs, the participants were also aware that playing college hockey provided them with more time to develop than alternative hockey leagues, which do not allow participation after the season in which the player turns 20 years old. They believed that earning a college degree could
be extremely beneficial for their futures. If, however, the organization that drafted them pushed them to leave school early, they would gladly sacrifice the degree.

**Theme 2: The College Experience**

*Intense time commitment*

As would be expected, the participants reported a plethora of obligations that they must somehow fit into an overtaxed schedule. Although their schedules were incredibly full the participants did not report being overwhelmed and had obviously adapted well to the hectic weeks. As a matter of fact, they reported that many commitments that might send the layperson into panic attacks were actually not as bad as they had expected. Through carefully budgeting their time, relying on the structure provided by the hockey program, and engaging in open and thorough communication with professors, the participants do not consider themselves any busier than a typical college student. One of the participants explained, “They have four hours blocked off for practice and workouts,” emphasizing the convenience that building their schedule around this block afforded them. It was obvious that these individuals were not strangers to devoting hours of their day to training, as they had been doing it for as long as they could remember.

The only noticeable difference between the time commitment that they had made to hockey for the better part of their lives and their time in college was the addition of college level school work. One participant noted the increased emphasis placed on school: “There is a lot on the table with college hockey so um where maybe in juniors when schoolwork’s not as intense as it is here.” Although being a collegiate student-athlete seemed to be more student oriented than they were used to the participants overwhelmingly expressed that their schoolwork was both manageable and not as bad as they had expected. They were quick to cite myriad factors that facilitated their lives as students including: helpful teachers and peers, support from teammates and the hockey program, and being grateful for having the opportunity to pursue an education.

*Using downtime to relax*

Given the highly regimented nature of their schedules there was not an abundance of downtime for the participants while in season. A typical day during the season included attending classes around their block of practice and workouts (which vary in duration and time of day from program to program) attending to schoolwork and getting sufficient rest. With this in mind, when the players did have downtime they took advantage of it by relaxing. The most common activities reported were hanging out playing video games or watching movies or sports,
going out and having meals, and spending some time alone. Weekends during the season were consumed with competing in games, mostly two-game series on Friday and Saturday nights and the travel associated with such competition.

When they were not in season (a very minimal portion of the school year) their schedules were more flexible, but their activities remained similar to the aforementioned. The only difference was that with the increased freedom they were able to get away from campus more often to explore the shopping and eating opportunities at nearby cities. Additionally, participants reported taking short fishing trips, or relaxing at the beach when not in season.

*Teammates on and off the ice*

All of the aforementioned downtime activities, with the exception of spending time alone, included the participants’ teammates. In fact, their social circles consisted almost exclusively of teammates. They reported getting along great on and off the ice and wanting to hang out together all the time. One participant described it as such, “Wherever you go one of the guys is always with you at least. You’re always with guys on the team and it’s nice having a team that’s so close.” It was very common for players in the same year in school to take the same classes, live in the same housing and spend their leisure time together. Other teammates typically made up the next level of the participants’ social networks. They spent most of their time with their roommates, but also frequently visited with other teammates for social events, meals and local excursions. Participants noted that their cohabitating teammates were the biggest influence of how they spent their leisure time, as they all made decisions together concerning what activities they would engage in.

The participants were extremely satisfied with their social circle and had little desire to go outside of their teammates to forge meaningful relationships. This is contrary to certain findings that posited that being surrounded with fellow athletes to the exclusion of out-group members leads to social isolation and detriments to their conception of the social self. The experiences of the participants were much the opposite actually. They had acquaintances that they met through classes or as friends of a friend, but their meaningful relationships were with teammates. They credited these close relationships with teammates as one of the most fulfilling aspects of their college experience. The term family was used more often than any other to describe the team dynamics, but this is a concept that will be explored further in conjunction with another theme.
Experiencing college under a microscope

The participants had a heightened awareness when it came to their actions and behaviors representing more than just themselves. They believed that everything they did was a reflection on their teammates, the program, and the university as a whole. One of the participants felt that a Hollywood cliché was apropos in describing his situation when he stated: “I think I forget what the one quote is, uh, with great power comes great responsibility or something like that.” Another participant explained, “Student athletes are held to a bit of a higher standard because if you’re doing something stupid it reflects back on the program and makes the whole program look bad.” These strongly held beliefs were indicative of the respect that the student-athletes had for their programs. They believed their programs held them to a higher standard and they in turn held themselves to a higher standard and thus strived to be more mature and responsible than their non-athlete peers.

Without fail the individuals that I spoke to described themselves as being “good kids” and “not the type to get into trouble” regardless, but also acknowledged that even if they did have such proclivities they would not risk jeopardizing their hockey careers. “You don’t wanna put yourself in the position where the pro organization can use something against you,” a participant reminded me. With all of the potential hazards created by social media and other omnipresent technologies, these prospects realized that there is little margin for error when it comes to ill-advised behavior. With the barriers of privacy obliterated by indiscriminant online sharing even the smallest slip could lead to public humiliation as well as alienation from professional organizations. While nobody confirmed it overtly, those may be the main reasons that student-athletes tend to surround themselves with their trusted teammates rather than out-group members.

Theme 3: It’s All About the Program

Playing with fear leads to sub-optimal play

One of the most universally referenced sentiments among the participants was regarding the notion that there was no place for fear in the manner they approached their on-ice duties. The shared belief was that getting hurt, and even injured, is all part of the game and that a player cannot be successful if they play with hesitance because of fear of injury. With their promising hockey careers just one serious injury from going unfulfilled it could be easily understood if
injuring themselves in college was a serious concern. I as much as expected to hear that losing a shot at playing pro due to an injury was something that was constantly on their minds.

After speaking with them, however, it became undeniably evident that they had been playing hockey for the vast majority of their lives and they had a much better grasp on injury than I did. In fact, each participant recalled suffering serious injuries at least once in their playing careers. One of them recounted, “I am not afraid of getting injured. I had ACL surgery in 2011 and was able to return to play and I feel that I am stronger now than I was before.” Another participant summed up the general consensus on injury with an understated courageousness, “I am not afraid of getting injured, bumps and bruises come with the way I play. I have been injured in the past and it’s just part of the game, you have to heal up and move on.” The overwhelming message was that playing hesitantly meant playing less than 100% and that would jeopardize their prospects of playing professional hockey far more than any injury might. Or in one of their own words, “playing concerned you’re not gonna be playing as well, the way you can; up to your potential. No you can’t ever be scared of injury.”

*Pride in accomplishments*

All of the individuals that I spoke with for this study expressed remarkable humility and gracious attitudes that varied from many of my previous experiences dealing with student-athletes (most of whom had no earthly shot at ever competing higher than their current level). They were humble to the point that I could not really coax them to boast or brag about their accomplishments to any significant extent. I was, however, able to extricate a few examples of their proudest or most memorable accomplishments within their sport. As should be expected, being drafted by a professional organization was one of the most memorable experiences in these individuals’ lives. “One of my proudest achievements was getting drafted into the NHL. This is because it is something that I had always worked towards and can always have that achievement on my resume.” Another participant recalled the specific moment of: “Being at the NHL draft and hearing my name called, and walking down to meet all the organization’s staff and throw on the jersey was a pretty surreal experience.”

While their draft day experiences ranked highly on their lists of proudest achievements, and rightfully so, I was surprised to learn that this achievement was not the pinnacle of achievements for all of the players. Actually, a number of them mentioned it in more of an, oh yeah and being drafted was awesome too, manner. This was because a distinction was made
between team accomplishments and individual accomplishments. Individual accomplishments were very special to the individuals, but they did not have the same impact as team accomplishments. One participant mentioned the feeling he had when his junior team won a series to advance to their league championship. Unfortunately, I am not able to offer a direct quote because every aspect of his recounting of the experience included specifics as to his team, league and position, but suffice it to say that his pride and passion were abundantly expressed. Another of the young men had similar experiences with his college team and described it much better than I could hope to:

Winning with your team is just by far the best thing. When you win as a team, as a collective group it just means so much. Getting drafted that was cool, but it’s more an individual thing. When you win with all the guys around you and you know how much work you’ve put in with them, winning with your team is just by far the best thing.

To these individuals, personal accomplishments were nice to have, but the team accomplishments were the ones that were most rewarding. Again, the teams were likened to a family and it was obvious that the families’ achievements were often painstaking and riddled with hardships, but enduring that pain and overcoming those hardships together made the achievements that much more special.

*It’s all about the program.*

Attending high quality universities provided the participants with a multitude of opportunities. The social and educational opportunities were viewed as nice perks that could prove beneficial down the road, however, the true benefit was playing college hockey. Each of the participants was completely committed to playing hockey for their respective programs. Even with the prestige of being drafted by an NHL organization, they maintained a surprising ability to invest all their energy into contributing to their college teams. Their job was to not only contribute to the team’s success on the ice, but more importantly to embody the ideals and image of their respective programs and represent their universities in a positive manner.

These young men showed awareness of the fact that they do not have the luxury of making mistakes that might be typical of some of their non-athlete peers. One participant addressed this specifically, “We’re kinda in the spotlight here so you gotta be acting accordingly. It’s our individual actions reflect a much bigger thing in the program and the team, the program, the university not just us we’re worrying about.” The participants were committed continuing
and growing their program’s brand by positive behavior off the ice and earning accolades on the ice. When speaking of their ambitions, mentions of professional achievements were rare, while dreams of NCAA conference titles and national championships were noted quite frequently. Similarly, the eldest of the participants who was nearing the end of his college career was quick to reference his team’s various accomplishments among his proudest achievements.

Upon superficial analysis, this level of commitment to their college programs seemed improbable given the fact that each believed they would be moving on to become part of a professional program. What became evident, however, was that none of the participants allowed their drafted status to affect the way that they interacted as a member of their college team. Participants were quick to insist that they were no more valuable to their team than any other player and that they were not held in any higher regard based on their drafted status. Their drafted status was rarely, if ever mentioned in the locker room and they certainly did not receive any special recognition from coaches. Participants were quick to mention that they were lucky to have been drafted, but believed that many of their teammates would be getting a shot to play professional hockey regardless of their undrafted status. The tired cliché of “no I in team” came to mind repeatedly while listening to the participants speak about their role on the team, but their sincerity assured me that there was nothing cliché about their beliefs. One particular statement seemed especially representative of the experiences of the participants with regards to team dynamics.

Sometimes guys kinda joke around with me about it (being drafted), but for the most part it’s not something that’s talked about or that is focused on. We’re just focusing on this program and our time here and doing the best that we can do.

Even with the glamorous life of a professional athlete looming over them and moving closer to their lifelong dream with every goal and every big hit, these individuals were still able to completely focus on their duties as a college hockey player. Moreover, a few of the participants mentioned looking forward to playing professional hockey, but could not imagine it being nearly as enjoyable or fulfilling as playing as a member of their college program.

**Theme 4: Enjoy Every Day**

*College environment extremely enriching and supportive*

Each anecdotal story and mention of their college environment made it increasingly obvious that each participant deeply believed that everybody around them wanted them to
succeed. In fact, they viewed their college environment as one in which they were free to learn through trial and error how to transition into adulthood. Having an entire university looking out for their best interests allowed them to traverse this developmentally arduous period with great peace of mind. They felt that they were generously supported as a student, an athlete, and as an individual. The chief benefactors of this support were their professors and peers, their coaches and teammates, and their friends and second family.

As a student they experienced generosity, almost without exception, from professors and fellow students who went out of their way to ensure that these individuals were in a position to succeed academically. Participants did not mention a single example of professors refusing to be flexible regarding missed classes, due dates for assignments, or making alternate arrangements for exams. Professors were acquiescent at worst, and more often than not, actively supportive of their role as an athlete. One participant shared, “My experiences with professors have been great. They are understanding of the classes we miss for hockey and for the most part like to know how the team is doing.” Experiences similar to this were certainly the rule rather than the exception as each participant provided analogous accounts.

The participants felt incredibly supported in their athletic pursuits by the university in general, and by their coaches and teammates specifically. A commonality across the participants was that they all truly believed that their decision to attend their respective programs put them in a position to become the best hockey player possible, and gave them the best chance possible of successfully transitioning into professional hockey. The head coaches were commonly cited as a major factor in attending their specific program, and various assistant coaches and trainers were given praise for the one on one time that they spent with these athletes. Similarly, participants were quick to recognize their teammates as integral components of their development as a hockey player. One participant recognized, “I’ve had some great coaching and great friends who have motivated me and pushed me to go on and on and just coaches that have just taught me so much that it’s just been good.”

The opportunity to grow as an individual was, perhaps, the most valued of all the benefits that the college environment offered. The college years are certainly a transformative time in most students’ lives. Although the participants have had the unique experiences involved with competing as elite athletes for a good portion of their lives they were quick to acknowledge the influence that their college years have had on their personal development. It was unanimously
agreed upon that college had been the best time of their lives, a sentiment that I dismiss as a shockingly sad cliché when uttered by a middle-aged adult, but willingly accepted as the sincere reality from these young men who were currently immersed in it.

A significant amount of time was spent by each participant describing the many friendships that they have created since starting college. In fact, it was rare that a participant would make a statement that did not include at least a mention of their friends. One participant noted, “The friends that I’ve made here are the lifelong friends.” Each of the participants echoed the sentiment that the friends they have made in college will be lifelong friends, as well as the feeling that their friends were akin to family. The friends that they referred to so endearingly were without exception their teammates. The camaraderie that these “brothers” shared was palpable while simultaneously impossible for me to comprehend. The unique relationship that these individuals formed was easily recognizable, but elusive, reserved for elite athletic teams, or service members who battle not only with, but for one another.

*Love of hockey.*

Beloved Philadelphia Flyers head coach of the 1970’s Fred Shero once said, “We know that hockey is where we live, where we can best meet and overcome pain and wrong and death. Life is just a place where we spend time between games.” The layperson understands the meaning of this humorous yet sincere quote, but it carries an unfathomable profoundness with those few individuals that have lived it. To these individuals, the phrase “it’s just a game” would be more offensive than insulting their mothers. That is because to these individuals hockey is an integral part of their past, present, and future. Hockey is their deepest passion, and their life’s ambition. “My life’s pretty much always been hockey; it’s been six or seven days a week that I’ve been on the ice and playing hockey. I just love the sport ever since I started playing and have no regrets.” Whether expressly stated or implied, as in the previous statement, the participants were not able to speak about hockey without bringing up fun. “It is something that I love to do and I have tons of fun doing,” a participant reported. Another participant shared this simple sentiment, “It’s just so much fun to play.”

In addition to hockey being incredibly fun, participants also found hockey to be both fulfilling and peace inspiring. A participant summarized his on-ice experience explaining, “Overall it’s the thing you’re almost at peace with yourself when you’re out there it’s the thing you like to do the most.” Another participant described it similarly, “I focus on hockey and
everything else seems to disappear.” Although, by their own admission, hockey was their number one priority and the main reason they were attending their respective institutions, it still did not feel like a job for them. On the contrary, hockey was the activity that they engaged in when they felt they needed to center themselves or alleviate stress. Considering the fact that these young men have built their lives around playing hockey, it would be understandable if it took on a work like role rather than their most enjoyable, fulfilling activity that just happens to consume the majority of their lives. This, however, was certainly not the attitude that they adopted. Ironically enough, each participant had the ultimate goal of making hockey, the most enjoyable of all activities, their job. One participant acknowledged this by pointing out rather matter-of-factly, “It’s never felt like a job. If it does feel like a job one day I don’t think anybody would trade their job playing hockey for any other job in the world.”

Living in the moment, enjoying every day

The participants could not imagine playing hockey in a more fulfilling environment, and they relished having the opportunity to enjoy their college experience. Each participant noted that they never once regretted their decision to play college hockey rather than join another developmental league. Moreover, they all expressed that they were extremely satisfied with their decision to attend their respective universities. They were confident that they had made the best choice from a personal and professional standpoint in attending their universities, and were more than just content with their current situations. One participant explained, “The best thing is just being able to live in the moment and enjoy every day. Once I came here I was happy, yeah happy to come and no chance I’d go anywhere else”

Their ability to live in the now even with the prospect of all of their lifelong dreams coming true in the future was extremely refreshing. When they spoke about goals they hoped to achieve it was evident that they were truly embracing the present rather than looking toward the future. The goals that they coveted included winning regional and national championships at the college level, or reaching respected milestones within their respective programs, but there was no mention of the Stanley Cup or NHL accolades. I would wager that such professional goals are somewhere floating around their minds, but at the forefront was, “improving in the classroom each year as well as on the ice.” Indeed, if they were to offer advice to incoming teammates it would consist of not looking towards the future, and focusing wholly on being successful in their
current situation. One participant offered specific advice as to how this could be achieved, “Live in the moment, enjoy the moment and just have fun.”

*The future is hockey*

Nothing about any of the individuals that participated in this study elicited the comparison to the jock caricatures that have inundated pop culture. These individuals were intelligent, well-spoken and responsible. They took their education seriously, appreciated the advantages of playing college hockey and had realistic views of what it takes to become a professional athlete. Still, there was almost a duality that emerged when describing their lives. There was hockey then there was everything else. As noted, they were cognizant of the various roles they assumed and diligently attended to each of them, however, it was evident that hockey was their calling. Each participant was firm in the belief that they were going to build their lives around playing hockey, but acknowledged that becoming a mainstay in the NHL was far from guaranteed.

“In a picture perfect world I’d be playing in the NHL, but it’s a long ways to go, a lot of steps to take before then. My experience has primed me for a professional hockey career.” This statement really summed up the overall impression that I got from speaking with the different individuals. All of them made it abundantly clear that their main goal was to play hockey in the NHL. These young men have not, however, reached the level of accomplishment in the sport without realizing how the business of hockey works. Most of them drew upon experiences that had been shared with them by friends and former teammates who have gone on to play professional hockey after college. These friends have had varied experiences, but the majority of them were at the point in their professional career where they were playing minor league hockey and trying to establish themselves as a potential NHL level talent. At the same time there were friends and former teammates who had been fortunate enough to gain valuable NHL experience, and while the participants expected to move on to the minor leagues after college, they quietly hoped to be among the fortunate ones to get a shot at the NHL right out of college.

In addition to realizing the daunting task of ascending to the NHL and playing at a level worthy of staying there, an undeniable fact is that longevity as a professional athlete is something that is typically measured in years not decades. The consensus among the participants in regard to this was what would be expected, “I’m hoping I can make it as long as I can out of hockey.” Without exception, however, they agreed that the end of their playing career would not be the
end of their career in hockey. Each of them mentioned continuing to work within hockey, preferably with an NHL organization, in some capacity after their hang up the skates. Some of them expressed interest in coaching, others in a variety of administrative endeavors, but all were committed to forging a long career within hockey. Participants agreed unanimously and indubitably that hockey will always be a part of their lives and that they could not, and wished not to imagine their lives without hockey. One thing that they were certain of was that they would enjoy every moment that they were fortunate enough to be a part of hockey.

**Discussion**

Drafted status did not have as much of an all-encompassing impact on participants’ lives as I had imagined. They were more down to earth and humble than many athletes that I have encountered who have no prospects of ever becoming a professional. I was surprised by how well these individuals were living in the moment and not looking ahead. Each of the participants would be considered high in athletic-identity. If asked to describe themselves, I have no doubt that the first thing that they would mention would be that they were hockey players. Placing such an emphasis on their athletic role did not, however, have a detrimental impact on the various other roles that they fulfilled. On the contrary, they realized the impact that each of their roles had on their hockey career and vice versa.

Rather than falling into the mindset of academics being a necessary evil, they realized that they were in a uniquely beneficial position to get an education while, simultaneously, increasing their stock as a hockey prospect. Rather than feel a sense of entitlement and expect special treatment, they gratefully accepted their place on the team, no more or less important a player than anybody else. Rather than falling into risky stereotypical student-athlete behavior, they surrounded themselves with teammates who were committed to making responsible decisions, and representing their teams in a prideful manner. Rather than let the stress of elite competition overwhelm their lives and control their emotions, they were gracious in defeat, humble in victory, and learned to effectively mourn losses or celebrate wins, but quickly refocus on the next task. Participants’ experiences regarding academic performance, social experiences, and well-being parallel many of the generalizations found in the literature, while contradicting others. Of course, the aim of this study is to neither support nor refute generalizations, rather to understand how individuals experience college. To this point, I will attempt to compare the participants’ specific experiences with the generalizations found in literature.
Student-Athlete Academic Performance

Everybody is aware of the various stereotypes and misconceptions that are prevalent regarding athletes and their scholastic abilities, endeavors and preferential treatment. Unfortunately, being aware does not translate to attempting to debunk misconceptions, and the harmful beliefs are perpetuated. The “dumb-jock” has been a fixture in pop culture for decades. In some cases life imitates art and athletes embrace the role and fall into a self-fulfilling prophecy of underachievement, while others grow resentful of the negative image. Whether they embrace or resent being labeled a “dumb-jock,” the athlete is not well served by having to live under this stigma.

It would be naïve to assert that athletes were always held to the same academic selection criteria when being considered for admission to colleges, but there is no reason to treat them as if they have nothing to offer academically. Athletes are viewed by certain peers and faculty as being unworthy of admission to their university. There are other groups who surely benefit from less stringent admission criteria. Highly talented artists or performers are often admitted based on their extraordinary abilities outside of scholastic achievement. Similarly, it is commonly accepted that students whose parents or other family members have an affiliation with the university are likely to be admitted. For some reason, however, it seems that the athletes bear the brunt of the resentment. If students should be admitted based on what they can offer to the university, does it not stand to reason that exceptional skills and talents should weigh on admittance decisions? While high academic achieving students may be able score in the 90th percentile on standardized tests, it is likely that they would be at a loss if asked to lead a no huddle two-minute drill or play Beethoven’s 5th Symphony in C minor. Who is to say which of these is more beneficial for the university? This question is often met with a cynical nod to the business of higher education and the revenue production of college sports. While the revenue that athletes can potentially generate for their universities is important to school administrators, it is not the sole source of contribution for athletes. The ideal college culture is all-encompassing and eclectic. The diversification of the student body should include students with diversified skill sets. Academics is merely one area in which a student can excel, but no more inherently valuable to the university’s culture than sport, the arts, or music.

Feelings of resentment that peers and faculty hold towards athletes are not limited to personal beliefs that go unnoticed by the athletes. Simons, Bosworth, Fujita and Jensen (2007)
found that 62% of athletes in their study reported negative remarks about athletes by faculty members during class. Additionally, 69% of athletes reported specific comments made by faculty or fellow students involving the dumb jock stereotype, low intelligence, little academic motivation, and undeserved benefits and privileges. Inappropriate comments were not the only barriers that student-athletes faced. Athletes are subject to unique time commitments that may at times interfere with classwork. Best practice would be for the professor to be as accommodating as possible when attempting to resolve any conflicts, but 61.5% of athletes reported being refused or given a hard time when requesting an accommodation for athletic competition. It can be expected that athletes will have issues focusing on academic success when they are subjected to prejudicial treatment such as professors commenting, “Are there any athletes in this class? No response. Good I can teach at a regular pace.” (Simons et al., 2007, p. 261).

Less inherent academic ability is also no reason to assume that an individual will not be successful in their academic endeavors. It might be true that a given athlete is less scholastically gifted than their peers, but perhaps the years of discipline, hard work, determination and structure that they learned from their sport will prove more influential determinants of academic success. Likewise, a student who scores 1500 on their SATs and breezes through high school might be ill prepared for the rigors of college, have trouble adapting and struggle with academic achievement. There is no reason to believe that what an athlete may lack in ability will not be counteracted with effort. Still, many faculty and peers approach athletes with an incapable until proven otherwise attitude.

Research has supported the idea that athletes do not necessarily underperform. Aries, McCarthy, Salovey and Banaji (2004) found that student-athletes entered into college with academic credentials somewhat lower than non-athlete students. They also found that student-athletes had less confidence in their academic abilities and perceived barriers to academic success posed by their sport participation, mainly time constraints and biases against them on the part of professors. Even with these contributing factors it was found that the student-athletes did not underperform academically. Their academic performance was in line with what should be expected based on their entering credentials and that of other non-athletes with similar entering academic credentials. It is important to note that this study was conducted using students at extremely academically selective schools. The students that were used are not representative of the general student population in terms of academic credentials.
The aforementioned studies provide interesting findings regarding student-athletes’ academic experiences in general. Each individual athlete, however, has unique abilities, skills and motives and thus has unique experiences. There are undeniably student-athletes who view academics as an afterthought and offer only as much effort as is necessary to ensure renewal of their scholarship. There are also student-athletes who intend to take every advantage of the opportunities they are being given, learn as much as possible, and use their sport participation to provide rewarding educational enrichment. Some athletes may be certain that they are going pro in their sport and view college as a vehicle to display their athletic skill at the next level before their inevitable ascension. Such athletes may have little regard for their academic performance and have little to no desire to pursue educational fulfillment. Other athletes may be taking advantage of their athletic scholarship to pursue their ambitions of becoming accountants or physicists. These personal academic experiences that defy generalizability are the truly intriguing ones. Little research exists attempting to understand the academic experiences of athletes who have good prospects of playing professionally. Will their education be an afterthought for them? Will the same drive and dedication that allows them to excel as athletes motivate them to be successful in the classroom? Are they dumb jocks or are they adaptive perfectionists who demand success in all of their pursuits?

Academically, the participants in this study appeared to be as motivated and committed as a typical college student, with the added incentive of earning good grades to ensure eligibility and maintain the reputation of their program. With the high likelihood of them moving on to compete in the professional ranks, each participant was committed to an athletic career. Even so, every participant believed that their education would prove beneficial throughout their lives. Perhaps their dedication to academics led to the positive interactions that they experienced in the classroom. Contrary to the experiences of many student-athletes, as noted by Simmons et al., the participants enjoyed open communication with professors, who were extremely understanding and supportive of their athletic endeavors. They were not subjected to the aforementioned disparaging remarks from professors and peers towards athletes, nor were they treated with anything but respect. In fact, the only instance that any participant described that could possibly be considered negative involved other students not wanting to work with athletes on group projects. This, however, was due to the difficulty of meeting outside of class
due to the time constraints that the athletes are subject to, and had nothing to do with embracing a “dumb jock” stereotype.

Participants attended various well-respected institutions ranging from top ranking public universities to private Ivy League schools. The academic reputation of their institutions impacted their decision to attend. They considered their schools as the best mix of hockey and academics of any of their options. I did not inquire into any specifics regarding their academic credentials upon entering college, nor their grades while in college. From the information that they did provide, however, it appeared that their experiences would support the findings of Aries et al. Based on their description of the standards that the hockey program expected them to adhere to they were performing quite adequately compared to the general student population. Program standards also prohibited players from missing classes unnecessarily. Unless they were traveling for hockey or legitimately ill players were expected to attend every class. Perhaps it was the standards set forth by the program, or the vast support system at their disposal, but participants found their schoolwork to be not only reasonable, but easier than they had anticipated. Any mentions of schoolwork, classes, or academics in general were neutral at worst, and more commonly positive. In short, the participants may have attended their universities to play hockey, but they embraced the valuable opportunity of getting an education and hopefully earning a degree while doing so.

Student-Athlete Social Experiences

The relationships that are forged during college are often thought of as some of the deepest and most enduring individual experiences in their lifetime. This is not surprising given the developmental considerations associated with typical college aged individuals and the college environment. For many students, college is their first prolonged experience with freedom and autonomy. A typical college student enters college immediately following high school. The jump from highly structured, carefully overseen behavior in high school and while living at home with their parents to self-initiated, self-monitoring behavior can be overwhelming and emotional. These conditions are especially conducive to forming relationships and bonding with others sharing the same experience.

Similar adjustments are also typical for student-athletes although they are still faced with a relatively high degree of structure and oversight. Athletes are required to keep strict schedules with time devoted to training, conditioning and practicing their sport, taking classes and
attending study tables. Members of the coaching staff, athletic department, and advising coordinators generally keep a close watch on athletes’ adherence to their schedules. As a result of the regimented nature of their schedules, athletes can end up missing out on experiences highly valued by other students. This comparatively structured lifestyle may influence many of the athletes’ social choices and behaviors.

Student-athletes have very little flexibility in their schedules between training, school, travel and performance. It could be expected that in many cases the athlete will limit their social network primarily to teammates and others in athletics with whom they inevitably spend a great deal of time. It is very productive on many levels to form meaningful relationships with teammates. Unfortunately, this is often to the exclusion of other out-group members. Often this inability to develop relationships with students outside athletics can be distressing and lead to feelings of social isolation (Watson, & Kissinger, 2007). Indeed, Watson and Kissinger found that student-athletes reported significantly lower levels of “Social Self” than non-athletes (p. 158). The student-athletes scored “Social Self” as their highest variable of those assessed in the study, as is consistent with what is expected among a college-aged sample, but their scores were still significantly lower than those of non-athletes. These findings point to students valuing and being cognizant of their social interactions, but potential detriments keep student-athletes from experiencing the same level of satisfaction in their social interactions. Much of the literature suggests student-athletes’ sport-related responsibilities act as a hindrance to forging and maintaining relationships with people outside athletics.

If this is the case and student athletes do have difficulty keeping friends outside of their teammates, then it would certainly be beneficial for them to get along with their teammates and value relationships with them. The existence and quality of interpersonal relationships are believed to have widespread impact on every facet of individuals’ lives. Research supports this belief as it pertains to athletes’ performance in their sport. Athletes rated the most overall happiness in their relationships with family, compared to teammates, peers and coaches. They reported the least overall happiness in the relationship with their coach. The athletes also perceived their relationship with family to contribute the most to their sport performance, although not significantly more than their relationship with their coaches (Donohue, Miller, Crammer, Cross, & Covassin, 2007). It is suggested that the stronger the athletes relationships, the more they may contribute to sport performance. If nothing else, this research supports the
idea that athletes do perceive their interpersonal relationships as having an impact on their sport performance.

Similar to other areas of research dealing with student-athletes, literature regarding their social interactions is broadly focused and in most cases seeks to generalize to the population of student-athletes as a whole. There is not a great deal of research dealing with how individual student-athletes perceive the importance of their social interactions during college and how these interactions influence the other aspects of their lives. While the generalizations about student-athletes as a population are helpful in understanding their experiences, they may be marginalizing the athletes who have experiences not explained by or counter to the findings. While many athletes may feel that their social experiences during college are inhibited by their sport participation, there may be others who relish their athletic standing and perceive their social experiences as very fulfilling.

Possibly the most interesting results of this study revolve around the participants’ social experiences. Perhaps I am biased by my personal experiences with student-athletes during my time as an undergraduate. I lived in a small dorm that also housed a number of football, baseball and soccer players. To my recollection these student-athletes were among the worst offenders when it came to underage drinking, all night parties and general mischief. Or perhaps I have internalized the numerous studies citing increased incidences of binge drinking among student-athletes. The participants of this study, however, do not fit into either of these molds. Of course I relied on self-report, and would not expect participants to divulge anything overly incriminating, but even in general description, “going out,” and “partying” were not typical behavior for these individuals. All of the participants mentioned being responsible and representing their programs positively. The overwhelming majority of their leisure time was spent simply hanging out with teammates and relaxing. The participants’ reports are given credence by considering the schedule that college hockey players are subject to. The college hockey season begins in early October with preseason events scheduled throughout September and stretches through March and into April depending on tournament performance. During the season it is typical for the team to play two game series on Friday and Saturday nights. This leaves at most a month at the beginning and end of the school year where players have their weekends free. Be it lack of opportunity or embracing a culture of responsible behavior the individuals in this study reportedly spend very little time drinking and partying opting rather for video games and much coveted sleep.
Participants’ experiences were consistent with the findings that student-athletes’ social circles are comprised mostly of teammates. Their experiences, however, were free from feelings of isolation or longing to expand their circles. To the contrary, their social experiences were exceptionally positive and fulfilling. The camaraderie that they felt for their teammates was not limited to the ice. In fact, teammates were a constant presence in their lives. Regardless of the activity, there was a very good chance that teammates were involved. Rather than viewing this as a limitation in their social experiences, however, participants were pleased to have such good relationships with teammate that they wanted to be around them all the time. The most common word used to describe their relationship with teammates was family. They considered the relationships that they forged with their teammates to be the highlight of their college experience. They felt these friends were the best they had ever made and believed that they would remain lifelong friends.

**Student-Athlete Well-being**

The issues that student-athletes have developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, as well as the added pressure resulting from their sport participation, are sure to have an impact on their well-being. The instability of college students’ psychological well-being and struggles with various mental health issues is an area that has been studied extensively and is considered an area of concern for today’s college population. This is no surprise given the countless novel experiences, pressures and obligations associated with transitioning to the college life. Many students may find the flood of stimuli overwhelming and have difficulties developing effective coping techniques.

Athletes have been found to have even more well-being and mental health related issues than non-athlete students (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). There are a plethora of potential reasons that student-athletes might experience detriments in well-being from increased pressure to perform to lack of fulfilling relationships to issues stemming from their athletic identity. The vast majority of college student-athletes are competing at a level that will prove the culmination of their athletic participation. A great deal of stress has been related to athletes coping with the end of their competitive athletic career. The athletes face retirement related difficulties in transitioning from competitive sport participation (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Regardless of the source of stress or pressure, the student-athlete is subjected to a gambit of difficulties unique to athletes as well as all of those faced by a non-athlete college student.
Interesting questions arise as to whether certain athletes might be better prepared to deal with such difficulties or less likely to allow them to affect their well-being.

In the interest of transparency I must address my personal leanings regarding well-being. I do not approach well-being as if it were a general construct; rather I realize that it must be understood from one philosophical lens or another. For example, a proponent of hedonic well-being would hold an entirely different value system and conception than someone versed in subjective well-being. Personally, I tend to gravitate towards the concept of eudaimonic well-being. There has been extensive research conducted regarding the construct of eudaimonic well-being. Researchers have systematically, and critically studied the validity and generalizability of scales designed to measure eudaimonic well-being. I want to be clear that I am not addressing eudaimonic well-being in a critical matter or attempting to verify or even argue its validity as a construct. Rather, eudaimonia is the lens through which my perception of well-being is filtered and thus my natural inclination is to understand individuals’ well-being within a eudaimonic context. Furthermore eudaimonic well-being implies a type of deep, very personal well-being that transcends affective states, or self-perceived happiness, and seeks to address the degree to which individuals are living their lives in a manner consistent with their true selves. This deep level of understanding could not possibly be deduced from relatively brief conversations with unfamiliar individuals. I cannot say with any degree of certainty that the individuals in the current study are high or low in eudaimonic well-being, but my personal lens reserves me to perceiving and assessing well-being within this context.

Eudaimonic well-being is a concept that has been gaining influence over the past few decades. Eudaimonia is a concept with its origins dating back to Aristotle (Deci & Ryan 2008; Ryff & Singer 2008), but has recently been adopted as an alternative to subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is mainly concerned with happiness, which is often associated with positive affect. Proponents of eudaimonic well-being, however, believe that happiness alone is not sufficient in predicting well-being. While happiness is often present when eudaimonic well-being is present, the true focus of eudaimonia deals with living one’s life in a manner consistent with their true-self and fulfilling their true potential (Deci & Ryan 2008; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti 2008). When an individual is living their life in congruence with their true self, they are likely to realize their true potential which inevitably leads to higher perceptions of happiness, but also a deeper sense of personal well-being.
Eudaimonic well-being provides a promising conceptual framework for viewing student-athletes’ well-being. Throughout their experiences in college there are stimuli and situations that are likely to lead an individual to report high levels of subjective or hedonistic well-being, such as being under the influence of various substances or partaking in sexual activities. Such activities, however, may not lead to higher levels of true well-being and could potentially be debilitative to their well-being. From a eudaimonic perspective, only those activities that are in line with the true self lead to increased well-being. Similarly, this conception of well-being could be effective in determining the level to which various activities are in line with the true self. Does their participation in sport allow them to ascend to their true potential or are they simply an athlete who is participating in sport for extrinsically motivated reasons? It is possible sport is not a context in congruence with their true selves in which case having a great deal of their personhood associated with being an athlete could lead to detriments in their well-being. Conversely, athletes may be attending college simply to approach their potential as athletes, and their concurrent pursuit of an education could be detrimental to their well-being.

The concept of eudaimonic well-being is an especially useful approach for understanding the well-being of athletes who very well may be moving on to professional sport and basing their entire lives upon continued participation in their sport. For these athletes, the question of whether or not their participation in sport is in line with their true selves is extremely pertinent and could have momentous impacts on their continuing well-being. To reiterate, my interactions in this study are brief and relatively straightforward. If given the access and resources, I would love to assess the participants’ eudaimonic well-being, but that is beyond the scope and intent of this study. My personal gravitation towards this concept of well-being, however, certainly influences the questions that I ask and the manner in which I perceive and interpret the participants’ responses.

It is expected that college should be a very transformative time for all young individuals transitioning to independence. The college experience in this regard, however, can be confounded in the case of student-athletes due to the increased structure they are subject to. Nonetheless, the participants reported that they were learning a great deal about living on their own and the transition to adulthood. The stress of this transition compounded with the stress of keeping up with schoolwork, and succeeding on the ice could certainly lead to detriments to the participants’ well-being. Luckily, each of them was fortunate to have a supportive social network.
that helped to mediate dealing with these stressors. Chief among this network were the participants’ teammates, who were described as family. Being surrounded by this second family at all times offered the participants a unique network of individuals who not only understood what they were going through, but in many cases went through it with them.

On top of being surrounded by understanding, supportive teammates, they also benefited from pursuing their true passion. The majority of their time and energy was spent practicing, playing and thinking about hockey, and they would not have it any other way. In fact, hockey was the activity that these individuals sought out when their life was stressful, as being on the ice allowed them to forget about everything else and simply be in the moment. Even though hockey was their top priority it was still fun. They were fortunate enough to immerse themselves in the activity that they were most passionate about with teammates that they considered family. That is certainly a recipe for positive well-being.

The participants also have peace of mind in regards to the continuation of their hockey career past college. While their drafted status is no guarantee of a long, fruitful professional career, it does all but guarantee a chance to prove themselves in the pros. The vast majority of college athletes are faced with their competitive sports careers ending with graduation, but not the participants in this study. The participants acknowledged that their playing careers would have to end at some point, but could not imagine having to hang up their skates after college. In fact, each participant expressed a sense of relief knowing that they would have an opportunity to play hockey at the next level. While realistic about the challenges that lay between them and an NHL career, each participant was completely dedicated to playing hockey as long as possible. Having the opportunity to continue pursuing their greatest passion as a career is a luxury reserved for a miniscule percentage of athletes. The participants in this study expressed intense gratitude to be among these athletes.

So What?

The “so what?” message to take away from this study is that college appears to be an advantageous option for hockey prospects looking to make it to the NHL. As has been mentioned, the college route is rapidly gaining in popularity among top hockey prospects, and is currently the fastest growing development path for the league. Now that the league recognizes the college path as not only a viable option, but a desirable one, the population of drafted college hockey players will continue to grow, and likely grow rapidly. Based on the participants’
responses it is safe to say that all have found their college experience to be profoundly fulfilling on every level. They are having the time of their lives in an environment that feels like home, with individuals who they consider family. They are enjoying success as students, athletes, social-beings, and developing individuals. Not to imply that they do not face many difficulties similar to other college students, as well as those associated with their athletic responsibilities, but given their druthers there is no place they would rather be. The college experience has been truly rewarding, allowing them to realize their potential not only as athletes, but more importantly, as individuals. I cannot imagine a more supportive, gratifying environment for young athletes to hone their athletic skills, while transitioning from adolescence to the autonomy of adulthood.

**Limitations**

While commonly viewed as a limitation when following a positivist approach to research, the small sample size for this study was more than adequate for a phenomenological study. Moreover, given the extremely small population from which this sample was drawn the opportunity to speak with five individuals provided more than sufficient saturation. In fact I was able to utilize 2.5% of the entire population of interest as participants in this study. A possible limitation could exist based upon which individuals chose to respond with interest and ultimately participate. It is very possible that only those individuals who were enjoying their experiences in college and were thriving in their current environment chose to participate. Another limitation was the brevity of my encounters with the participants. With little opportunity to build rapport, and the impersonal nature of the telephone interactions, it cannot be expected that the participants were primed to respond in as open and honest a manner as possible. These individuals are also savvy when it comes to interacting with many forms of media and giving interviews as they have competed with elite hockey programs on various stages. Given these constraints I am left to wonder about the propensity for the participants to respond in a socially desirable manner rather than present the positive and negative as they actually exist.

**Practical Implications**

It is expected that the extremely unique population in question, college hockey players who have been drafted to play professional hockey, will have varied and unique experiences while in college. This subset of the student-athlete population has, arguably, the most to gain or lose while in college based on the decisions they make and experiences they have. It is likely that
these athletes will be aware of their potential ascension into professional sports and this awareness likely weighs heavily on their thought process and provides the context through which they move through their lives. The findings of this study have implication for college coaching staffs, athletic advisors and counseling services. A deep understanding of athletes’ experiences will allow individuals filling such roles to develop techniques and strategies for facilitating the most holistically fulfilling experiences for student-athletes.

Perhaps the most significant implications of the findings in this study revolve around the decision facing individuals in situations similar to the participants. These individuals are grappling with whether or not attending a college and playing college sports is an appropriate choice in the context of their personal goals. Gaining a deeper understanding of the experience of others who were in a similar position, such as the participants of this study, could be immensely beneficial for the individuals, their loved ones, and anybody advising them on their next step.

**Future Research**

There is a wide range of research dealing with drafted-student athletes that could prove beneficial. There is virtually no published literature focusing on student-athletes who have been drafted by a professional organization as the population. This specific population is distinct enough that results could vary drastically from those found utilizing general student-athletes as the population. Furthermore, given the time and resources it would be appropriate to conduct research with individuals from this population in a more in-depth manner. This study does a sufficient job of raising awareness to the unique experiences of this population, but utilizing intensive data collection techniques, such as those common in ethnographies, could provide a much more in-depth, nuanced look into the lives of these individuals. Furthermore, a longitudinal study following the progression of these athletes throughout their college and into their professional careers could prove especially illuminating.
References


Appendix A: Consent Form

I am a graduate student in the Kinesiology and Health department and am conducting research under supervision of KNH faculty members.

You are invited to participate in a research study examining student athletes’ experiences while in college. Your participation will consist of one interview session which should last no longer than an hour. The interview session will be audio recorded. The audio recording will be transcribed into a written document and the recording will be destroyed. Any personal identifiers will be excluded or coded in the written transcript, thus the information you provide during the interview cannot be associated with you. All interview material will be treated as confidential and protected and accessed only by myself or other IRB approved researchers who are equally bound to preserving your anonymity and confidentiality. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the session at any time or decline to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You will not be exposed to any risks outside those of everyday life as a result of your participation. Your participation in the study will assist in gaining a deeper understanding of student athletes’ college experiences. Results of this study may at some point be presented at professional conferences and/or published in articles.

If you have any further questions about the study, do not hesitate to contact Ryan Graham at grahamrc@muohio.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Advancement of Research and Scholarship at 529-3600 or humansubjects@muohio.edu.

Thank you for your participation. You may keep this portion of the page

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I understand that my participation in this research is totally voluntary and I can discontinue my participation at any time without penalty. Furthermore, I understand that any information I share in the course of research will be kept confidential and anonymous. I also give my consent to be audio recorded in the manner consistent with the above description. By signing I am also acknowledging that I am 18 years or older.

Signature: ________________________________ Date: _______________
Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

Tell me about your time in college to this point. Tell me the story of you as a: college student, student-athlete, an athlete being developed for a professional organization.

Explain a few of your obligations and discuss how you prioritize among your various obligations.

What are some sources of pressure that you feel to perform:

   Within your sport?
      What impact if any has being drafted had on the way you approach the game?
      Are you afraid of getting injured? Does that affect the way you approach the game?
   Academically?
      How important is it to you to get an education?
      Do you believe that a college education will be beneficial in your life?

Describe typical leisure time activities addressing who, what, when, where, why.

What influences what you decide to do when you have leisure time?

Do you behave differently based on:

   Your status as a student-athlete?
   Your affiliation with a professional organization?

What situations or experiences do you feel most at ease when you are engaged in them?

Describe how you think your life would be without sports?

What were your reasons for deciding to attend this university as opposed to: another university?

Playing in one of the other common developmental hockey leagues?

How do you think your time at this university will influence the rest of your life?

If you were writing the script of your life following your time at this university, what would your life look like 5 years down the road? 10 years? Long-term?