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Higher Education and Athlete's Second Career

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Abstract

Introduction and purpose. Many athletes obtain popularity during their time in sports, but what they do after the end of their professional careers is something that is rarely well known. It has to be stated that a sports career is a specific activity because it starts early in life, lasts relatively short, and the greatest successes usually occur when non-athlete peers are just starting to climb the steps of a typical professional career. Some former athletes do great after they retire from sports, but there are also many of those who have difficulties finding themselves in a new for them reality. The article aims to present how the level of education of former athletes' affects their subsequent professional careers.

Material and method. The study involved 301 former basketball players who previously played in 4 top leagues in Poland. The dependent variables in this study are the most common in the literature on the subject indicators of career success, such as earnings and job satisfaction. In turn, the independent variable is the level of education. In addition, the study considered whether the represented sports level influences the acquisition of education.

Results. It turns out that those players who played in the top league finished their sports careers later and thus earned longer on basketball. However, more players from the lower leagues have higher education, and they are now more satisfied with their work.

Conclusions. It may not be easy to combine professional sports at the highest level with studying. But the results of the research show that in the case of basketball, many athletes graduate from university. What is more, former players with higher education are usually very satisfied with their current job. In conclusion, it can be stated that former basketball players do well in their second careers, compared to the national average.

Keywords: education, second career, athletes, basketball, league level.

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Introduction

The article discusses the second career of former professional athletes. The interest in this topic stems from the fact that a sports career is a specific activity ¹ because it starts early in life, lasts relatively short, and the greatest successes usually occur when non-athlete peers are just starting to climb the steps of a typical professional career. Ending a sports career and moving to other professions is usually a demanding and stressful task ^{2,3}. It should also be added that despite the very high salaries of top athletes ⁴ and the prevailing belief that professional athletes, in general, receive very high salaries, only a few of them are able to secure themselves financially for the future. Therefore, it is worth considering what sports career factors affect the later professional life of former athletes.

Some former athletes do great after they retire from sports ⁵, but there are also many of those who have difficulties finding themselves in a new for them reality ⁶. Some studies conducted in the best leagues in the United States have shown that despite high earnings during sports careers, many athletes quickly got into financial trouble (Torre, 2009). In some leagues – such as the NBA ⁸, they try to deal with this problem themselves by introducing a retirement system for players. Some professional athletes also make money from other sources, already during their sports careers, for example by participating in advertising, investing money in real estate, and also setting up their own companies. Furthermore, the dual career of athletes (e.g. combining sports with education) is also becoming more common ⁹. There is a more and more common belief that athletes should continue their education in college, because not everyone will be able to achieve great success in sports, and also a sports career can be quickly interrupted or ended by injuries. In a case like this, it can be very difficult for an athlete without any education to find a satisfactory job, and undoubtedly a higher education degree is something that can help in this kind of situation. Nowadays the government and the various sports associations are also trying to provide programs to assist former athletes in taking up new jobs ¹⁰. These types of activities can help former athletes, but still now and then the media shows examples of former athletes struggling to adapt to a new reality.

In the literature on the subject, education, social origin, social capital, marital status, and psychological characteristics are often listed as determinants of a person's situation in the labor market ^{11,12}.

However, a sports career is a rather specific occupation. According to the literature on the subject, the professional transition of athletes is differentiated by sports identity, the length of the career, the main reason for its termination, and the degree of satisfaction with it^{13,14}. It is also worth considering that more and more research indicates that sport may be important for working life. The positive effect may come from the fact that through sport a person can develop certain competencies (e.g. perseverance), build social capital, and improve physical and mental health¹⁵⁻¹⁹. However, in the above-mentioned studies, the impact of amateur rather than professional sports was analyzed.

In this study, it was decided to check whether former athletes with higher education do better later in their second careers than former athletes with lower levels of education. Therefore, at this point, it should be indicated based on what it can be assessed that someone is doing better in professional life. The literature most frequently lists two quite different criteria of career success: objective – measurable, and subjective – accessible only to the person in question^{11,20-22}. Objectively, career success can be assessed using observable and measurable indicators such as earnings, promotion and the social status of a profession. It has to be stated that the majority of researchers focus on objective indicators¹¹. Subjective career success, on the other hand, is related to the feelings and emotions one has towards a job. The primary indicator, in this case, is job satisfaction, in addition to being proud of one's accomplishments and work-life balance. Therefore, in this study, earnings and job satisfaction were used to assess the current professional situation of former basketball players.

In studies of the second careers of ex-athletes, the top performers are most often described²³⁻²⁶, forgetting that many athletes play in the lower leagues and are also reliant on sport as their main job. In this study, former basketball players who played basketball at different levels of competition were selected for the study group. This study aimed to present how the level of the athletes' education affects their subsequent professional careers. The study verified the research hypothesis that former basketball players with higher education achieve greater career success than former basketball players with a lower level of education.

Materials and Methods

The online survey was conducted in 2021 and 301 people took part in it. The research group consisted of former basketball players who played in Poland. There are 4 national basketball leagues in Poland, and the higher the league, the more professional the level. The most numerous group were those who mainly represented the second level of the competition – 88, and the least were those who mainly represented the highest level – 47. The average age of the respondents was 38.1, and they ended their sports career at the average age of 27.5. The average length of a sports career in the study group was 10.13 years. It is also worth adding that basketball is one of the most popular team sports in the world, which is also often discussed by scientists (e.g. 27,28).

The list of former players was created based on a review of archival league tables and team rosters. The link to the survey was sent directly to the former basketball players by e-mail or by social media. Sometimes, those who had already participated were asked for help in obtaining the e-mail addresses of other respondents. The survey was completely anonymous and voluntary. The return of the questionnaires was about 40%.

Statistical Analysis. Microsoft Excel 2019 and IBM SPSS Statistics 26 were both used to process the quantitative data of research. The study used descriptive data analysis as well as statistical tests such as ANOVA, Kruskal-Wallis, and U Manna-Whitney. The statistical tests were selected according to the variables.

Results

In the study group, as many as 77.4% of former basketball players had higher education. Interestingly, the remaining 22.6% had at least secondary education. It can be said that this is a very high percentage because generally, only 42.5% of Poles aged 25-34 have completed higher education²⁹. This is probably because basketball is often practiced at universities, and in Poland, many universities have their team at the 2nd and 3rd league levels. It is also worth considering whether the league level that a player represents has an impact on his level of education. When starting the study, it was assumed that the higher the league level a player represents, the more difficult it is for him to complete his studies, especially in the case of the highest level, because it is a fully professional. In this study, the players were divided into the level that they mainly represented in their careers, and in this way, 4 groups were obtained. The table below presents the education level of the respondents depending on the presented level.

Table 1. League level and education

League level	Education	
	Secondary	Higher
Ekstraklasa	42.6% (n=20)	57.4% (n=27)
1 st league	20.5% (n=18)	79.5% (n=70)
2 nd league	18.3% (n=15)	81.7% (n=67)
3 rd league	17.3% (n=14)	82.7% (n=67)

Among all analyzed groups, the lowest percentage of people with higher education was in the Ekstraklasa group. This is probably because playing in a professional league requires a lot of commitment from players and they have little time to do other things. Also, they receive relatively high salaries, which is why they are more willing to focus on the further development of their basketball skills. The league level turned out to be a factor that significantly differentiated the level of education. The obtained value of the Kruskal-Wallis test is statistically significant: $H = 13.11$; $p = 0.004$. It is also worth analyzing the importance of the league level represented by players on other aspects of the sports career. It seems it is useful in a way to understand why a much smaller percentage of players from the top league has a lower level of education. The table below shows how the league level affects the duration of a sports career and the number of years of basketball as the main source of income.

Table 2. League level, the number of years of main earnings from sport, and the age of ending a career

League level	Average number of years of sport as a major income	Average age of the end of career
Ekstraklasa	11.62 (n=47)	30.54 (n=13)
1 st league	8.90 (n=88)	27.51 (n=43)
2 nd league	3.85 (n=82)	27.85 (n=53)
3 rd league	1.89 (n=81)	26.68 (n=59)

Usually, players from better leagues receive higher salaries. There is no official data on the earnings of athletes in Poland, but according to the author's knowledge, based on his professional and scientific experience, it can be said that the average earnings in Ekstraklasa (depending on the player's position and seniority) amount to net PLN 15,000 (about EUR 3,250), in the 1st league it is approximately PLN 7,500 (EUR 1,650), in the 2nd league it is approximately PLN 3,500 (EUR 770) and in the 3rd league it is approximately PLN 1,500 (EUR 330). It is worth to add that the average salary in Poland in the enterprise sector in August 2021 amounted to PLN 5,844 (about EUR 1,260) (GUS, 2021). The results show that for the Ekstraklasa players basketball was their main source of income for an average of 11.62 years and in every lower league, this period was gradually shorter, up to the 3rd league where it was only less than two years. These results indicate that in the lower leagues, a person can earn money for playing basketball but it is often not high enough to be the only source of income. Differences in the average number of years of sport as a major source of income turned out to be statistically significant as indicated by the following ANOVA results: $F(3,294) = 55.50$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.36$. When it comes to the average age of ending a sports career, it was the highest in the group of Ekstraklasa players. This is probably because people playing in the lower leagues, due to lower earnings, had to take up a different jobs over time. It is also not surprising that the players who managed to get to the highest level in the country were good basketball players and therefore practiced this sport for a longer time. However, the differences in the average age of retirement from sports did not turn out to be statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

In the study, the current earnings of former athletes were compared with the national average in Poland. It turns out that most former players earn currently better than the national average, regardless of their level of education. It is interesting, however, that 48.6% of former players with a higher education degree now earn much better than the national average. Detailed results are presented in the table below. Despite some differences, it cannot be said that they are statistically significant, as indicated by the results of the Mann-Whitney U test: $U = 682.50$, $Z = -1.68$, $p = 0.092$.

Table 3. League level and comparison of current earnings with the national average in Poland

Education	Much lower	Lower	Similar	Higher	Much higher
Higher	2.1% (n=5)	7.7% (n=18)	10.7% (n=25)	40.8% (n=95)	38.6% (n=90)
Secondary	3.0% (n=2)	4.5% (n=3)	17.9% (n=12)	49.3% (n=33)	25.4% (n=17)

Finally, it was decided to check the satisfaction of former basketball players with their current work. Detailed results are presented in the table below. It turns out that most of the former basketball players are very satisfied or satisfied with their current work.

Table 4. Education level and satisfaction with the current job

Education	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Hard to say	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Higher	1.3% (n=3)	2.6% (n=6)	3.0% (n=7)	33.5% (n=78)	58.4% (n=136)
Secondary	0.0% (n=0)	1.5% (n=1)	5.9% (n=4)	47.1% (n=32)	39.7% (n=27)

Looking at the highest level of satisfaction (very satisfied), the highest percentage was recorded in the group of former players with higher education (58.4%). It can be said that this is a very high result because, in general in Poland, 36.8% of Poles are very satisfied with their work³⁰, which is roughly similar to that of former basketball players with secondary education. The differences between groups are statistically significant, as shown by the Mann-Whitney U test results: $U = 6388.50$, $Z = -2.73$, $p = 0.006$.

Discussion

As it has been written before, being a professional athlete is a specific job, mainly because the period of a sports career is limited and usually around the age of 30 players have to look for other professions. In this study, a few interesting dependencies were found. Firstly, it turned out that among top league players, basketball has been the main source of earnings for the longest time, and the lower the league, the shorter this period. Secondly, the higher the league level in which a player plays, the later he ends his sports career. These two factors can be closely related because if someone plays basketball well and gets decent money for it, it seems logical that this is enough motivation to play basketball for a longer time. Of course, the end of careers can also be influenced by other factors, such as health or family problems, but in this study, it was the Ekstraklasa players who ended their careers at the latest.

What is very interesting is that the vast majority of the analyzed players had a higher education – especially in the lower leagues. According to the literature on the subject, education has a significant impact on the position of a person in the labor market³¹. Probably the lower percentage of players with higher education in Ekstraklasa is because it is a fully professional league that strongly engages the players present there. On the other hand, players from the lower leagues often combined basketball with studying, sometimes playing for their university's team. The study examined whether the level of education had an impact on a second career. For this purpose, two factors were selected that are most often used in the literature on the subject to assess a person's career success, i.e. earnings and job satisfaction^{11,22,32}. It turned out that the vast majority of former basketball players now earn more than the national average.

This may be because they are currently using their popularity gained during their sports careers, but it may also be that they have developed certain competencies through sports that are much needed in the modern labor market ¹⁵. Despite some differences in earnings between basketball players with secondary and higher education, it cannot be said that they are statistically significant.

It also turned out that former basketball players are also much more satisfied with their work than the average satisfaction in Poland. In addition, former basketball players with higher education are more satisfied with their work than former players with secondary education, and the differences between the groups are statistically significant. Therefore, it can be said that the study is, to some extent, consistent with the results of research showing that practicing sport may contribute to career success ¹⁵. These studies showed that by practicing sports, a person can develop competencies useful in the labor market, such as perseverance and the ability to set goals ³³, as well as build social capital ³⁴ and improve health ³⁵. In this study, education and practicing sport professionally turned out to be factors that may contribute to a successful second professional career. It is worth adding how important is physical and intellectual development: “A physical harmony creates the base of a higher intellectual yield and can become the foundation of a positive behavior for the individual in society”³⁶.

Conclusions

Many athletes are media celebrities, but there are also many athletes who are much less known and for whom sport is also their main job. In this study, it was decided to check how the level of education of a player plays affects his later professional work. First of all, it turned out that there are significant differences between the players who played in the top league and those from the lower leagues. Those from the top league later finish their sports careers and thus earn longer on basketball. However, there are also some downsides of playing in the top league, because more players from the lower leagues have higher education, which undoubtedly affects the position of a person in the labor market. This study shows that former basketball players generally earn more than the national average in Poland and are also more satisfied with their current job than the national average. Moreover, basketball players with higher education are more satisfied with their work than those with secondary education. These results indicate that practicing sport may predispose to a successful professional career, and the level of education is undoubtedly an important factor. Therefore, the study partially confirmed the hypothesis that former basketball players with higher education achieve greater career success than former basketball players with a lower level of education.

The study shows that the education and also the fact of playing sports professionally plays an important role in a second career. In subsequent studies, it would be worth checking whether similar dependencies also exist in other sports and other countries. It should be remembered that each sport has its distinctive features that affect the career length, and in some countries, for example, salaries even in the lower leagues can be much higher than the average in the population (e.g. football in England), which may also affect the results.

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