

From Idealism to Pragmatic Detachment: The Academic Performance of College Athletes

PETER ADLER AND PATRICIA A. ADLER

In recent years, the relationship between the athletic participation and academic performance of college athletes has become a topic of scholarly concern. The sociological literature in this area, however, has been inconsistent in its findings. Some studies have cited a weak positive relationship, claiming that although most college athletes had poor academic records in high school, they have higher GPAs, lower attrition rates, and a greater likelihood of graduating than nonathletes because they receive extra tutoring, more attention, and special "breaks" (Hanks and Eckland, 1976; Henschen and Fry, 1984; Michener, 1976; Shapiro, 1984). But most studies of college athletes have found a negative relationship between athletic participation and academic performance. These studies conclude that athletes are unprepared for and uninterested in academics, that they come to college to advance their athletic careers rather than their academic careers; therefore, they have lower GPAs, higher attrition rates, and lower chances of graduating than other students (Cross, 1973; Edwards, 1984; Harrison, 1976; Nyquist, 1979; Purdy, Eitzen, and Huftnagel, 1982; Sack and Thiel, 1979; Spivey and Jones, 1975; Webb, 1968).

Our research, which also finds a negative relationship, extends previous studies in several ways. First, we show that although most college athletes ultimately become disillusioned with and detached from academics, many begin their college careers idealistically, caring about academics and intending to graduate. Second, we show that the structure of college athletics fosters the academic deindividuation of athletes. We traced the stages through which athletes progress as they become socialized to their position in the university environment and learn its structural characteristics. We describe how their academic goals and behavior become increasingly influenced by their athletic involvement. The initial academic aspirations of freshman athletes are considerably varied, but these various individual ideals gradually give way

SOURCE: "From Idealism to Pragmatic Detachment: The Academic Performance of College Athletes" by Peter Adler and Patricia A. Adler. From *Sociology of Education* 58, pp. 241-250. Copyright © 1985 by the American Sociological Association. Reprinted by permission.

under the force of the structural conditions athletes encounter. Thus, by the time athletes complete their eligibility requirements, their academic attitudes and goals closely resemble each other's. This process, which reduces individual differences between athletes, is accompanied by collective academic detachment and diminished academic performance. Third, using a longitudinal analysis of process and change, made possible by our method of data collection, we show the influence of interconnecting factors on athletes' progression through college. This is the first systematic participant-observation study of college athletics. Such an in-depth, ethnographic investigation of this area (suggested by Coakley, 1982; Fine, 1979; Loy, McPherson, and Kenyon, 1978; Purdy, Eitzen, and Hufnagel, 1982) is useful for two reasons: (1) it enables us to determine whether athletic participation hinders or enhances academic performance, and (2) it reveals the factors and processes that produce this relationship.

We begin by discussing the setting in which this study was conducted and our involvement with members of the scene. We then examine the athletes' academic attitudes, goals, and involvement in their first months on campus. Next, we analyze their involvement in three spheres of university life—athletic, social, and classroom—and the impact of this involvement on their academic attitudes and performance. Last, we discuss the series of pragmatic adjustments they forge, which reflect the gradual erosion of their earlier academic goals and idealism. We conclude by offering a structural analysis of athletes' experiences within the university, which shows how and why they become progressively alienated and detached from academics. We suggest several educational and athletic policies that might help to ameliorate this situation.

METHODS AND SETTING

The Research

Over a four-year period (1980–1984), we conducted a participant-observation study of a major college basketball team. We used team field research strategies (Douglas, 1976) and differentiated, multiperspectival roles to enhance our data gathering and analysis. I (first author) was initially granted access to the team because the coaches became interested in our earlier works on the sociology of sport (Adler and Adler, 1978; Adler, 1981). After reading these and talking with me, they perceived me as an expert who could provide valuable counsel on interpersonal, organizational, and academic matters. Although college and professional sports settings are generally characterized by secrecy and an extreme sensitivity to the insider-outsider distinction (see Jonassohn, Turowetz, and Gruneau, 1981), I gradually gained the trust of significant gatekeepers, particularly the head coach,

and was granted the status and privileges of an assistant coach. As the "team sociologist," my primary duty was to informally counsel players on social, academic, and personal matters and help them make the adjustment to college life and athletics. This role allowed me to become especially close to the athletes, who came to me with their problems, worries, or disgruntlements. Becoming an active member (Adler and Adler, 1987) and interacting with other members on a daily basis was also the only way I could penetrate the inner sanctum and achieve the type of rapport and trust necessary for the study.¹

The second author assumed the outsider role, "debriefing" me when I returned from the setting, looking for sociological patterns in the data, and ensuring that I retained a sociological perspective on my involvement. She helped me conduct a series of intensive, taped interviews with 7 of the coaches and with the 38 basketball players who passed through the program during the four years.² She also helped construct the final analysis and write ten reports.

The Setting

The research was conducted at a medium-size (6,000 students) private university (hereafter referred to as "the University") in the mid-south-central portion of the United States. Most of the students were white, suburban, and middle class. The University, which was striving to become one of the finer private universities in the region, had fairly rigorous academic standards. The athletic department, as a whole, had a very successful recent history: The women's golf team was ranked in the top three nationally, the football team had won their conference in each of the previous four seasons, and the basketball team was ranked in the top forty of Division I NCAA schools and in the top twenty for most of two seasons. They had played in postseason tournaments every year, and in four complete seasons they had won approximately four times as many games as they had lost. Players were generally recruited from the surrounding region. Most of them came from the lower and middle classes, and 70 percent of them were black. In general, the basketball program represented what Coakley (1982) and Frey (1982) have termed big-time college athletics. Although it could not compare to the upper echelon of established basketball dynasties or to the really large athletic programs that wield enormous recruiting and operating budgets, its recent success has compensated for its small size and lack of historical tradition. The University's basketball program could best be described as up-and-coming. Because the basketball team (along with other teams in the athletic department) was ranked nationally and sent graduating members into the professional leagues, the entire athletic milieu was imbued with a sense of seriousness and purpose.

ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

Contrary to the recent negative thought, noted earlier, most of the athletes we observed entered the University feeling idealistic about their impending academic experience and optimistic about their likelihood of graduating. Their idealistic orientation and aspirations derived from several sources. First, they had received numerous cultural messages that a college education would enhance their ability to be successful in our society (cf. Semyonov and Yuchtman-Yaar, 1981). These messages were reinforced by their families, their most outspoken significant others. One sophomore described his family's involvement in his academic career: "When my mom calls she always asks me, first, 'How you feelin',' second, 'How you doin' in school?' She won't even let me talk 'bout basketball 'til she hear I'm doin' okay in school. She always be thinkin' 'bout my future and wantin' me to get that degree." College coaches also reinforced these messages. During recruitment, the coaches stressed the positive aspects of a college education and the importance of graduating (cf. Cross, 1973). The athletes accepted the rhetoric of these sports personnel (what Tannenbaum and Noah [1959] called "sportuguese"), but they never really considered what a higher education entailed. Thus, a third factor fostering their optimism about academics was their naïve assumption that after attending college for four years they would automatically get a degree. They never anticipated the amount or kind of academic work they would have to do to earn that degree. Many of them had not taken a sequence of college preparatory courses in high school.³ Thus, their optimism was based largely on their "successful" academic careers in high school ("I graduated high school, didn't I?") and on their belief that as college athletes they would be academically pampered ("I heard you can get breaks on grades because you're an athlete"). Arriving freshmen commonly held the following set of prior expectations about their future academic performance: (1) they would go to classes and do the work (more broadly conceived as "putting the time in"); (2) they would graduate and get a degree; and (3) there would be no problem.

Of the entering athletes we observed, 47 percent ($n = 18$) requested placement in preprofessional majors in the colleges of business, engineering, or arts and sciences, indicating their initially high academic aspirations and expectations. One sophomore gave the rationale behind his choice of a major: "You come in, you want to make money. How do you make money? You go into business. How do you go into business? You major in business, and you end up having to take these business courses, and you really don't think about it. It sounds okay." Despite warnings from coaches and older teammates that it would be difficult to complete this coursework and play ball, they felt they could easily handle the demands.

Another group of freshmen, who had no specific career aspirations beyond playing professional basketball (45 percent, $n = 17$), were enrolled by

their coaches in more "manageable," athletic-related majors such as physical education or recreation.⁴ However, most of these individuals believed that they too would get a degree. Though they had no clear academic goals, they figured that they would somehow make it through satisfactorily. Only a small number of individuals in our sample (8 percent, $n = 3$) entered college with no aspirations of getting a degree. Either these individuals were such highly touted high school players that they entered college expecting to turn professional before their athletic eligibility expired, or they were uninterested in academics but had no other plans. Their main concern, then, was to remain eligible to play ball. But they never seriously considered the possibility that they would be barred from competition because of low grades.

In their first few months on campus, athletes' early idealism was strengthened. During these summer months, the coaches repeatedly stressed the importance of "getting that piece of paper." Once the school year began, freshman athletes attended required study halls nightly, were told how to get tutors, and were constantly reminded by the coach to go to class. One freshman, interviewed during the preseason, indicated his acceptance of the coaches' rhetoric: "If I can use my basketball ability to open up the door to get an education, hopefully I can use my degree to open up the door to get a good job. . . . I think that's really important to Coach, too, 'cause in practice he always be mentioning how important the degree is an' everything."

Although these athletes unquestionably cared more about their athletic and social lives than their academic performance, getting through school, at least in the abstract, was still important to them. For most, this period of early idealism lasted until the end of their freshman year. After this time, their naïve, early idealism gradually became replaced by disappointment and growing cynicism as they realized how difficult it was to keep up with their schoolwork. They encountered unexpected problems in the articulation of the athletic, social, and academic spheres of the University.

ATHLETIC EXPERIENCES

A major difference athletes encountered in moving from high school to college lay in the size of the athletic sphere. In high school, athletics was primary to their self-identities; but in college, it played an even more central role in their lives. It dominated all facets of their existence, including their academic involvement and performance.

A primary change in their athletic involvement was rooted in the *professionalization* of the sport. Upon entering college, freshman athletes immediately noticed its commercialization (cf. Coakley, 1982; Eitzen, 1979; Hoch, 1972; Sack, 1977; Underwood, 1980). They were no longer playing for enjoyment. This was big business ("there's a lotta money ridin' on us"). As a

result, basketball changed from a recreation to an occupation (cf. Ingham, 1975). The occupational dimensions of the sport and their desire to perform well intensified the pressure to win (cf. Odenkirk, 1981; Underwood, 1980). A senior described this emphasis on winning: "In college the coaches be a lot more concerned on winning and the money comin' in. If they don't win, they may get the boot, and so they pass that pressure on to us athletes. I go to bed every night and I be thinkin' 'bout basketball. That's what college athletics do to you. It take over you mind."

Professionalization also brought with it the fame and glamour of media attention. During the season, athletes were regularly in the newspaper and on television and were greeted as celebrities whenever they ventured off campus. Overall, then, the professionalization of college athletics drew athletes' focus to this arena and riveted it there.

Playing on the basketball team also demanded a larger share of athletes' *time* in college than it had in high school. In addition to the three hours of practice daily ("two-a-days" on weekends during the preseason), players were expected to watch films of other teams, to be available for team meetings, to return to their dorm rooms by curfew, and to leave the campus for two to five days at a time for road trips.⁵ They also had to spend a certain amount of their time with athletically related others: the media, fans, and boosters (rich businesspersons who contributed money and wanted to feel close to the program). This involvement often conflicted with potential academic time: Afternoon practice conflicted with the required courses or labs in certain majors, games and road trips conflicted with the time athletes needed for exams and term papers, and booster functions cut into their discretionary time. By the end of their first year, most athletes acknowledged that their athletic-related activities affected their academic performance. As one senior explained: "We got to go two-a-days, get up as early as the average student, go to school, then go to practice for three hours like nothing you have ever strained. . . . It's brutal 'cause you be so tired. Fatigue is what makes a lot of those guys say 'Chuck it, I'm goin' to sleep.' You don't feel like sittin' there an' readin' a book, an' you not goin' comprehend that much anyway 'cause you so tired." Fatigue (cf. Edwards, 1984) and restricted time for studying caused many athletes to give up and cease caring about their academic work. Thus, rather than use the little free time they had to catch up on their studies, they usually chose to spend it socializing or just sleeping.

Athletes' academic performance was also affected by *coaches' intervention* in their academic lives. Assistant coaches handled academic matters for the athletes, declaring their majors, registering them for courses, adjusting their schedules, and periodically contacting their professors (to monitor their progress). Athletes, therefore, were largely uninvolved in academic decision-making and did not interact directly with professors, academic counselors, or academic administrators. As a result, they failed to develop the knowledge, initiative, or, in many cases, the interest to handle these academic mat-

ters themselves. As one sophomore stated, "The day before class you go up to the office and they hand you a card that got your schedule all filled out on it. You don't say nothin' or think nothin' 'bout it, you just go. And it kinda make you feel like you not involved in it, 'cause you don't have nothin' to do with it. Like it's their's job, not yours."

Because the coaches managed these administrative matters, the athletes developed a false sense of security, a feeling that someone was looking out for them academically and would make sure that they were given another chance, a feeling that they could foul up and not have to pay the consequences. They believed that their coaches dominated their professors and the administrators, that they would be "taken care of" academically, and that they need not involve themselves in this arena. This also led them to distance themselves from their academics and to diminish their effort.

Having formed this belief, many athletes were surprised to discover, usually sometime during their sophomore or junior year, that this overseeing and management extended to administrative areas only. Coaches placed them in their courses, but they could not guarantee them special breaks. Athletes then realized, often too late, that they were responsible for attending classes and completing their assignments on their own and that they had to do the same work that other students did to pass their courses. Many athletes were shepherded through high school; therefore, they were ill-equipped to assume responsibilities in college and often failed to fulfill them.

Finally, the athletes received greater *reinforcement* for athletic performance than for academic performance. No one closely monitored their academic behavior, but they were carefully watched at games, practices, booster functions, and on road trips. The celebrity and social status they derived from the media, boosters, and fans brought them immediate gratification, which the academic realm, with its emphasis on future rewards, could not offer.

With a few exceptions, athletes' experiences within the academic realm brought neither close contact nor positive reinforcement. Like many other college students, athletes generally found their professors aloof and uninterested. One freshman gave his impressions of college professors:

At my high school back home, the teachers would make sure everyone done the reading before we went on to the next subject. The teachers really cared if the students got behind, so sometimes they would teach individually. But here, by the next time the class meets, they ask if anyone has any questions, and if no one says anything, then most of them would give a pop quiz. I cannot really say the teachers care here, because if you get behind it's your problem, not theirs.

Given the paucity of contact with the faculty, the lack of reinforcement within the academic realm, and the omnipresence of the coaches, media,

fans, and boosters, who provided both positive and negative feedback on daily athletic performance, it became easier for athletes to turn away from academics and concentrate their efforts on sport.

SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

The athletes' social experiences also affected their academic performance. Their social lives at the University were dominated by their relationships with other athletes. They had initially expected to derive both friendship and status recognition from a wide variety of students, both athletes and nonathletes, as they had in high school (cf. Coleman, 1961; Cusick, 1973; Eitzen, 1975; Rehberg and Schafer, 1968; Spady, 1970). But instead of being socially integrated, they found themselves isolated (cf. Antonelli, 1970). They were isolated geographically because they were housed in the athletes' dorm in a remote part of campus. They were cut off temporarily by the demands of their practices, games, study halls, and booster functions. They were isolated culturally by their racial and socioeconomic differences from the rest of the student body. They were isolated physically by their size and build, which many students, especially women, found intimidating. A freshman described his feelings of social alienation:

This school is nothing like I thought it would be when I left home. The social life is very different and I have to adjust to it. A main problem for me are the white people. Where I grew up, all my friends were black, so I really don't know how to act toward whites. Here, when I speak to some of them, they just give me a fake smile. I really can't understand the people here because this is college and everyone should have a good time socially.

Since they had few opportunities to interact with nonathletes, they formed extremely strong social bonds among themselves. Housed together in a dorm reserved almost exclusively for male athletes (primarily football and basketball players), they were bonded together into a reference group and peer subculture. Relations within this group were especially cohesive because they lived, played, and traveled together.

Within the dorm, athletes exchanged information about various individual attitudes and beliefs about their athletic, social, and academic experiences. The peer subculture thus provided them with a set of norms and values that guided their interpretations and behavior within these three realms.

One of the most predominant influences of the peer subculture was its anti-intellectual and anti-academic character (cf. Coleman, 1960; Sack, 1977). Typically, dorm conversation centered on the athletic or social dimensions of the athletes' lives; little reference was made to academic, cultural, or intellectual pursuits (cf. Meggsey, 1971; Shaw, 1972). As one junior

remarked, "If a athlete was living in the dorm with just ordinary people, what do you think they'll be talkin' about? Ordinary things. But you got all athletes here. What are they goin' be talkin' about? It won't be Reaganomics, believe me. It'll definitely be *Sports Illustrated*." Separating athletes from other students thus made their athletic reality dominant and distanced them from any academic inclinations they may have had. The same athlete continued:

The two images are set apart because one side of us is, "My momma send me to school to be an engineer, and in order to be an engineer I got to go to class every day and study hard," and the other side is "I come to school to play basketball. I didn't come to school to study that hard." So to keep those two images apart, to keep you thinking basketball night and day, they puts you in with all these other jocks dreamin' in they dream worlds.

The athletes' peer subculture also subverted academic orientations by discouraging them from exerting effort in academics. In fact, individuals who displayed too much interest, effort, or success in academics were often ridiculed, as one player described: "When most of the other guys are making D's and F's, if I work hard and get a B on a test, if I go back to the dorm and they all see I got a B, then they goin' snap on [make fun of] me. So most of the guys, they don't try. They all act like it's a big joke." Like the Chicano subculture Horowitz (1983) observed, the athletes' peer subculture valued education in the abstract, yet the commitments valued by the athletes' subculture conflicted with the commitments necessary to make that value carry over into practical reality. Their peers thus provided them with excuses and justifications that legitimated their poor academic performance and neutralized the importance of this realm in their self-identities.

CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

Athletes' attitudes toward academics and their effort and performance were also affected by the difficulties and disruptions they encountered in the classroom. Athletes believed that many professors labeled them as jocks because they looked different from most of the other students, they were surrounded in their classes by other athletes, and they were identified by coaches early in the semester to the professors as athletes. They perceived, then, that professors treated them differently from the general student body. On the one hand, because of the widely held subcultural lore that as college athletes they would have special privileges and because of the important and visible role they played at the University, they commonly thought that professors would accord them greater tolerance—i.e., extra tutoring sessions, relaxed deadlines, relaxed academic standards (cf. Raney, Knapp, and Small, 1983). This perception was fostered by their placement,

especially in their freshman year, in courses taught by sympathetic faculty members who tried to give them extra attention or assistance. Because of these placements, athletes often began college thinking that academics would not be a major concern. On the other hand, athletes also encountered a number of less sympathetic professors who they thought stereotyped them as dumb jocks or cocky athletes. In these cases they "rejected the rejectors" (Sykes and Matza, 1957), using persecution as a rationale for disengaging from academics. One player discussed his experiences with professors:

'Some are goin' help you, if they can, and you can always tell who they are 'cause you got a bunch o' athletes in your class. Some try to make it harder on you. They're out to get you 'cause they feel like you living like a king and it shouldn't be that way. With those jerks, it don't matter how hard you try. They gonna flunk you just 'cause you a athlete.'

This differential treatment served to reinforce their perceptions that they were athletes more than students. Therefore, when they returned to their dorm rooms at night, exhausted and sore from practicing, it became easier for them to rationalize, procrastinate, and "fritter" (Bernstein, 1978) their time away instead of studying.

Athletes also became uninterested in academics because of the *content* of their classes. Many individuals placed in physical education or recreation courses, even those who were fairly uninterested in academics from the beginning, felt that their courses lacked academic or practical merit and were either comical, demeaning, or both. One sophomore articulated the commonly held view: "How could I get into this stuff? They got me takin' nutrition, mental retardation, square dancing, and camp counseling. I thought I was goin' learn something here. It's a bunch o' b.s."

When athletes enrolled in more advanced or demanding courses to fulfill their requirements, they often found themselves unequipped for the type of work expected. Because of their inadequate academic backgrounds, poor study habits, tight schedules, peer distractions, and waning motivation, the athletes often became frustrated and bored. Their anticipated positive feedback from academics was replaced by a series of disappointments from low grades and failed classes. One player described how his failures made him feel inadequate and uncertain: "When I first came here I thought I'd be goin' to class all the time and I'd study and that be it. But I sure didn't think it meant studyin' all the time. Back in high school you just be memorizin' things, but that's not what they want here. Back in high school I thought I'd be a pretty good student, but now I don't know."

Athletes' experiences in the classroom were thus very different from their preconceptions. The work was harder and they were not taken care of to the extent they had imagined. Because of the intense competition in the

athletic arena, they became obsessed with success (Harris and Eitzen, 1978). Their frequent academic failures (or, at best, mediocre grades) led to their embarrassment and despair, which caused them to engage in role-distancing (Ball, 1976) and to abandon some of the self-investment they had made in their academic performance. To be safe, it was better not to try than to try and not succeed. As we noted earlier, this posture was reinforced by their peer subculture.

ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENTS

As college athletes progressed through school, they changed their perspectives and priorities, re-evaluating the feasibility of their original optimistic, albeit casually formed, academic goals. This caused them to effect a series of *pragmatic adjustments* in their academic attitudes, efforts, and goals.

First, whenever possible, athletes externalized the blame for their academic failures. Failures, for instance, were not caused by their own inadequacies or lack of effort but by boring professors, stupid courses, exhaustion, the coaches' demands, or injury. This allowed them to accept the frequent signs of failure more easily and served as an important neutralizing mechanism for their competitiveness.

More importantly, athletes re-examined their academic goals. Because of their initially optimistic expectations, some athletes had declared majors based on career choices that sounded good to them or their parents (e.g., doctor, teacher, engineer, or businessman). About one-fourth of the individuals who began in preprofessional majors stayed in these majors all the way through college and graduated.⁶ Nevertheless, these individuals generally expended less effort and had less success than they had initially anticipated. Though they graduated in their original major, their academic performance was largely characterized by an attitude of getting by; in most cases, they achieved only the minimum GPA and took the minimum number of hours required for eligibility. One junior described how his attitude toward academics had changed during his years at college: "If I was a student like most other students I could do well, but when you play the calibre of ball we do, you just can't be an above-average student. What I strive for now is just to be an average student. My best GPA was 2.75. You just don't find the time to do all the reading."

More commonly, athletes in preprofessional majors found that a more concrete adjustment was necessary. The remaining three quarters of this group dropped out of preprofessional programs and enrolled in more manageable majors. This shift indicated that they had abandoned both their academic idealism and their earlier career goals. Nevertheless, they still maintained the goal of graduating, regardless of the major. As one player commented, "Look at George [a former player]. He was a rec major, but now

he's got a great job in sales, working for some booster. It don't matter what you major in as long as you keep your nose clean and get that piece of paper."

Athletes who began their college careers with lower academic aspirations, majoring in physical education or recreation, made corresponding adjustments. Approximately one-fifth of these athletes held onto their initial goal and graduated in one of these fields. But like the preprofessional majors, they did not perform as well as they had planned. The other four-fifths realized, usually relatively late, that their chances of graduating from college were slight. This genuinely distressed them, because getting a degree had become both a hope and an expectation. They shifted their orientation, then, toward maintaining their athletic eligibility. A junior's remarks illustrate how this shift affected his attitude toward academics:

I used to done thought I was goin' to school, but now I know it's not for real. . . . I don't have no academic goals no more. A player a coach is counting on, that's all he think about is ball. That's what he signed to do. So what you gotta do is show up, show your smilin' face, try as hard as you can. Don't just lay over in the room. That's all the coach can ask. Or else you may not find yourself playing next year.

By their senior year, when they had completed their final eligibility requirements, many members of this last group entirely abandoned their concern with their academic performance.⁷ As one senior put it, "I just be waitin', man. I be waitin' for my shot at the NBA. I be thinking about that all the time. Once the season is over, I be splittin'. I don't see no reason to go to classes no more."

As a result of their experiences at the University, athletes grew increasingly cynical about and uninterested in academics. They accepted their marginal status and lowered their academic interest, effort, and goals. They progressively detached themselves from caring about or identifying themselves with this sphere.

DISCUSSION

We have just described how college athletes progress from an early phase of idealism about their impending academic experiences to an eventual state of pragmatic detachment. The initial differences among the athletes in academic aptitudes, skills, and expectations eventually erode, causing even motivated freshmen to slip into a pattern of diminished interest and effort. The universality of this transformation (albeit with variations) suggests that there is something endemic to universities with big-time athletic programs that significantly affects athletes' orientations and behavior. An overview of

the structural characteristics and embedded processes athletes encounter can help explain how and why their behavior changes.

First, athletes are overwhelmed by the demands and intensity of the athletic realm, which absorbs their concentration and commitment. They react by willingly entering the vortex of media celebrity and fantasies about future professional athletic careers. Second, athletes find themselves socially isolated from other students because of their geographic and temporal separation and their physical and cultural differences. In this way, athletes resemble Simmel's strangers—i.e., individuals who are full-fledged members of the group yet at the same time are outside of the group (cited in Wolff, 1950:402-408). By being part of, but not like, the larger student body, athletes experience the tension between nearness and distance. This heightens their sensitivity to their strangeness and focuses their attention on those elements they do not share with other students. As a result, the internal cohesion of their peer subculture becomes strengthened and their self-identities become more firmly anchored within it. Finally, for many athletes, the gap between their academic abilities and the university's expectations brings failure, frustration, and alienation. The peer subculture exacerbates the situation by devaluing academic involvement and neutralizing academic failure. Athletes respond by gradually withdrawing from their commitment to academics.

These structural factors are ultimately much stronger predictors of athletes' academic success than any of their initial individual characteristics. Their early academic involvement varies according to their goals, intelligence, talents, parents' attitudes, and other individual attributes, but the common structure of their experiences erodes many of these distinctions. Some athletes excel in all areas of college, and their success is well-publicized (cf. Looney, 1984). But most college athletes become disillusioned with academics by the time their athletic eligibility expires. This combination of structural factors influencing athletes' behavior, admittedly an extreme example, could also explain the academic careers of other students. Students who are distracted by an outside interest (i.e., a job or an avocation), who belong to a peer group that de-emphasizes the value of academics (i.e., a fraternity), and who become frustrated in the academic realm are likely to be academically unsuccessful in college.

The transformation athletes undergo corresponds to Goffman's (1959) conception of occupational role progression, in which the attitudes of persons socialized to a new social status (here, college athlete) evolve from belief to disbelief. This process begins with the learning and internalization of charter values. For college athletes, this occurs during the final year of high school and the freshman year of college, when they form moderately high aspirations and expectations about their academic futures. A period of desocialization then ensues, in which athletes progressively realize the structural constraints framing their situation. They become unable to accommodate the myriad, often conflicting, expectations and demands confronting

them. As a result, they make choices and establish priorities that compromise their early idealism. Expediency thus supplants a concern for academics (Ingham and Smith, 1974), leading them to engage in role-distancing and to forge pragmatic adaptations that undermine their academic performance.

This in-depth investigation confirms the findings and interpretations of those studies positing a negative relationship between athletic participation and academic performance at universities with big-time athletic programs. We extend these analyses by showing that college athletes' academic performance is multifaceted and is determined less by demographic characteristics and high school experiences than by the structure of their college experiences. Athletes progress through a pattern of experiences, which first raises their hopes and then diminishes their opportunities for attaining the professed goals of the educational system.

Given the revenue that athletic programs generate, it may be unrealistic to expect this structure to change dramatically. However, there are several policy implications that can be derived from this research. First, athletes should be sheltered, as much as possible, from the enticing whirlwind of celebrity. This can best be accomplished by reinstating the ban on freshman eligibility. Second, athletic dorms should be abolished and athletes should be better integrated into the larger university culture. In these ways we can begin to transform college athletes from strangers into neighbors. Third, athletes should be provided with more academic role models and advisors. The current arrangement, in which athletic personnel masquerade as academic advisors, functions counterproductively to the academic goals of the university. Only after these changes are made can college athletes begin to meet the goals of the educational system.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed discussion of the methodological issues involved in this research, see Adler (1984).
2. Some individuals were interviewed several times, at various stages of their socialization process.
3. Several sociological studies have noted that the admission standards for athletes are lower than those for the general student body, leading to the admission of academically marginal, ill-prepared students (Edwards, 1984; Purdy, Eitzen, and Hufnagel, 1982; Sack, 1977; Shapiro, 1984; Spady, 1970).
4. This figure includes a small number of athletes who decided, usually during their sophomore or junior year, not to play professionally but to go into an athletically-related occupation such as coaching.
5. Edwards (1984:7) has estimated that during the season, basketball players spend fifty hours a week preparing for, participating in, recovering from, and traveling to games.
6. These figures represent rough estimates based on the number of individuals who graduated, the number of individuals who used up their eligibility, and projections for individuals still in the program. They are intended to be suggestive rather than exact.
7. Ironically, however, even the marginal players never abandoned their dreams of making it in the NBA.

REFERENCES

- Adler, P., *Momentum: A Theory of Social Action*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981.
- Adler, P., "The sociologist as celebrity: The role of the media in field research." *Qualitative Sociology* (1984) 7:310-26.
- Adler, P. and P. A. Adler, "The role of momentum in sport." *Urban Life* (1978) 7:153-76.
- Adler, P. A. and P. Adler, *Joining the Crowd: Membership Roles in Field Research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1987.
- Antonelli, F., "Psychological problems of top-level athletes." *International Journal of Sport Psychology* (1970) 1:34-39.
- Ball, D., "Failure in sport." *American Sociological Review* (1976) 41:726-39.
- Bernstein, S., "Getting it done: Notes on student fritters." Pp. 17-23 in J. Lofland (Ed.), *Interaction of Everyday Life*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978.
- Cookley, J. J., *Sport in Society*, 2nd ed. St. Louis: Mosby, 1982.
- Coleman, J. S., "Adolescent subculture and academic achievement." *American Journal of Sociology* (1960) 65:337-47.
- Coleman, J. S., *The Adolescent Society*. New York: Free Press, 1961.
- Cross, H. M., "The college athlete and the institution." *Law and Contemporary Problems* (1973) 38:151-71.
- Cusick, P. A., *Inside High School*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973.
- Douglas, J. D., *Investigative Social Research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976.
- Edwards, H., "The collegiate arms race: Origins and implications of the 'Rule 48' controversy." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (1984) 8:4-22.
- Eitzen, D. S., "Athletics in the status system of male adolescents: A replication of Coleman's 'The Adolescent Society.'" *Adolescence* (1975) 10:268-76.
- Eitzen, D. S., "Sport and deviance." Pp. 73-89 in D. S. Eitzen (Ed.), *Sport in Contemporary Society*. New York: St. Martin's, 1979.
- Fine, G. A., "Preadolescent socialization through organized athletics: The construction of moral meanings in little league baseball." Pp. 79-105 in M. Krotee (Ed.), *Dimensions of Sport Sociology*. Corning, NY: Leisure Press, 1979.
- Frey, J. H., "Boosterism, scarce resources and institutional control: The future of American intercollegiate athletics." *International Review of Sport Sociology* (1982) 17:53-70.
- Goffman, E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1959.
- Hanks, M. P. and B. K. Eckland, "Athletics and social participation in the educational attainment process." *Sociology of Education* (1976) 49:271-94.
- Harris, D. S. and D. S. Eitzen, "The consequences of failure in sport." *Urban Life* (1978) 7:177-88.
- Harrison, J. H., "Intercollegiate football participation and academic achievement." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Sociological Association, Dallas, 1976.
- Henschen, K. P. and D. Fry, "An archival study of the relationship of intercollegiate athletic participation and graduation." *Sociology of Sport Journal* (1984) 1:52-56.
- Hoch, P., *Rip Off the Big Game*. New York: Doubleday, 1972.
- Horowitz, R., *Honor and the American Dream*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983.
- Ingham, A. G., "Occupational subcultures in the work world of sport." Pp. 337-89 in D. W. Ball and J. W. Loy (Eds.), *Sport and Social Order: Contributions to the Sociology of Sport*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975.
- Ingham, A. G. and M. D. Smith, "The social implications of the interaction between spectators and athletes." Pp. 189-224 in J. Wilmore (Ed.), *Exercise and Sport Science Reviews*, Vol. 2. New York: Academic Press, 1974.
- Jonassohn, K., A. Turowetz, and R. Grunau, "Research methods in the sociology of sport." *Qualitative Sociology* (1981) 4:179-97.
- Looney, D. S., "He came out picture perfect." *Sports Illustrated* (1984) 60, 22:44-50.
- Loy, J. W., B. D. McPherson, and G. Kenyon, *Sport and Social Systems*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978.

◆ FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Meggysey, D., *Out of Their League*. Berkeley, CA: Ramparts, 1971.
- Mitchener, J. A., *Sports in America*. New York: Random House, 1976.
- Nyquist, E. B., "Wine, women, and money: College athletics today and tomorrow." *Educational Review* (1979) 60:376-93.
- Odenkirk, J. E., "Intercollegiate athletics: Big business or sport?" *Academe* (1981) 67:62-66.
- Purdy, D. A., D. S. Eitzen, and R. Hufnagel, "Are athletes also students? The educational attainment of college athletes." *Social Problems* (1982) 29:439-48.
- Raney, J., T. Knapp, and M. Small, "Pass one for the gipper: Student athletes and university coursework." *Ardena Review* (1983) 7:53-59.
- Rehberg, R. A. and W. E. Schafer, "Participation in interscholastic athletics and college expectations." *American Journal of Sociology* (1968) 73:732-40.
- Sack, A. L., "Big time college football. Whose free ride?" *Quest* (1977) 27:87-97.
- Sack, A. L. and R. Thiel, "College football and social mobility: A case study of Notre Dame football players." *Sociology of Education* (1979) 52:60-66.
- Semyonov, M. and E. Yuchtman-Yaar, "Professional sports as an alternative channel of social mobility." *Sociological Inquiry* (1981) 1:47-53.
- Shapiro, B., "Intercollegiate athletic participation and academic achievement: A case study of Michigan State University student-athletes." *Sociology of Sport Journal* (1984) 1:46-51.
- Shaw, G., *Meat on the Hoof*. New York: St. Martin's, 1972.
- Spady, W. G., "Lament for the letterman: Effects of peer status and extra-curricular activities on goals and achievements." *American Journal of Sociology* (1970) 75:680-702.
- Spivey, D. and T. A. Jones, "Intercollegiate athletic servitude: A case study of the black Illinois student-athletes, 1931-1967." *Social Science Quarterly* (1975) 55:939-47.
- Sykes, G. M. and D. Matza, "Techniques of neutralization." *American Sociological Review* (1957) 22:664-70.
- Tannenbaum, P. M. and J. E. Noah, "Sportuguese: A study of sports page communication." *Journalism Quarterly* (1959) 36:163-70.
- Underwood, J., "The writing is on the wall." *Sports Illustrated* (1980) 52, 21:36-71.
- Webb, H., "Social backgrounds of college athletes." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, St. Louis, 1968.
- Wolff, K. H. (Ed. and Trans.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press, 1950.
- Adler, Patricia A., and Peter Adler. 1991. *Backboards and Blackboards: College Athletics and Role Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Books, Dana D., and Ronald C. Althouse (Eds.). 2000. *Racism in College Athletics: The African American Athlete's Experience*, 2nd ed. (Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology).
- Byers, Walter, with Charles Hammer. 1995. *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
- Eitzen, D. Stanley. 2000. "Racism in Big-Time College Sport: Prospects for the Year 2020 and Proposals for Change," in *Racism in College Athletics: The African American Experience*, 2nd ed., Dana D. Brooks and Ronald C. Althouse (Eds.) (Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology).
- Fleisher, Arthur, Brian Goff, and Robert Tollison. 1993. *The National Collegiate Athletic Association: A Study in Cartel Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Gup, Ted. 1998. "Losses Surpass Victories, by Far, in Big-Time College Sports," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 18):A52.
- Sack, Allen L., and Ellen J. Staurowsky. 1998. *College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA's Amateur Myth* (Westport, CT: Praeger).
- Shaw, Peter L. 1995. "Achieving Title IX Gender Equity in College Athletics in an Era of Fiscal Austerity," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 19 (February):2-27.
- Sperber, Murray. 1993. "Flagrant Foul: How Professors Let Jocks Push Them Around," *Lingua Franca* 4 (November/December):1, 26-31.
- Sperber, Murray. 1998. *Onward to Victory: The Crises That Shaped College Sports* (New York: Henry Holt).
- Suggs, Welch. 1999. "College Basketball on the Line," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 26):A53-A55.
- Williamson, Thad. 1998. "Bad As They Wanna Be: Loving the Game is Harder as Colleges Sell Out Themselves, the Fans, the Athletes," *The Nation* (August 10/17):38-41.
- Wyatt, Joe B. 1999. "Our Moral Duty to Clean Up College Athletics," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 13):A56.
- Yaeger, Don, and Douglas S. Looney. 1993. *Under the Tarnished Dome: Notre Dame Betrayed Its Ideals for Football Glory* (New York: Simon and Schuster).
- Yaeger, Don, and Alexander Wolff. 1997. "Troubling Questions," *Sports Illustrated* (July 7):70-79.