

Cross-Cultural Adjustments and International Collegiate Athletes

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Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) proposed a theoretical model to measure international student-athlete adjustment to college consisting of: (a) adjustment factors, (b) antecedent dimensions to those factors, and (c) outcomes. The purpose of this study was to examine whether the antecedent factors listed by Ridinger and Pastore were indeed the best indicators of successful adjustment to college for international migrant athletes and to determine if other antecedent factors were also relevant to adjustment. Multiple qualitative interviews with 13 international athletes from four NCAA Division I institutions were conducted. Data collected through those interviews supported all of the antecedent dimensions of the Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) model with the exception of the perception dimension sub-heading of faculty/staff. New dimension subheadings (a) sense of adventure, (b) previous international travel experience, and (c) family influence emerged from the data and were added to a revised model of international athlete adjustment.

During the recent “age of migration” (Castles & Miller, 1993), many contexts both within and outside of sport have seen a growing influx of international migrants. Collegiate sports in the United States have been no exception to this trend. According to a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) study, individuals from outside the U.S. comprised 5.5% of all male athletes and 6.9% of all female athletes at the Division I level in 2007–08, up from 2.4% of male athletes and 2.4%

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of female athletes in 1999–2000 (DeHass, 2009). Thus, just as the labor force in many contexts has changed through growing international migration, so too has the composition of athletes participating in U.S. collegiate sport.

An important issue raised in this trend of growing internationalization in collegiate sport is the ability of these relatively young individuals to adapt to their new environment on a university campus in the United States. With such a concern for this issue, Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) proposed a theoretical model to assess the adjustment of international athletes coming to U.S. colleges. Their model included: (a) adjustment factors, (b) antecedent dimensions to those factors, and (c) outcomes. While they took an important step toward a better understanding of adjustment of international collegiate athletes with the development of their model, the purpose of the current study is to extend this work by exploring how the antecedent factors identified by Ridinger and Pastore connect to the actual lived experiences of international migrant athletes at U.S. universities. Such work can help to not only provide an improved theoretical understanding of cross-cultural adjustment, but also help university officials better support international athletes in succeeding academically, athletically, and more broadly as individuals.

Theoretical Framework

Cross-cultural Adjustment

Before proceeding with the development of our theoretical framework, it is important to define what is meant by the term cross-cultural adjustment. Palthe (2004) defined cross-cultural adjustment as “the process of adaptation to living and working in a foreign culture” (p.39). Further, the concept of adjustment involves the level of comfort or familiarity that a migrant psychologically perceives from his/her new country (Black, 1988; Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, & Stroh, 1999). In the body of research on cross-cultural adjustment, the psychological perceptions of new migrants have been found to be influenced by such variables as self-efficacy (Harrison, Chadwick, & Scales, 1996), learning orientation (Porter & Tansky, 1999), work variables (Black & Gregersen, 1991), cultural similarity (Church, 1982), and family adjustment (Tung, 1981; Stroh, Dennis, & Cramer, 1994).

While the focus of the current study is international collegiate athletes, cross-cultural adjustment is certainly an important process faced by all international migrants. In investigating the global migrations of athletes, Elliott and Maguire (2008) have encouraged scholars to “think outside the box” by building on research related to the migrations of individuals in contexts outside of sport. Heeding this advice, we seek to draw on research related to cross-cultural migrant adjustment from contexts beyond sport in constructing the theoretical framework of this study.

Examples of contexts in which cross-cultural adjustment has been studied include business travelers, Peace Corp volunteers, and military personnel (Adler, 1975, Church 1982), missionaries (Befus, 1988), and refugees (Phalet & Hagendoorn, 1996). Perhaps most closely related to the current study, however, is research on the adjustment of international students coming to universities in the United States. Some of these studies have addressed concerns and feelings of international students and what particular strains and stressors they endure during the adjustment process (Constantine, Anderson, Caldwell, Berkel, & Utsey, 2005; Crano & Crano, 1993; Parr, Bradley, & Bingi 1992). Other researchers, meanwhile,

have investigated the importance of native country as a factor for international student adjustment (Chapdelaine & Alextich, 2004), and the importance of social networks for successful college adjustment by international students (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Although considerable attention has been given to the adjustment of international students, only a few academic studies have specifically examined the experiences of international collegiate athletes and their abilities to cope with submersion into a foreign culture.

In particular, much of the previous research on the topic of international collegiate athletes has focused on their motivations to come to the United States (Bale, 1991; Berry, 1999; Garant-Jones, Koo, Kim, Andrew, & Hardin, 2008). Bale (1987), for example, examined the migration decision-making process for international collegiate athletes. Bale (1991) also documented the history of college recruitment of international athletes and how they reacted to their experiences in the United States. However, several key variables have changed since his study, including new NCAA legislation, a more competitive recruiting environment, more knowledgeable coaches, scouts, and athletes, and more internationally accessible information regarding schools and opportunities. Stidwell (1984), meanwhile, looked at differences in athletic motivation between domestic and international college track and field athletes. He found international athletes demonstrated statistically higher levels of perceived athletic confidence. Meanwhile, Popp, Hums, and Greenwell (2009), found international student-athletes perceived the purpose of collegiate sport in slightly different ways than domestic student-athletes, particularly in terms of the competitive natures of Division I athletics. Also of note, Craven (1994) examined the factors involved in the successful transition of cross-cultural athletes and coaches, but she focused on the professional ranks rather than international collegiate athletes.

In their work regarding international student-athletes, meanwhile, Ridinger and Pastore (2000a; 2000b) did look at the concept of adjustment to college. They approached it quantitatively (2000b) by assessing student scores on the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1989) from different cohorts within a large college campus, including a small group ($n = 16$) of international athletes. Popp, Hums, and Greenwell (in press) found international student-athletes did indeed report lower levels of adjustment to college in the facets of social adjustment and institutional attachment than their domestic teammates. In their research, Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) also examined cross-cultural adjustment literature in the fields of education and business, as well as sport, and developed a framework to identify factors associated with international athlete adjustment to college. Providing further insight into how that framework, depicted in diagram form in Figure 1, connects to the actual lived experiences of international college athletes is the impetus of this paper, with particular emphasis on the antecedent factors listed.

The Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) Adjustment Model

Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) suggested college adjustment for international athletes is a multifaceted construct with five main areas: (a) academic, (b) social, (c) athletic, (d) personal-emotional, and (e) institutional. With the exception of the athletic component, these facets are based on the work of Baker and Siryk (1984, 1986, 1989) and have been used extensively to measure adjustment to college, including studies on international student adjustment (Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, &

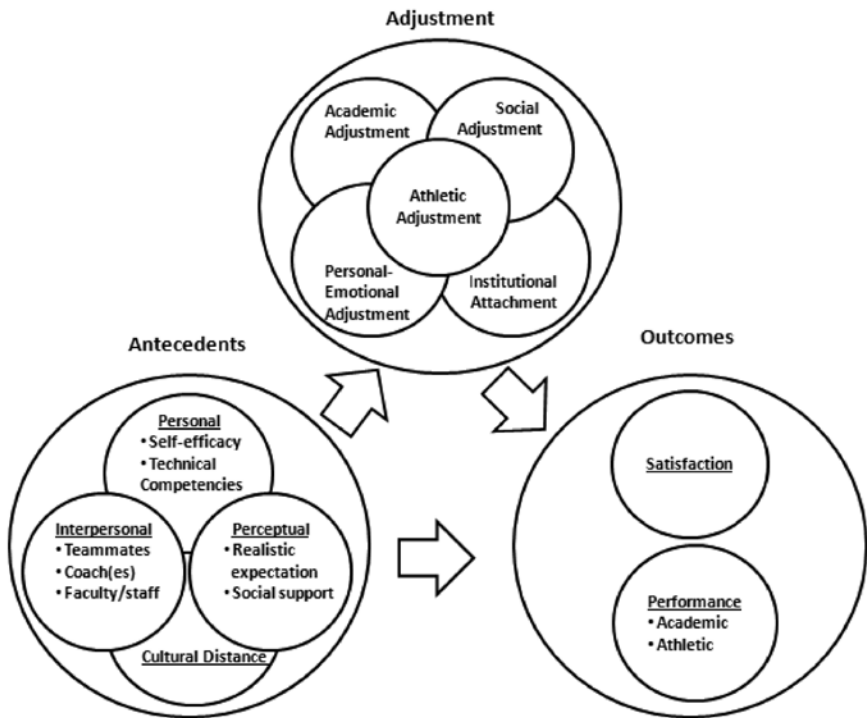


Figure 1 — Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) created a model of adjustment for international student-athletes.

Ross, 1994) and international student-athlete adjustment (Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, in press; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000b). The athletic component of the model was added by the authors, as previous research has linked athletic participation to college adjustment for student-athletes (Adler & Adler, 1991; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Jackson & Krane, 1993; Killeya-Jones, 2005).

Under this model, the level of successful adjustment is based on four antecedent dimensions: (a) personal, (b) interpersonal, (c) perceptual, and (d) cultural distance. According to Ridinger and Pastore (2000a), these elements are critical in predicting international athlete adjustment to college. The personal dimension refers to the confidence and self-efficacy levels individuals possess regarding their athletic and academic abilities, as well as their competency of English for nonnative English speakers. Interpersonal factors involve relationships with key people in the college adjustment process, including coaches, administrators, faculty, and fellow teammates. The perceptual dimension includes the athletes' expectations of what the university and athletic program will be like and what sort of social support, such as counseling and advising, are available for the individual upon arrival. The final antecedent dimension is labeled cultural distance. This concept refers to the difference between the home culture and the culture found on the college campus, which can be both a geographical distance and a societal or cultural gap.

The Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) model is strictly theoretical. To help validate its construction and organization, with particular focus on the antecedent factors, data were needed from international athletes regarding their experiences as migrants to the United States for the purposes of participating in collegiate athletics. Such a transition involves adjustments at several levels and numerous antecedent factors would be expected to emerge from the data. By exploring how the model connects with the actual lived experiences of international collegiate athletes, the purpose of this study was to determine whether the antecedent factors listed by Ridinger and Pastore were indeed the best indicators of successful adjustment to college. In turn, a second goal of the study was to determine if other antecedent factors, besides those outlined by Ridinger and Pastore, were also relevant to adjustment.

Methods

To explore how the antecedent factors from Ridinger and Pastore's (2000a) model connect to the actual lived experiences of migrant collegiate athletes, it was necessary to conduct an empirical investigation regarding international student-athletes' perspectives. Such an approach has been called for by Ridinger and Pastore (2000b), who suggested interviews with international student-athletes may reveal further insight. In the current study, collecting empirical data allowed us to gauge levels of adjustment and determine which factors in the participants' pasts most contributed to their adjustment. Specifically, the data used in this study come from qualitative, in-depth, semistructured interviews. Interview participants consisted of 13 international student-athletes at four public NCAA Division-I institutions in the United States, with enrollments ranging from 14,000–26,000. This purposive sample consisted of four males and nine females. Countries of origin for the athletes included Australia, Brazil, Canada, Congo, England, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Spain. The participants also came from a variety of sports, including basketball, diving, golf, softball, tennis, and volleyball.

Interviews generally ranged in length from 30 to 60 min. Each interview was conducted by one or more of the researchers at a private location of the participant's choosing. To enhance the level of understanding achieved by the researchers, some student-athletes also participated in follow-up interviews to further clarify responses given in their original interviews. In these semistructured interviews, the researcher would begin with a series of introductory questions to obtain general background information and to establish rapport (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Following introductory questions, the researcher(s) then proceeded with broad, open-ended statements, such as "tell me about your experiences adjusting to life on campus," which were designed to allow the participants to discuss their experiences in their own words. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers. While the analysis of our interview data were guided by the principles of constant comparative (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and thematic (van Manen, 1990) analysis, we also specifically made frequent reference to Ridinger and Pastore's (2000a) model while thinking about the data. Because our goal was to explore how that model connected to the actual lived experiences of student-athletes, this approach allowed us to examine where such connections (and disconnections) existed and, in turn, identify new dimensions not included in the original model. The findings of our analysis are detailed in the remaining sections of this paper.

Findings

Through interviews with participants, nearly all the antecedent dimensions from the Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) framework were expressed in some form, although some seemed to have less relevance than others. New factors also emerged and seem appropriate to add to the model as additional subtopics under the antecedent headings of the personal and perceptual dimensions. These new subheadings include *sense of adventure* and *previous international travel experience* under the personal dimension and *family influence* under the perceptual dimension. Figure 2 shows the revised adjustment model.

Personal Dimension

In the Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) model, the first antecedent factor for international student-athlete adjustment was labeled *personal dimensions*, which was split into self-efficacy and technical competencies. Ridinger and Pastore further divided these headings into subcategories: (a) athletic aptitude, (b) academic aptitude, and (c) English language proficiency. Athletic aptitude did not seem to be an issue for the participants in this study simply because through their recruitment, they felt assured of their place on the team and were confident they would be talented enough to compete, echoing the findings of Stidwell (1984). Most of the participants had

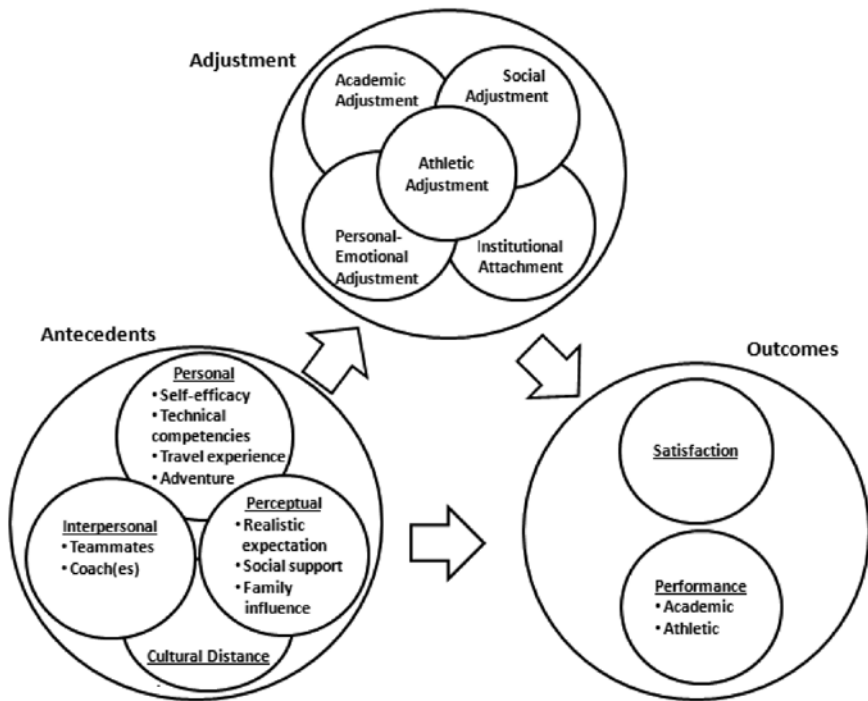


Figure 2 — A revised model of adjustment for international student-athletes.

been competing at a high level in their home nations, often against older and more experienced athletes. In many cases, international student-athletes had participated on a junior national or other elite level representative teams or were fighting for a spot on such squads when they made the decision to come to the United States. Because of this high level of experience, many international athletes came to the U.S. with little doubt their athletic ability would be adequate for the competition level. As a Romanian volleyball player explained:

So if you decide to go to school here, I don't think it's even that hard anymore just to get a scholarship here... Well, at least like if you're a pretty good athlete and then a school gets interested in you, it's not that hard to get a scholarship somewhere in the U.S. Because, you know, if they really want a good player, they're going to give a scholarship away.

A Slovakian tennis player reiterated this notion, stating her coach "just looked at my results and said she wanted me to come," even though the coach had never met the player face-to-face.

One interesting finding was many of the participants felt they may have been talented enough to turn professional in their sports if they had stayed in their homelands. Such a choice, however, typically meant forgoing a university education in their home nation because elite level training and higher education could not coexist. Thus, sojourning to the U.S. allowed them to continue elite training in hopes of a future professional career, while also allowing them to secure a university degree.

Data collected in the current study suggests academic aptitude could well be a factor predicting successful cross-cultural adjustment. Bale (1987) pointed out international student-athletes often enter U.S. colleges more academically prepared than their American counterparts, while Ridinger and Pastore (2000b) found international student-athletes were more academically well adjusted than international students. One explanation for this was participants' suggestions that the courses in their final years of high school were either the equivalent or superior to the classes they took as college freshmen. Such advanced courses appeared to give the students self-confidence in their ability to achieve academically in their new environment. A Slovakian student-athlete, for whom English is a second language, demonstrated this confidence:

I was kind of afraid I wouldn't be able to keep up the pace, to understand, that there would be a linguistic barrier. Fortunately, our school system is really good, I don't even have problems in math, because it is just stuff that we already covered in my high school. So that is kind of cool. Moreover, I have some basis for everything from econ[omics], because we have econ classes at home.

An athlete from Australia echoed the statement:

I thought the first year of gen ed courses was likely to be a lot of repetition to what I had done in high school, because our high school system is different, because we specialize much sooner. So that freshman biology, chemistry was basically what I had done my senior year of high school. It wasn't really anything new...that first year of gen ed classes was not very challenging.

Some participants also said they were cautioned before their arrival at an NCAA school that a bachelor's degree from the U.S. may not hold the same weight as one from their home country. Thus, they were advised to learn whether courses would be as rigorous as the same offerings in their home nation and to pursue a master's degree if possible, which many of the participants in this study intended to do. On the other hand, a few international student-athletes felt a U.S. degree carried more weight than one from their native country. As a basketball player from Congo expressed, "In America, if I get a degree from here, I could go to any country and get a good job. Because if I go back home they're going to respect me because I studied in America."

For nonnative English speakers, language was certainly a barrier to their adjustment to U.S. college life, but participants all felt their English language courses from home gave them some confidence before arriving. After a difficult first semester, many of them felt communication reached a satisfactory level by their second semester on campus. As a Serbian tennis player expressed,

Before I came to the US, I thought that I would be able to understand most of it (English), but I would have trouble explaining things. But I realized that I couldn't even understand what people were telling me, so my first semester... was pretty rough. I, um, I didn't talk much, I didn't understand much, but I got through. I took like math class, where I didn't have to speak English much. And I had those English composition and listening skills classes. So I didn't take five classes to start with. But once that semester was over, I had an idea of where I could improve.

While wondering whether she was adequately proficient in English, one Brazilian volleyball player was told by other Brazilians who were also attending American colleges that "oh, you'll be fine—if you already know a little bit of English, you'll be able to pick it up really quick." In fact, several participants cited the opportunity to acquire fluidity in a second language as a strong motivator for traveling to the U.S.

Sense of Adventure and Previous International Travel Experience

Data from this study does seem to suggest the addition of two subcategories to Ridinger and Pastore's (2000a) model under the personal dimension antecedent heading. We labeled these subcategories (a) sense of adventure, and (b) previous international travel experience. For nearly all of the participants in this study, these two factors played a critical role in their cross-cultural adjustment. An Australian diver explained,

And, um, when I left, I didn't even know who was picking me up at the airport, that kind of happened en route, so [laughter]... I'm not normally a very spontaneous person, but I knew in my mind that, like, I was going to either put myself totally into this and, you know, experience it for everything it was worth, or, you know, I could go home ultimately if I didn't want to be here... I honestly think that it's one of the best experiences you can have as like a young person. You know, getting out of your comfort zone, experiencing different things, it's certainly not for everybody. I think that I've met some student athletes from different colleges in the US that are just like, "I can't do this." [laughter] You know, but I think it helped me to be a lot more independent.

Some participants went so far as to suggest their willingness to study abroad was not a characteristic likely to be found among their domestic teammates. A Slovakian volleyball player felt,

Many Americans are stuck to one place. They have no desire to travel around to discover new places. Their dream is just to finish school, find wife or husband, buy house, buy car, and live until they die, you know (laughter). I don't know, there just are so many other things I want to do, to see other places... everyone's lives are all going in the same line, there are no exceptions. The European kids, they are more having fun—not like a party person. It is like having fun, not partying, but having fun by discovering new stuff.

Through participation in elite team programs in their homeland, nearly all of the students had played in elite international competition before entering college. A Canadian golfer, for example, mentioned traveling to tournaments in the United States and Japan, while a Slovakian volleyball player said she had played on teams that had toured throughout Europe and Asia. An English tennis player summed up this sentiment well.

I have traveled quite a little bit around the world—Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, mostly around Europe—seeing a new place and meeting different people. Something I quite enjoy doing, it's quite interesting to me to see different cultures and stuff. Also, I feel like it gives me a lot better viewpoint of viewing the world. Like I don't feel like I'm so judgmental now because, you know, I've seen a lot more of the world. And I can seek out different opinions from other factors.

Such previous cross-culture experience has been shown to increase ability to adjust in a new culture (Adler, 1975; Church 1982; Furnham, Bochner, & Lonner, 1986). Prior international travel also reduced presojourn anxiety as many of the participants already had a valid passport and were familiar with the paperwork and bureaucracy involved in overseas travel.

Interpersonal Dimension

In the Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) model, a second antecedent dimension, interpersonal, suggests international student-athletes adjust better if they form positive relationships with teammates, coaches, and school faculty members before the sojourn or early in the arrival process. Socialization with host nationals has been shown to be critical in the adjustment of international students (Church, 1982) and several studies have shown international students struggle socially in their new environment (Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Sports team participation, however, offers international athletes a preestablished socialization network. Several participants in the current study said relationships with their peers played a critical role in their adjustment, although these peer groups varied by individual. For some participants, the key socializing agents were friends and fellow athletes from their home nation who had successfully transitioned to life as an international collegiate athlete in the U.S. These peers often did not attend the same university, but were able to dispense critical advice during the decision making process which often made the participants in this study feel better about their futures.

A second key peer group was other international student-athletes and students who were attending the same schools, and in some cases, playing on the same teams. Even though they may not have been from the same host nation, fellow international athletes often bonded because they endured the same cross-cultural adjustment process. As a Slovakian tennis player stated,

...there are a lot of Europeans, and we are a bit more close to each other than to American people. So I think this made us more together. Like, for example, I think the relationships are much closer because all of us had to go through that like I did. So like, for example, now we have two new freshmen from Russia, so we already know what they are going through because we did it. And that's why I think they feel better with us. We feel like we can help them. So I think the relationships are much closer because of that.

U.S.-born teammates comprised a third key peer group, although according to data collected, the impact of this group on adjustment was much more limited than the influence of the other two peer groups. Some participants felt their domestic teammates were very accommodating and helpful, including an Australian softball player who said her American teammates were her best friends on campus. In stark contrast to this, however, was the story told by a Brazilian volleyball player.

Well, my visit here—I was already committed—but my visit here I had a really fun time. Like all of them [domestic teammates] were like, “oh, whatever you need, whatever you want, you know?” So they were very friendly. So I was like I'll get there and be fine, right? So I got here, and I was like, where is everyone, you know? I was like all by myself. I was like okay fine, I guess I'll do it on my own. And things were a lot different. At first, they were all interested in my country, in my culture. But after awhile, they were, I wouldn't say jealous, but I saw like a really bad energy coming from them toward me somehow. And they're all like, “here's my number, whatever you need, you call me.” But there is a lot of backstabbing, you know, from them. And I think because I was the only freshman that came at that time, especially coming from another country—that was huge—they were like, “who is she? What does she look like? What does she do?” Like, they were all into my business, but in a negative way. You know, not trying to help, but to get into my business. And I think that was bad.

While such stories were not common in interviews with international student-athletes, only a handful specifically mentioned U.S.-born teammates and friends playing a valuable role in their adjustment process.

In their model, Ridinger and Pastore suggested relationships with coaches would also play a key role in helping international student-athletes adjust. This was true for many of the participants in this study, although the sentiment was clearly not universal. Some head coaches spent considerable time trying to ease any fears international athletes (and their parents) might have in deciding to come to the U.S. An English tennis player said,

He [the coach] is going to speak to me, speak to my family, my mom kind of thing. Because obviously my mom, especially, was a bit unsure of me going to America, sort of uncharted territory really. She didn't know what I was getting

in for really. So yeah, he came over and you know, just kind of got to talk the whole time. He reassured my parents that I was doing the right thing. And I was in a safe environment and everything. And I got on really well with him, so it just seemed like a good decision for me to make in the end.

Several participants also said they felt head coaches were sincerely concerned about their personal well-being, not just their athletic talents. As a Brazilian volleyball player expressed,

So, how would I say, they tried to get me here as a player but also as a student—like as a person—and that was really nice from them. My parents also really enjoyed that. Rather than having all the other coaches, like, “just come, get your stuff ready and just come and you’ll be fine once you get here. And the coaches here were more like worried about clarifying stuff before I came. Making sure I would like to make a good decision. You know, they took the process more slowly. So I chose to come here.

In fact, a Slovakian volleyball player went as far as to say without the coach’s support, she likely would have returned home.

If someone would have offered me an opportunity to go back right there I would have taken it, but then practices started. I stopped thinking about it that much, but from time to time it would get to me after practice and I would start crying after practice. So I’m really glad coach had such patience with me and, like, my teammates, they helped me a lot and I spent a lot of time with them. They took care of me, so that was good.

In nearly all cases in this study, the head coach or an assistant played an instrumental role in recruiting the student-athlete, but in a few cases, participants said this nurturing relationship did not continue once they were on campus. As an Australian softball player illustrated, “. . .our head coach doesn’t have the best communication skills all the time. Sometimes she is fantastic, sometimes she is not. It’s not so much that you don’t have a relationship with her, it’s just, well, we do but it’s not a close one.” A Canadian golfer, meanwhile, still depended on his coach in his native country for most of his instruction and said his college coach instead offered “just guidance” and “. . .since I’ve been here, he has not worked a whole lot with me on my technique.”

One area of the Ridinger and Pastore model which was not supported by the data collected in this study was the importance of faculty and staff relationships with international student-athletes. Nearly all of the participants said they were comfortable and doing well in school, but none expressed a strong relationship with any professors or other faculty members. One reason for this could be that student-athletes at large NCAA Division I institutions often have a considerable amount of assistance from athletics department academic advising personnel. The participants in this study were no exception. Several said that upon their arrival classes had already been scheduled for them, and once the season rolled around, study times were assigned by coaches or other athletic department staff. Academic assistance from tutors and staff members was well publicized. The participants in the study sent mixed messages regarding whether athletic personnel truly emphasized doing well in the classroom, but all indicated numerous resources were made

available for student-athletes who were academically motivated. Because of this, international athletes appear to have a much less difficult time adjusting to the academic requirements of a university than do international students who may have fewer academic resources available to them.

Perceptual Dimension

In previous research, international student-athletes often came to the United States not knowing what to expect and sometimes being misled about what their scholarship entailed, what was expected of them academically, and what sort of environment they would be entering on campus (Bale, 1987; 1991). However, much has changed in international athlete recruitment since the time of Bale's work. Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) postulated that accurate expectations of what international student-athletes can expect will greatly enhance their ability to adjust. Nearly all participants in this research were quite unaware of the scope of the NCAA and its regulations governing college athletics before their sojourn to the United States, a continuing dilemma for the NCAA as it attempts to regulate amateur college athletic competition (Steinbach, 2003; Weston, 2006). All participants did, however, have a better understanding of what to expect from their college than did many of Bale's subjects. Information about the school and the athletics program was readily available on-line and the school mailed the players items such as media guides, admissions materials, and other recruiting pieces. Players also had several conversations with their coaches before their move, which reassured the athletes. In fact, some participants were very aware of the NCAA rules surrounding their recruitment, as shown by a Slovakian tennis player who said, "And then she [the coach] started to call me once per week, because you are allowed to call your player once per week in recruiting."

In several cases, the participants knew ahead of time that several of their future teammates and even coaches were internationals, which proved to be a major influence on their perception of the situation. In fact, reassurance provided by others who had made a successful transition to the U.S. college system may have been the most salient factor for the majority of participants in the study. The common theme among these migrant athletes was if others could make a successful transition, they could as well. As a Slovakian tennis player commented,

So we like talked to a lot of people who went before me to America—a lot of girls from my hometown that I'd played with before. And they told me about their experience, how they got here, how is it, how it was really good for them to study English, to meet new people, and about experience. So when they told me about it I started to think about it too.

A basketball player from Congo, in fact, stated her decision to come to America was almost entirely based on her conversation with another student-athlete from Africa. She said, "Um, it was good because we were talking to that girl [from Senegal] and she explained everything to us. Because she told us the coach is good and they're going to treat you good. It's a good school. She told us everything. That's why we decided to come."

For international athletes, the perception of attending a United States college on an athletic scholarship seemed to have great ego appeal. The concept was

particularly alluring for an Australian softball player who looked up to another international student-athlete from her homeland. She said:

One, that she was playing ball overseas and that I could not dream that I would be good enough to do that. I mean, she was living away from home, and they got to travel and play...every week. That is what I love doing. I think, just like the mystique of it all, like, you're going overseas to play your sport...and someone is going to pay you to do it, pay for your school. It was just, (long pause) a little girl's dream.

A Brazilian volleyball player echoed this idea by saying, "I knew about it (the chance to play in the U.S.) since I was like in fifth grade. And pretty much, that was the reason why I started volleyball. So I knew that I wanted to come here, even if my parents didn't really take me seriously."

Once they arrived here, the athletes all had very little trouble registering for classes, picking up course materials, finding living arrangements and other potential obstacles for international students trying to adjust to attending a new university. The school athletics department was primarily responsible for making this happen, which no doubt aided in the adjustment process.

While peers who had already made a successful transition to the U.S. offered support to those considering the jump, a few participants did suggest their peers and coaches in their homeland were not as encouraging. In the club sport system, coaches and officials are not always happy to see their top players leave their organizations to attend an American university. According to a Slovakian volleyball player, some of her coaches and teammates told her she would be playing against inferior competition in the United States, and if she was going to leave, she should at least travel to another professional club where she could earn money for her play. On the other hand, several other participants said their home club and national team coaches encouraged them to pursue the opportunity to play in the U.S. In fact, a Canadian golfer said his national junior sport body helped set up his entry to tournaments in the United States enabling him to catch the eye of college coaches and recruiters.

Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) suggested international student-athletes may need additional support services from the university to help alleviate adjustment problems, but the current study did not uncover much evidence to support this notion. A Slovakian volleyball player briefly mentioned her attendance at an on-campus church group helped her meet new friends and a few participants said they participated in a program called Life Skills, which was developed by the NCAA to provide programming to enhance student-athletes academically, athletically, and emotionally (NCAA, 2004). In general, though, all participants said their participation on a sports team, their camaraderie with other athletes, and the resources provided by the school athletics department seemed to offer adequate social support networks.

Family Influence

A key antecedent component missing from the Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) model was the influence of family on adjustment. Several researchers have noted the importance of family-like support from host nationals in successful acculturation of international students (Chapdelaine & Alextich, 2004; Crano & Crano, 1993)

and some investigators have found contact with extended family members is one of the greatest concerns for international students (Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1992). The impact of family influence regarding the decision to study abroad, however, was not discussed in any of the aforementioned studies. Several participants in this study cited family influence as the most pervasive factor in their adjustment to college. As a Slovakian tennis player explained, "It was more the decision of my parents, then mine, because I started to play tennis when I was four years old, and basically all my life was about tennis. But then I got injured, so I stopped like professional tennis. And my parents were telling me, 'you've been playing tennis so long, maybe try the opportunity to come to America for a scholarship, to learn English.'" Participants said their parents raised them to be responsible, independent, open-minded, and hard working. In addition, several had at least one parent from a very strong sporting background. They felt these attributes were influential in their parents' decisions to encourage them to pursue sporting opportunities as youngsters and college scholarship opportunities in the U.S. as young adults. Many also said their parents placed a heavy emphasis on academic achievement, which the students credited as playing a role in their work as university students. This point was illustrated by an English tennis player who stated,

But yeah, apart from that, I mean, my dad did a little bit of research on the computer, just as much as I did. You know, he loved the idea of me going out there [to the United States]. And my mom wasn't so thrilled with the idea of me going so far away, but she knew that kind of this is what I wanted to do, needed to do.

Cultural Distance

Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) suggested cultural distance as another adjustment antecedent. They defined cultural distance as "the degree of incongruence between the campus culture and the culture of the student athlete's home town" (p. 14) and posited "the more distant or different the home and host culture are, the more time and effort it will take for the sojourner to adjust" (p. 15). A few participants indeed suggested their home cultures were quite "westernized" allowing for an easier transition. As a Canadian golfer stated, "We're basically American anyways. Basically, we operate pretty much the exact same way with the customs and the way things are done. They are pretty much the same, so I haven't had any problems or anyone say anything negative to me." A Slovakian volleyball player, on the other hand, came from a more culturally distant Eastern European environment. She felt United States students were far less reserved than people her age in her native country. She said:

Also, people here are so open-minded. They ask personal questions in their very first meeting, so that was kind of weird for me to tell them about my personal life, little details. They had no problem telling me their experiences, or whatever. That was kind of weird to me, to be so open.

Her use of the term "open-minded" was particularly interesting because several other participants suggested United States students were not very open-minded when it came to world views. An Australian softball player, for instance, said:

...I just had to be quiet because people started talking about how America is wonderful, and how they do everything right in terms of politics, how they are the savior to everyone. And obviously from an outsider looking in, that is totally not the case. But there is no point in arguing with someone because they will argue until they're blue in the face that they are right. It drives me up the wall, but there have been numerous occasions where I just had to shut up before I got into trouble.

Some participants did mention other cultural factors that made it difficult to adjust quickly in their U.S. residency. The primary factors, besides language, were weather conditions and food. One Brazilian volleyball player said she intentionally had tried to find a college located in a similar climate and environment to her homeland.

We made a list of places where I thought I would like adjust better, and we decided that the South would be a better place just because of the weather, even though it's still a lot different...And also I didn't think I was going to have that much free time. I always thought it was just going to be like school and volleyball. And I got here, I was like "yeah, this is too much different from what I had [at home]." So I always, I still miss that. That's why I always go close to the ocean whenever I can—whenever I have a holiday or whatever. So that was kind of frustrating also, it still is.

A volleyball player from Romania, meanwhile, expressed some frustration with food choices in her new environment.

Uh, food was a problem. [laughs] I don't like it so much, but now I started cooking for myself so it's okay. I pretty much ate pasta for a year, and that was it. And cereal, and that was it.

Overall, such items as weather, food, and other cultural differences were important antecedents impacting the adjustment of international athletes.

Conclusion

Universities in the United States are recruiting large numbers of international student-athletes, making it increasingly important to understand what adjustments these students go through and how they perceive their experiences. For coaches and athletic administrators, understanding this process will aid them in building better international reputations and enhancing the experience for student-athletes. This, in turn, should assist in the recruitment of student-athletes and result in better athletic and academic performances by international athletes who are comfortable and well-adjusted to the college experience. In Bale's (1987) examination of migration decisions by international athletes, nearly 40% of surveyed participants did not complete, or had no intention to complete, their degree at their United States college, highlighting a dire need to understand the well-being and adjustment of international student-athletes. Some schools have begun special assistance programs to help meet the needs of international student-athletes (Berkowitz, 2006), yet very little research has been conducted to understand the migrant athlete adjustment process to American universities.

Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) proposed a framework to examine such an adjustment process, including different antecedent dimensions which could impact ability to adjust. These antecedent factors stemmed primarily from business and education cross-cultural adjustment literature, but as this study demonstrates, such factors are certainly relevant to international athletes as well. Among Ridinger and Pastore's (2000a) antecedent dimensions, only the interpersonal factor contained a subheading with marginal relevance, namely faculty/staff. As other researchers have shown, student-athletes at NCAA Division I institutions often have decisions made for them regarding their academic progress and when they attend study sessions (Adler & Adler, 1985, Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). It seems likely international student-athlete relationships with professors and faculty might be limited because these decision-making processes are taken out of their hands. Other reasons exist as to why international student-athletes might feel a disconnect with university faculty such as differences in learning style (Ladd & Ruby, 1999), a higher rate of classroom absenteeism due to athletics commitments, or intentions to return to their home nation after school, which might lessen the desire to develop long-term relationships with professors. Whatever the case, this study seems to indicate a lack of positive or significant relationships with faculty will not appreciably hinder successful college adjustment for international athletes. This was the only factor from the model which did not seem to belong.

While all the proposed antecedent factors presented in the Ridinger and Pastore model (2000a) had some impact on international student-athlete adjustment, the list was not exhaustive. Other factors in this study emerged as important. International student-athletes tend to possess a heightened sense of adventure and were more comfortable with international travel when comparing themselves to their domestic college teammates. Without these attributes, international athletes would likely not be as willing to make the jump from their native country to the United States. For college athletics recruiters, this could imply the need to focus on more than just athletic ability when scouting overseas talent. Finding potential athletes who are ready to make the leap to NCAA Division I competition may require more background knowledge about the recruit besides sporting talent.

In addition, family influence was also a major contributing factor in international student-athletes' decisions to attend a United States college. Parr, Bradley, and Bingi (1992) found family was the most important concern for international students. Similarly, in the current study, parents often played a significant role in the decision-making process to come to the United States. Parents tended to value both athletics and a college education. In turn, they were supportive of their child participating in the cross-cultural exchange. Other researchers have found family influence to have only a moderate impact on college selection for domestic student-athletes (Gabert, Hale, & Montvalo, 1999; Goss, Jubenville, & Orejan, 2006). Again, this difference offers college coaches an important piece of information when recruiting overseas.

While this study contains valuable information for college athletics personnel, the most important stakeholder in international student-athlete well-being is the student-athlete. Currently, very little data exist regarding the college selection process, retention rates, or college satisfaction levels of migrant collegiate athletes. This population appears to have different motives and perspectives than those of both domestic student-athletes and international students. The present study begins to offer some clues about these differences, but more importantly, offers further

evidence supporting the call for research regarding this particular population. The current study used qualitative methodology to explore how the theoretical model proposed by Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) connects to the actual lived experiences of international college athletes. Through this approach, we identified new factors not appearing in the original model that appear to be important in the international athlete adjustment process. Our research does not, however, seek to quantify the relative importance of or frequency with which these various dimensions impact student-athletes. Future research could be broadened by developing and utilizing scales of measurement which would allow for quantitative analysis, including data collection from greater numbers of international student-athletes, and to compare perspectives with those of domestic student-athletes. In addition, the impact of mediating variables such as English proficiency, sporting background, type of sport, and amount of scholarship, needs to be assessed.

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