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Going abroad to play: Motivations, challenges, and support of sports expatriates

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Executive summary

Professional athletes moving abroad for their career is a novel phenomenon in IHRM. This exploratory paper charts the motivations of sports expatriates to move abroad to play, as well as adjustment challenges and sources of support. A survey was conducted with 77 professional athletes in 10 different sports. The main motivations to move abroad were an interest to experience life abroad, followed by the search for new challenges. In terms of challenges, different coaching style and communication issues were most often mentioned. Support was mainly informal, through team mates rather than professional providers. Our paper contributes to the literature because it is one of the first studies focusing on sports expatriates from an international HR perspective. Our study provides information on a vulnerable group of expatriates; they are young in age and under extreme performance pressure. Sports expatriates need all the support they can get, and yet, little professional support is offered.

Keywords: self-initiated expatriates (SIE), sports expatriates, challenges, support, IHRM

Introduction

As the world becomes more and more interconnected, many athletes spend a part of their career abroad. Nearly half of all active professional football players (46.7%) in the BIG 5 football leagues are sport expats (Poli, Ravenel, & Besson, 2016). As professional athletes move abroad, they encounter many of the challenges that business expatriates (McNulty & Brewster, 2016) face, as well as some that are unique to the sport industry (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017). In combination with the precarious, short-lived nature of their career – highly reliant on physical capital with the permanent threat of injuries (Agergaard & Tiesler, 2014) – the well-being of this group of expatriates is a very important topic, for both professional athletes and their employer.

Sports expatriates are a group that has, however, received very little attention in the expatriation literature. So far, the experiences of professional athletes abroad have mostly been covered by sport management scholars, for example through qualitative accounts of the experience of migrant football players (e.g. Elliott, 2014a; Richardson, Littlewood, Nesti, & Benstead, 2012). A recent chapter published in the *Research Handbook of Expatriates* introduces the topic of sports expatriates to the field of international human resource management (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017). The authors describe the growing phenomenon of expatriation in sports, and highlight the uniqueness of the sport sector as compared to other industries in terms of “uncertainty of outcome, competitive balance, contest management, co-opetition and performance measurement” (p.19). This presents specific management challenges, one of which is how professional sports clubs should develop and integrate their foreign players. We delve deeper into this particular issue, taking an HR perspective towards sports expatriates and focusing on charting the motives of sports expatriates to move abroad to play, as well as adjustment support and challenges.

Athletes who go abroad to pursue their career are self-initiated expatriates, which is a burgeoning area in itself (e.g. Andresen, Al Ariss, & Walther, 2012; Doherty, 2013). Dolles and Egilsson (2017, p.

9) define self-initiated expatriates in sports (SIESs) as “athletes (players) or coaches (trainers, team managers) who pursue a temporary career abroad on their own initiative, primarily for the sports-related reasons of performance and achievement, and secondly for pecuniary gain”.

Sports expatriates such as professional athletes have several particularities. First, a sport career is contingent on physical capacity, and is, therefore, relatively short (Agergaard & Tiesler, 2014). This career is furthermore continuously in peril because of the possibility of an injury, “a permanent threat to the very skills on which their career is built” (Agergaard & Tiesler, 2014, p. 6). Besides the pressures to stay healthy and perform at the highest possible level each day, athletes’ careers span much shorter than the average employee lifetime. It is therefore vital for athletes to maximize their career potential in the rather short time frame of their professional career (between 10-25 years, depending on the sport). Another aspect that adds to the precariousness of a sports career is that athletes generally receive short term contracts, adding pressure to perform from day one. Additionally, this set up forces athletes to make career decisions almost every year that affect their private life.

Second, professional athletes are a relatively young group. The extreme youth of talented players bought by football clubs is well documented (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017) – an example being a star talent like Lionel Messi who moved from his home country Argentina to Spain at the age of 13. Cultural differences exist in that US athletes usually attend college with a full-athletic scholarship and then move abroad for a professional contract. In Europe and South America, the combination of education and professional sport is not as readily available, so that the choice between the two is typically made earlier. Finally, athletes are expected to function successfully without a long adaptation time, often expressed in the fact that athletes need to be ready to train on the same day or within 24h after arriving in the new country. These characteristics make sports expatriates a more vulnerable group than self-initiated expatriates in other industries. This heightens the importance of adequately supporting this group of expatriates.

Our paper contributes to the expatriation literature because it is one of the first studies that focuses on sports expatriates from an international HR perspective. Our study provides information on a group of expatriates that is extremely vulnerable; they are young in age, and under extreme performance pressure in a career with only a short time span. Sports expatriates need all the support they can get, and yet, very little professional support is offered to them. The data in this study is unique because athletes from more sports than just football are included (e.g. basketball and volleyball), thereby adding to our knowledge on sports expatriates in general. Furthermore, a broad range of nationalities have filled out the survey, broadening the predominantly Anglo-American focus thus far in the sport management literature (e.g. Elliott, 2014b; Elliott & Harris, 2011; Madichie, 2009).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review the current literature on motivations and challenges of (sports) expatriates, as well as the actors who support them. After outlining the methodology of our research, we answer our research questions. The paper then discusses the implications of these findings for sports expatriates as well as how they can be best supported. Finally, limitations of this study and directions for future research are outlined.

Motivations of sports expatriates

The expatriate management literature has focused on the reasons why business expatriates – both assigned and self-initiated – move abroad. Assigned expatriates were scrutinized by Dickmann, Doherty, Mills, and Brewster (2008) and Hippler (2010). Dickmann et al. (2008) found several motives to accept an international assignment: they pertain to the job itself, the opportunity for new learning experiences, a desire to have international experience, family and domestic issues, the location of the assignment, and the overall offer including the repatriation package and financial impact of working abroad. Their study challenges the view that financial considerations are the most important motive for

expatriates to accept an assignment; instead, the emphasis seems to be on considerations with regard to the job, personal development and the career. Similarly, Hippler (2009) conducted an inductive study of assigned expatriates and found both personal and professional motives at the top of the list. The most important private motive was to broaden horizons through new experiences, whereas career considerations and development and acquisition of knowledge, skills, abilities and insights were the most important professional motives to accept an assignment. Work/life balance issues might also be important factors influencing the decision to go, something that is reflected in the 2016 Global Relocation Trends Survey (Brookfield, 2016): family issues and partner's careers were the two most important reasons to turn down an international assignment.

Doherty, Dickmann, and Mills (2011) compared assigned expatriates to self-initiated expatriates. They found 8 factors that explained why expatriates move abroad: location, career, foreign experience, reputation of the host country as an attractive employment opportunity, family benefits, home-host relations, personal relationships, and push factors. These motives were different for assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates; the top motive for assigned expatriates was the impact of the international experience on their career; whereas, self-initiated expatriates mainly looked for adventure. Self-initiated expatriates also were more influenced by the location – in which they may have more choice than assigned expatriates – and the reputation of the host country. In short, where self-initiated expatriates favored personal motives, assigned expatriates' motives were more work-related with the desire for international experience a central part of one's organizational career development.

In the sport literature, several typologies have been developed to characterize professional athletes (see Dolles & Egilsson, 2017 for an overview). While some of these typologies are distinguishing athletes in terms of whether they would like to stay permanently in the host country or return (Agergaard, Bothelo, & Tiesler, 2014), some others shed some light on the motives these sports expatriates have for moving abroad. When looking more closely at the typology by Magee and Sugden

(2002), which focuses particularly on the foreign migrant in English league football, we can recognize some of the factors that Doherty et al. (2011) have found. First, the *Mercenary* type focuses on economic gain or short term rewards, which is comparable to the financial motives for business expatriates. This is part of the career-factor (‘personal financial impact’) that Doherty et al. (2011) found. Second, the description of the *Ambitionist* highlights two different motivational factors, namely career and location. *Ambitionists* want to move abroad to achieve a professional career, or to move to a better quality league. They might also move abroad because they have a particular wish for playing in that particular country (Magee & Sugden, 2002). Third, some push factors seem to be present in the types *Exile* and *Expelled*. The *Exile* type covers both voluntary and involuntary relocation, for example due to political instability in the home country. The *Expelled* type covers those players who have experienced such problems in their home country that it is virtually impossible for them to keep playing there (see Magee & Sugden, 2002, p. 433 for some examples). Finally, the *Nomadic cosmopolitan* moves abroad because of a desire for adventure, for experiences different cultures.

While these typologies suggest that some of the motives that have been found for business expatriates are applicable to sports expatriates as well (e.g. location, career, foreign experience, and push factors), none of these studies move beyond the formulation of these types based on qualitative data or their own experience to assessing what the most important motives are. One exception is the study by Bourke (2002) who surveyed young Irish professional footballers in England. She found four career-motives at the top of the list (improved career prospects, opportunity to make money, opportunity to play more international games, better quality league). The motivational factor ‘foreign experience’ (Doherty et al., 2011) was also present; the opportunity to travel was also an important reason to move, and players viewed the move to England as an “exciting adventure, and one not to be missed” (Bourke, 2002, p. 385). She further mentions a rather unique motivation to move to England, namely the fact that their football hero played in England. With some imagination, this could be linked

to the category ‘reputation of the host country as an attractive employment opportunity’ (Doherty et al., 2011), but it could also be a motivation that is unique to sports expatriates.

Our knowledge about the motivations of sports expatriates is far from complete. It is, therefore, important to delve deeper into the motivations professional athletes have to move abroad, and also include more than just football players. Do professional athletes move abroad for financial gain, for advancement of their career, or for adventure? This lead to our first research question:

RQ1: What are sports expatriates’ motivations to move abroad?

Challenges of sports expatriates

The challenges that business expatriates face when moving abroad, are well documented in the expatriate literature. A large body of literature focuses on the adjustment of expatriates – several meta-analyses outline the ‘centrality’ and ‘criticality’ of expatriate adjustment for successful international assignments (e.g. Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005). Similarly, sports expatriates also face challenges when moving abroad to play (Bourke, 2002). The sport management literature has paid much attention to ‘transitions’ – e.g. the entry into elite sport (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008) – to which an international transfer adds a new element. Such transitions can be extremely demanding (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Richardson, Relvas, & Littlewood, 2013) and need to be managed well (see the next section).

Some studies delve deeper into the types of challenges professional athletes face when transitioning. Several studies highlight that both the professional and private domain can be sources of strain (Bruner et al., 2008; Finn & McKenna, 2010; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005). Finn and McKenna (2010) take a stress and coping perspective, and identify three main sources of strain during the transitioning period, as perceived by coaches: athletic (e.g. physical intensity and coach

relationships), social (e.g. managing free time, family and partners), and academic/vocational (e.g. university). The qualitative study by R. A. Jones, Mahoney, and Gucciardi (2014) confirms many of these themes. A final study to mention is the one by Hanton et al. (2005), which focuses on stressors for elite athletes in a broader context – not only with regard to transitions. They distinguish stressors associated with competitive performance as well as with the ‘sport organization’, including environmental issues, personal issues, leadership issues, and team issues.

These studies show that professional athletes face many different challenges both in the professional as well as the private domain when they encounter a career transition. However, it is as yet unknown which challenges athletes perceive when they move abroad to play. This leads to our second research question:

RQ2: What are the main challenges that sports expatriates perceive?

Supporting sports expatriates

Career transitions are challenging for professional athletes (Finn & McKenna, 2010; R. A. Jones et al., 2014), and so is moving abroad for one’s career. Bourke (2002) has examined the career path of young Irish soccer players who move to England for their career, and concluded many ran into difficulties in their first year in England. Only 43% felt settled within half a year; 31% took more than one year, and 7% still did not feel settled. This is likely to influence the athlete’s performance. Hanton et al. (2005) studied competitive and organizational stressors of international athletes, and found that organizational stressors (environmental, personal, leadership, and team issues) were more often mentioned than competitive performance stressors (e.g. injury, opponents). They, therefore, suggest that the focus should not only be on reducing stress related to competitive performance, but also on managing the organizational factors. As the environmental demands are exacerbated when moving abroad, it is

important to support sports expatriates to minimize the associated stress. For this reason, transitions abroad to play need to be managed well.

How can professional athletes be supported when they move abroad? Although family is often noted as one of the most important support providers (Richardson et al., 2012), the club has an important role to play. Dolles and Egilsson (2017) and Bourke (2002) suggest pre- and post-arrival training for sports expatriates. Bourke (2002) has studied the arrival experiences of Irish soccer players in England, which showed that English clubs are well organized when it comes to meet&greet of new players, and finding accommodation for them. Also, in the first year, club managers encouraged the new arrivals to keep in contact with home, and facilitated their frequent return home. However, clubs usually did not see the new arrivals as ‘employees’ who would benefit from an induction or orientation program. Richardson et al. (2012) also found that soccer clubs typically neglect the acculturation phase of their young new players.

Although the club probably has one of the largest roles to play in supporting sports expatriates, there are also other actors who can support the sport expatriate. The agent, for example, has received little attention in the talent management literature (Richardson et al., 2012). Athletes themselves can also do something. Van Yperen (2009) identified social support seeking as one of the factors that distinguished successful male soccer players from the unsuccessful ones. When one faces challenges, one coping strategy is to reach out to friends or family.

Since much of this literature has focused on soccer players, and is more qualitative in nature, we would like to investigate the way sports expatriates are supported in a broader sample. This leads to our third research question:

RQ3a: Which actors support sports expatriates?

RQ3b: In which areas do sports expatriates feel they need the most help?

Method

The following section will outline the methodology used. This study uses archival data, which are “any sort of information previously collected by others, amenable to systematic study” (C. Jones, 2010, p. 1008). Archival data have been used in expatriation studies before; for example, Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, and Bross (1998) used data collected by a global relocation agency.

Archival data

The present paper uses two sources of archival data, namely a survey as well as five podcasts, which are used to illustrate the findings of the survey. In the context of her job as relocation consultant for sports expatriates, the second author held interviews with sports expatriates and conducted a survey to learn more about the topics that were highlighted in those interviews to better support sports expatriates. Although these interviews and the survey were not conducted for academic research purposes and, hence, have limitations, the data nevertheless provides valuable information on a group of expatriates that we do not know much about.

The questionnaire was created based on the interviews the second author conducted, all in all with more than 40 experienced sports expatriates about their experiences during their transition abroad¹. The sports these expatriates played ranged from basketball, soccer, volleyball to ice hockey and baseball, and players came from the U.S., Germany, Denmark, UK, Greece, etc. These interviews suggested the three main topics this study examines: the motivations, challenges, and support of sports expatriates. The second author then created an online survey to get an overview of these topics in a broader sample, to be better able to support sports expatriates. The survey was distributed online via a newsletter of the

¹ *These interviews are available as podcasts on [website withheld]*

second author, as well as through social media. The survey was hosted virtually to reach a global population of sports expatriates. This survey included the following:

Motivation to move abroad: This question asked why the sport expatriate had moved abroad. Ten answer options were provided as multiple choice options, including an open-ended option ‘other’. Answer categories were: league level, better salary, better facilities/access to professional coaches, experience living abroad, new challenges, higher level of competition abroad, realize my dream, learn new language, bridge two seasons in my home country. Participants were asked to select all that applies, meaning that the percentage used in this paper expresses the amount of expats that found the specific category to have motivated their self-initiated expatriation.

Challenges: Sports expatriates were asked about their major perceived challenges when transitioning internationally. Answer categories were presented as multiple choice options, where the selection of more than one answer was possible. Categories were: 1. language/communication issues with the team/coach, 2. language/communication issues outside work, 3. style of coaching/leadership, 4. adapting to cultural differences in daily life, 5. staying in touch with family and friends, 6. social isolation, 7. different food, 8. issues with regards to salary/benefits, 9. homesickness, 10. dating, 11. isolation of trailing spouse (and children), 12. Other challenges, with “No perceived challenges” as an option as well.

Source of Support: The survey asked respondents to specify who helped them in their transition, if they had received any support. Answer categories were: ‘team mates/colleagues’, ‘club management’, ‘fans/locals’, ‘external professional providers’, ‘coaches’, or ‘other’ (open ended), with multiple selected answers possible.

Support Needed: The survey also enquired into the area in which most help was deemed necessary. The answer categories to choose from included: ‘translation/language tutoring’, ‘understanding cultural differences’, ‘understanding the medical system’, ‘understanding differences in the sport (rules,

regulations)', 'contract/legal help', 'finding housing options', 'getting in touch with locals', 'finding a job for spouse', 'finding daycare/schooling options for children', and 'other'. Multiple selections of categories were possible.

The survey further included demographic questions on *Gender, Nationality, and Type of sport*.

Sample

A survey was conducted with 77 professional athletes in 10 different sports. Most survey respondents were active in the sport of basketball (39.7%), volleyball (38.5%) and soccer (10.3%). The respondents' experience abroad showed different career stages, with 42.9% having worked abroad for less than 3 years, 32.5% between 3-4 years, and 24.7% were experienced sport expats with five or more years of experience working abroad. The main nationality represented in this survey was U.S. American (62.3%), with a wide range of other nationalities (see Table 1) as well as dual nationality citizens. The survey sample's gender was relatively evenly distributed, with 42.9% male and 57.1% female respondents. These professional athletes have been pursuing their sports career in 55 different countries, Germany (7%), Italy (5.5%), and U.S. (5.5%) being the top three host countries.

----- Insert Table 1 about here -----

Five podcasts were selected to illustrate the findings of this study (Table 2). These podcasts were selected to reflect a range of different sports and host countries as well as different motivations, challenges and support actors and wishes (Table 3).

1. The first podcast is with Ryan, an American ice hockey player who went to Finland for one season, his first stay abroad. He had been playing since he was four years old, wanting to follow in his father's footsteps. He received the offer to play in Finland in an unconventional way,

through a former team mate at college who contacted him through Facebook. After two months of negotiations he signed the contract and traveled to a small town with only 15.000 inhabitants, four hours north of Helsinki.

2. The second illustrative example is Marisa F., a Canadian volleyball player who was playing her sixth season abroad in Switzerland. Having played volleyball through college, it really took off when she was at university and was selected for the Canadian national team. Due to the fact that there is no professional league in Canada, she decided to pursue her career abroad after finishing university. Her first experience abroad was in the Canary Islands, Spain, and she also played in France and Germany.
3. The third podcast is with Jenista, an American professional soccer player who had her first experience abroad when she went to Germany to play. She was looking for opportunities to play in either Germany or Sweden, and when her agent received an offer for her to play in Leipzig, she jumped on the opportunity and found herself in Germany only two weeks later.
4. Our fourth example story is Fabien, also a soccer player but from Trinidad and Tobago, who went abroad to play in five different countries including Puerto Rico and Malaysia. He started playing at five years old and dreamed to play professionally from a very young age. He was scouted at his home high school, and had his first chance to follow his dream abroad with a college scholarship in the U.S, followed by a career around the globe.
5. Finally, the fifth podcast included is with Marissa K., an American basketball player who played in Sweden, the Czech Republic, and Puerto Rico. After playing in college, she decided to try and get the most out of her talents playing basketball before getting 'a real job', so she signed with an agent and obtained her first contract overseas. To follow her dream of one day playing in the WNBA, she traveled to Sweden, where she experienced the local culture first hand while living with a host family.

----- Insert Table 2 and 3 about here -----

Results

In this section we present the results with regard to motivations, challenges, and the support actors and wishes of sports expatriates. We will illustrate these findings with examples from the five podcasts outlined above.

Motivations of sports expatriates

Our first research question pertains to the motivations of sports expatriates to move abroad (RQ1).

Table 4 shows that the main motivation was an interest to experience living abroad (75.3%), closely followed by the search for new challenges (74.0%), and the realization of the dream to play professional sports (58.4%). Other reasons to make the international move were better salary (42.9%), the league level (41.6%) and higher level of competition (35.1%). Some indicated another reason than the ones listed, for example the fact that there were no professional opportunities at home; Marisa F. was an example of this motivation, since there are no professional volleyball leagues in Canada (or the US) so she had to move abroad to continue to play.

----- Insert Table 4 about here -----

Professional athletes can have various reasons to make the move abroad at the same time. For Marissa K., the move abroad was mainly motivated because it would be a way to attain the professional goals she had set herself; however, she also acknowledged that it would also give her a chance to travel: *“Being realistic, I had to decide with the WMBA still a goal, I need to do something that continues to prepare me. And the best way to do that was to go overseas. But on top of it, not only was it a good way to propel my basketball career, but it also gives me a chance to travel”*.

For Fabien these two motivations were also present but it seemed they predominated at a different time of his career. From early age, watching Champion's League with his father, his dream was to play soccer at a high level, and for that, he needed to move away from Trinidad and Tobago. By the time he moved to the Philippines, his fifth country, he commented: *"For me it was more like an adventure. I was just fascinated by being able to travel the world, and do what you love to do."*

Challenges of sports expatriates

Secondly, we focused on the challenges that sports expatriates faced when playing abroad (RQ2).

The two most commonly mentioned challenges were the different coaching style (50.6%) and communication within the team (50.6%) (see Table 5). Differences in coaching styles are often the most immediate realization of professional athletes arriving in a new country. The daily contact with your "manager" (i.e. coach) leads to the realization that communication styles and tactical/technical preferences differences tremendously across the world. For example, Marisa F. noticed that the tactical side of soccer was much more emphasized in Germany; whereas in the US, the physical aspect of playing soccer would get more attention.

----- Insert Table 5 about here -----

Athletes often also found communication within the team challenging (50.6%), as well as communication outside of work (46.3%). An important aspect of this is language, as four of the interviewed athletes point out. Ryan moved to play ice hockey in Finland, and while the coach and his team mates did speak English, practice was in Finnish. He explained how the drills would be drawn on the board before a practice, so he could follow along – unless they changed it midway, then he had to

ask one of his team mates for clarification. He says: *“A lot of it was just trying to get by, and figure it out on my own, which is not an ideal way to do it. But I definitely got the hang of it, after a few weeks.”*

Marisa K. and Jenista were also confronted with practice in a language they did not speak; Czech and German, respectively. Jenista talks about the difficult transition when she first came to Germany and did not know any German, because even though many people do speak English, much of the time people spoke German to her. Marisa F. struggled with language in private life because nobody spoke English, only Spanish. Happily she had a team mate from the Canadian national team who was with her and who spoke a little bit of Spanish, so they could set up practicalities such as phone and internet.

Another surprisingly common challenge is with regard to salary/benefits, which is mentioned by 28.6% of the sports expatriates. Both Ryan and Marisa F. experienced difficulties with this. Ryan had difficulty with the club in terms of getting full pay for the month of December, since the club argued they did not have to pay the ten days he was away for Christmas, as well as getting some reimbursements that were agreed on during the negotiation before he came to Finland. Both Ryan and Marisa F. had difficulties with the accommodation provided by the club; Ryan did not get the apartment they had shown him pictures of, and had to wear winter coats for a week in January when the heat broke down in the apartment and it was 5 degrees Fahrenheit outside. Marisa F. also had both power and water turned off at some point, and she and her roommate had to threaten not to come to practice or to the match to force the club to fix the problem.

Besides these work issues that could affect a player’s performance directly, sports expatriates also encounter challenging situations off the court, gym or field. The challenge of staying in touch with family and friends back home (40.3%), homesickness (32.5%), and social isolation in the new country (28.6%) are subjects that are often hard to talk about, but occur too often to ignore. Ryan moved to a small town four hours north of Helsinki, with only 15.000 inhabitants. Many of his team mates had girlfriends and lived in a larger town 20 minutes away, where ‘anything social’ was happening. Ryan

says: *“If we’d lived there, it would have been a better experience.”* Instead, he decided to get involved with the community and taught English to children and also coached some of them, which was a very good experience for him: *“I got to meet a lot of good people because I was so involved. I made an impact there.”* For Jenista one of the hardest challenges was the find things to do in between practice. She has much more freedom to spend her time between practices than when she was still studying, and many of her team mates are still studying or already working. She also talks about her ‘recipe for homesickness’, which is an e-mail newsletter that she sends to all of her family, as well as keeping in touch with them via Skype.

Furthermore, in addition to the communication issues outside of work mentioned above, a quarter of the expatriates report the challenge of adapting to cultural differences (26.0%), and different food (24.7%). Jenista had to get used to wait for green to start crossing the street, as they do in Germany even if there is no traffic nearby. Marissa K. comments: *“Walking through the grocery store [...], I mean it’s so different. You don’t see any name brands that you’re used to. You don’t see anything that’s normal to you.”*

Supporting sports expatriates

Our third research question focused on who supported sports expatriates (RQ3a). The majority of the respondents received some kind of support (88.3%), with on average 2.05 (SD 1.23) sources of support (max. = 6). The most common sources of support were colleagues (76.6%), club management (53.2%), and coaches (36.4%). Very few sports expatriates were supported by external professional providers such as a relocation agency or an agent (9.1%).

Although the majority of respondents do receive some kind of support, the question is whether this support is sufficient. As Fabien states: *“At the professional level there is no mommy or daddy, nobody holding your hand.”* In particular, the podcasts show that this support is lacking at the very beginning of the stay. Many athletes are thrown in the deep upon arrival, for example, Ryan had a pre-season

game the very next day after arriving from the US. Similarly, on her first stay abroad in Spain, Marisa F. was dropped off at the apartment she was going to live in without it having the bare necessities such as water, internet, or an idea where the grocery store was. After having done several seasons in several countries, she comments: *“I hate the first couple of weeks. Everyone already knows everyone, and you’re usually just thrown in.”*

Colleagues were the most common source of support. Jenista was very glad that she had other foreigners in the team, to share experiences: *“It’s nice to be able to have other people to rely on, and talk to about those kinds of things.”* Also Marisa F. received much support from her fellow Canadian team mate, and Ryan had a Latvian roommate who was going through the same (professional) challenges, which helped him as well.

The podcasts also shed interesting light on the use of agents. Four of the five interviewees had an agent to help them with negotiating the contract, or to scout for offers in the first place if they did not have the international network themselves. Ryan is the only one who decided to not engage an agent to help him with contract negotiations, but he realized that it would have been better to have one to help him when problems arose with him not getting the play time he was promised as well as his salary. *“I thought I could handle it. Of course I would think otherwise now. Especially going abroad. I thought I asked a lot of questions over the summer, but I realized I didn’t ask enough really hard questions.”* However, Fabien warns that one has to be careful with agents in Asia. He had two experiences with agents in Singapore and Myanmar who could not uphold deals that they had made for him with clubs. He comments: *“These are not FIFA approved agents but do have relationships with the clubs. [...] It’s not the same as in the West. That’s just part of their culture, and you just have to decide if you want to be a part of it. It’s just part of the business. Sometimes you just have to take calculated risks.”*

When asked about the areas they felt they needed the most help (RQ3b), participants’ responses showcased the wish to be better integrated (Table 6). Almost half of participants wished to receive

more help with translation and language skills (57.1%) and learn more about cultural differences (41.6%) and, while issues like legal support, housing options, understanding differences in sport (rules, regulations) seemed to be better taken care of by their club environment, even though, as we have seen, some athletes still experience difficulties in this regard.

----- Insert Table 6 about here -----

One way to learn about the host culture and receive help with language skills is living with a local host family, which Marissa K. experienced: *“Living with that family, just experiencing the Swedish culture, just right in your face, it was everything – it was the food, the manners, the dinner table customs, the ‘what do you do, when you have friends over’, how do you act on a weekday vs. a weekend. Just so many different things, that I was able to acquire living with this family.”*

Discussion

A new group in the expatriation literature is sports expatriates. While this group has received quite some attention in the sport management literature (e.g. Agergaard & Tiesler, 2014; Magee & Sugden, 2002), there have been virtually no publications about sports expatriates in the expatriate literature (an exception being the book chapter by Dolles & Egilsson, 2017; and Egilsson & Dolles, 2017). Sport expatriates are self-initiated expatriates, who take the initiative to leave their home country themselves and who intend to stay temporarily in the host country (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). The present study sheds some more light on certain basic features of this group of expatriates, namely their reasons for moving abroad, the challenges they faced, as well as which actors supported them and in which areas they would have liked to have received support. More attention for this group is warranted due to their

high vulnerability; they are young and under extreme performance pressure. This presents certain IHRM challenges for the clubs (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017).

Reasons for moving abroad

First, the motivations of sports expatriates to move abroad were examined. Our study showed that sports expatriates mainly move abroad out of a desire for new experiences and new challenges. Our results echo the finding by Dickmann et al. (2008) that financial motives are not the most important motives to move abroad; the emphasis instead is with personal and career development. In fact, the desire to find new career challenges is one of two main motivators for sports expatriates; this is an interesting addition to the literature on motives of self-initiated expatriates, which state that self-initiated expatriates main motivations lie in the private domain, namely experiencing life abroad and broadening their horizons (Doherty et al., 2011). While these motivations are indeed important for sports expatriates, career considerations are very important as well.

In terms of the typologies developed in the sport literature (e.g. Magee & Sugden, 2002), this suggests that the Ambitionist is the predominant type, followed by the Nomadic Cosmopolitan who moves abroad to see the world. The findings furthermore found that financial reasons (Mercenary) are present for 42.9% of our sample. It is difficult, however, to compare our findings to Magee and Sugden's typology (2002), since our study did not ask the expatriate to list their motivations in order of importance. Most of the expatriates listed more than one motivation, so it is likely that many expatriates are a blend of different types. Future research should take the combination of different motivations into account, and determine the deciding factor.

Challenges

Our second research question focused on the challenges the sports expatriates faced. Almost all of them acknowledged experiencing challenges in both the professional and private domain (e.g. Finn &

McKenna, 2010) such as different coaching styles, communicating with the team, as well as challenges related to feeling at home in the new country, such as social isolation.

One of the main perceived challenges was communication issues with the team. This is an important topic because research on stereotype threat effect on sports performance (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999) as well as on the effect of diversity on sport team performance (Timmerman, 2000) was able to demonstrate the effects of in-group bias on athletic performance. Sports teams that are unable to integrate their foreign, diverse athletes so that they are perceived as one group will leave potential untapped due to conflict and lack of social contact.

Our study also emphasizes the importance of adjustment challenges for sports expatriates. Even though environmental and social factors during career transitions are acknowledged as impacting on sport performance (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Hanton et al., 2005), the particular challenge of adjusting to a new culture when moving abroad to play is relatively new to the sport management literature (an exception being Bourke, 2002). This finding echoes the point that is made in the expatriate literature that expatriate adjustment is ‘central’ to the success of the international assignment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

Furthermore, some of the perceived challenges are particular to the sports expatriate population. While every expatriate has to build a new social network when moving abroad (van Bakel, van Oudenhoven, & Gerritsen, 2017), it might be more difficult for sports expatriates to build a new social network outside of their immediate work environment due to their time schedule; they often have practice when others are off work, and have to play games in the weekend. Future research should examine in more detail how sports expatriates can build new social networks when abroad, since social support has been found vital for expatriate adjustment (Wang & Kanungo, 2004).

Supporting sports expatriates

Our study showed that sports expatriates are receiving support, but it is often of an informal nature. The team and the coach often become informal support providers. The sport expatriate, for example, is told to call the coach if they have any questions, and they ask their team mates to explain how to buy a ticket in the metro. Very little professional support, e.g. by relocation agencies, is used. When examining the areas in which sports expatriates would have liked to receive more support, it was clear that they were relatively satisfied with the logistical support offered (e.g. housing, legal support), but would have liked to receive more support with regard to adjusting to life in the new country.

In light of the challenges that sports expatriates experience both with regard to playing and living abroad, it could be worthwhile for clubs to offer more support to their expatriates, especially since they would like their athletes to perform at their highest level the day after arrival. There especially seems to be a gap in terms of support with regard to language and translation issues and cultural differences. Furthermore, clubs face increasing competition for the best talent (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017), and adequate support provision upon arrival could be a deciding factor for talents to choose that particular club. The German Bundesliga club Bayer Leverkusen has used the model of a development academy for international talent successfully, with specific coaches, language tutors and a buddy system to integrate their young, foreign talent in Leverkusen.

One obvious way to support sports expatriates with this is by providing them with cross-cultural training, which has been found to facilitate success on expatriate assignments (Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley, & Riedel, 2006). Future research should examine if cross-cultural training can also help sports expatriates, and how cross-cultural training can be tailored towards this specific group. However, when discussing how to support sports expatriates, there are many other actors than the club itself who could play a role in this respect: sports agents, national sporting federations, player's unions, and even international sport associations. The fact that there are many potential support providers can also cause confusion in terms of who is responsible for this. This could be a reason why currently not much

support is offered to sports expatriates, even though they themselves indicate they would like to be better supported with regard to adjusting to a new country.

Theoretical implications

The present study adds to the expatriate management literature by highlighting a very particular group of self-initiated expatriates who are highly vulnerable, and where support is extra important yet mostly absent. It is one of the first empirical studies on sports expatriates from an international HR perspective, gathering more information about this particular group as well as suggesting several avenues to better support them. It also offers information on their reasons to move abroad, which have a heavier career-emphasis than the 'normal' self-initiated expatriate has (Doherty et al., 2011).

We are also adding to the sport management literature in three ways. First, although much work has focused on transitions (e.g. into elite sport) (e.g. Finn & McKenna, 2010), only few studies have focused on the specific challenges of an *international* transition (e.g. Richardson et al., 2012). Such transitions are part and parcel of the life of a professional athlete, and deserve more specific focus since the added complexity of living and working in a different culture can increase the stress on an individual who already is under enormous performance pressure. Second, this study adds to the knowledge about the motivations of sports expatriates to move abroad. So far, the sport management literature has mainly investigated different typologies of sports expatriates, and has not yet investigated how often certain motivations occur. The present study also shows that many expatriates have more than one motive, and might be difficult to categorize in one particular type. Finally, the study also adds to our knowledge on sports expatriates in general, since the data in this study includes athletes from more sports than just soccer, as well as a broader range of nationalities. This broadens the predominantly Anglo-American focus thus far in the sport management literature (e.g. Elliott, 2014b; Elliott & Harris, 2011; Madichie, 2009).

Practical implications

In practical terms, this research provides useful pointers in terms of what IHRM challenges professional sports clubs need to address if they want to remain competitive in the global landscape of sports.

The expatriation literature clearly highlights the value of preparing expatriates for their international assignment (Littrell et al., 2006); yet, preparation and support of athletes is often scarce or non-existent once they are entering the ‘first-team world’ (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017; Richardson et al., 2013, p. 150). Egilsson and Dolles (2017) further show that limited support can be expected from team mates and agents, and that most of the young soccer players they interviewed, were mainly supported by their parents. Support of the sport club itself usually focuses on the athletic dimension; whereas, psychological and psychosocial aspects are neglected (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017). Professional sport clubs can support their athletes better, particularly with regard to non-athletic aspects such as providing social support. In order to foster the integration of foreign talent into the environment and team, one recommendation would be to establish a buddy system, by pairing a local player with a foreign one. Such a system has shown to provide benefits to expatriates in terms of adjustment and intercultural competence (Van Bakel, Gerritsen, & Van Oudenhoven, 2011, 2014). Equally, it could be a possibility to identify host families within the reach of the club community to host foreign players and introduce them to the local language and culture for a few weeks – as happened to Marissa K. – before finding appropriate individual housing.

Professional sports clubs have another reason to make sure their talent is well prepared for the challenges of playing abroad. The club’s reputation may be an important factor in the decision making process of a talented athlete with multiple offers. The professional sports world is small and tightly connected, especially in the day and age of digital platforms (Burns, 2016). Experienced international

athletes increasingly become mentors for young talents who reach out to them online, as Marissa K. also discussed in her podcast. Furthermore, individual athletes and small groups have been trying to build ranking platforms similar to Yelp for professional sports clubs (e.g. World of Volley’s “Bad Payment report” featuring clubs’ rating by current and former athletes²). This means that athletes now have more information available to make their decision; and they may decide to not sign with a club that is known for not paying on time, not providing adequate housing, and plainly speaking, not providing the most basic of expatriation services.

In addition, there is an ethical aspect to consider. The traditional agent system is currently disrupted and circumvented through online scouting platforms, such as www.footballscout.com, which enables clubs to contact athletes directly. More and more athletes decide to self-represent (Burns, 2016). Without an agent, the athlete is exposed to even more vulnerabilities in terms of contracts, security, and career longevity. It is therefore important for athletes at a younger age to be exposed to the questions and issues that will be important in their career decisions (legal understanding, nutrition, time management, cultural intelligence, etc.). The sports industry with all of its stakeholders needs to consider who is playing what role in the process of an athlete’s individual career development.

National sport associations with their youth development center may be able to further push the elite development of athletes by preparing them to compete against the best in the world – wherever that maybe. There is however a difference in their national policy and strategy depending on the size. While smaller NOCs and sport associations can benefit from sending their athletes to countries with better competition, larger associations (in size or sport success) are often prone to keep their athletes close to monitor development carefully and in close collaboration with the club. This goes as far as to implement policies that make athletes that play professionally abroad ineligible to qualify for the national team (e.g. rugby in England³). As the Rugby Football Union chief executive notes: “*We feel*

² <http://www.worldofvolley.com/>

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/rugby_union/english/9250944.stm

that [this policy] enables our whole elite department, including team management and coaches, as well as our technical, medical and sports science teams, to work more closely with England Playing Squad players to ensure that you are supported in the right way.”

On a club level, the receiving club of an international athlete has an interest in his or her immediate integration to minimize the time to optimal performance, e.g. through a cultural onboarding by the HR department. However, there are also economical reasons for youth academies of professional sports clubs to invest in the cultural integration and therefore maximize the performance potential of their younger players. Any means to develop better players will namely also bring a higher value in the transfer market. So, while they might not benefit from the player’s development on the pitch, they certainly benefit from the financial benefit of trading a well-rounded, adaptable player to other clubs (e.g. German’s Bundesliga club Bayer Leverkusen has been successful with this model for multiple years⁴).

All of this in mind, there are questions left to be resolved in the future: Who will be holding clubs that do not uphold contractual agreements responsible? Who supports those athletes that are struggling abroad from quitting their sport? Who will help athletes and coaches re-integrate into the local sports landscape after they return from abroad, disseminating their new knowledge and skills into the local system?

Limitations and future research

The present study has several limitations. First, the sample has some limitations. Although the study wanted to take a broader view by including more sports than just soccer, the total sample size was too small to allow for analyses between the different sports. Future research should take into account that there is a large variety within sports expatriates depending on the type of sport they do (e.g. team vs.

⁴ <https://www.stern.de/sport/fussball/der-fall-breno-und-die-integration-abseits-im-multikulti-paradies-3768680.html>

individual). As Maguire (1996, p. 337) notes, “golf and tennis players are arguable the nomads of the sports labor migration process, with constantly shifting workplaces and places of residence”. Future research should examine the challenges and support of these more nomadic sports expatriates.

Another limitation of the sample is that the participants were most likely self-selected, meaning that those sports expatriates who had become successful were more eager to share their experiences than those who were struggling. The fact that 98.7% of participants recommended a self-initiated expatriation for athletes points to the fact that the overall satisfaction among this group was extremely high. It is, therefore, likely that sports expatriates experience, in reality, experience even more challenges, emphasizing the need for organizations to adequately support their sports expatriates.

Since research on sports expatriates from an international HR perspective is only starting, there are many possible avenues for future research. First, future research should examine the adjustment of sports expatriates, for example by using the adjustment instrument by Hippler, Caligiuri, Johnson, and Baytalskaya (2014). Also, the sports industry offers unique opportunities to take objective performance measures into account, due to the “well-defined metrics of productivity and comparison (win, score), as well as clear outcomes (match results and league standings)” (Dolles & Egilsson, 2017, p. 10). This offers much scope for further research. Related to this, future research could examine the effects of different types of contract. Many sports expatriates have (extremely) short contracts which then have to be renewed on a regular basis. It is plausible that longer term contracts would lessen the adjustment challenges, and may even deliver extra benefits such as heightened team cohesion and more knowledge sharing within the club through coaching of lower level teams.

Another point of interest is the level of league these professional sport expats are working in. Soccer players in a Champions League club are offered much more support than second-league volleyball players, who often only make pocket money. Whether their challenges and motivations are the same is questionable. This study looked at professional athletes that are not part of the top 1% of

elite players who earn multiple million Euro contracts; therefore, the population of this study is more representative of the population of professional athletes abroad. It would also be worthwhile to take gender differences into account; for example, it is possible that financial motives to move abroad are less important for female athletes due to the gender gap in salaries (Hutt, 2016), with basketball, soccer, golf, and cricket reporting the highest gaps between male and female athletes. Female expatriates have less to gain by moving abroad than male expatriates. Future research should take gender into account when examining the reasons why sports expatriates move abroad.

Finally, the current paper focused exclusively on professional athletes. Another interesting group of sports expatriates are coaches and team managers. Although their career is less dependent on physical capital, they also experience the immense pressure on their performance; they are more and more 'hired to be fired' (Nissen, 2016) as a quick fix for unmet expectations. Coaches and trainers are usually somewhat older than athletes (>30), and they typically have more years of experience abroad, often having had a career as a professional athlete themselves. This suggests that motivations, challenges and support wishes could be different for coaches as compared to professional athletes. This offers scope for future research.

Conclusion

The growing phenomenon of expatriation in sports warrants more attention for the well-being of sports expatriates, and how various actors (e.g. clubs) can contribute to this. Sports expatriates are a vulnerable group; they are young, under high performance pressure from the day they arrive in the host country, and face a career with a short life-span, that can end from one day to the next. This emphasizes the importance of supporting this group of self-initiated expatriates. Better support of sports expatriates would not only benefit the professional athletes themselves, but also their clubs.

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Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 77)

		N	%
<i>Years abroad</i>	1-2 years	33	42.9%
	3-4 years	25	32.5%
	5+ years	19	24.7%
<i>Gender</i>	Male	33	42.9%
	Female	44	57.1%
<i>Nationality</i>	U.S. American	48	62.3%
	Swedish	7	9.1%
	German	3	3.9%
	Canadian	2	2.6%
	Finnish	2	2.6%
	Luxembourger	2	2.6%
	Bi-nationals	2	2.6%
	Other*	7	9.1%
	Missing	4	5.2%
<i>Sport</i>	Basketball	31	39.7%
	Volleyball	30	38.5%
	Soccer	8	10.3%
	Baseball	2	2.5%
	American Football	2	2.5%
	Other sports**	5	6.5%
	<i>Total</i>	78	100%
<i>Host country***</i>	Germany	14	7.0%
	Italy	11	5.5%
	USA	11	5.5%
	Spain	10	5.0%
	Switzerland	10	5.0%
	Austria	9	4.5%
	France	9	4.5%
	Sweden	9	4.5%
	Other***	117	58,5%
	<i>Total</i>	200	100%

*Other nationalities include: Australian, Brazilian, Bulgarian, Dominican, New Zealand, Slovenian and Spanish.

** Sports with only a single respondent include classic dance, ice hockey, hockey, swimming, and track and field / cross country. One respondent indicated playing two different types of sports, therefore N = 78.

***Other host countries include: Argentina, Australia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kosovo, Latvia, Lebanon, Maldives, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Norway, Oman, Philippines, Poland, Puerto Rico, Qatar, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Table 2 Overview of podcasts

Name	Sport	Nationality	Countries	Date
Ryan	Ice hockey	USA	Finland	June 11, 2016
Marisa F.	Volleyball	Canada	Spain, Germany, France, Switzerland	Jan 28, 2015
Jenista	Soccer	USA	Germany	March 30, 2014
Fabien	Soccer	Trinidad & Tobago	U.S., Puerto Rico, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines	Dec 14, 2014
Marissa K.	Basketball	USA	Sweden, Czech Republic, Puerto Rico	Nov 12, 2015

Table 3. Overview of motivations, challenges and support highlighted in the five podcasts

Name	Motivations	Challenges private domain	Challenges professional domain	Support
Ryan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He aspired to model his career after another successful player, who went from US to playing pro in Europe (Germany) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teammates social life did not match his, so him and another foreign player felt somewhat isolated • Missing friends and family • Accommodation not ideal (old, problem with heat for a while) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not get the playing time he was initially promised • Language: 1) Not everyone at the team could speak English, or at least not well 2) Practice was in Finnish • Problems with pay for vacation, problems with negotiated refunds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would have liked to have an agent to deal with management and coaches to ask the tough questions • Person in charge of import from the club helped mostly in the beginning
Marisa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanted a professional career (no professional league in home country, Canada) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting settled into everyday life (finding the grocery store, getting around, getting WiFi etc.) • Getting permanent accommodation • Practical issues with accommodation that the club did not want to take care of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different coaching styles • Different playing styles • Different group dynamics in team • Getting told off for eating the wrong type of lunch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worked with an agent for contract and practical issues (salary etc.)
Jenista	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play professionally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding things to do between practice • Language and communication: People usually speak in German and not everyone speaks English (especially the older generations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language and communication: Practice in German 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worked with an agency to get a contract abroad
Fabien	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanted to advance his career • Follow the dream • Being able to travel the world while doing what you love to do 	<i>Not discussed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to know if you can trust the agents, as there are a lot of scam agents in Asia, and you can't necessarily know if you can trust the deals that are made on your behalf • Difficulty finding clubs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social support (parents, home high school) • A scam-agent (not FIFA-approved), taking care of travelling arrangements, accommodation etc.
Marissa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanted to play professionally • Travel and get new experiences • Experience different cultures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The weather is different • Shopping for groceries • The culture is different 	<i>Not discussed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lived with a host family in Sweden • Agent (help with getting contracts abroad, decide on contracts etc.) • Parents (help decide on contracts)

Table 4. Motivations of self-initiated sports expatriates

<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Athlete (n = 77)</i>
Experience living abroad	75.3%
New challenges	74.0%
Realizing the dream	58.4%
Better salaries	42.9%
League level	41.6%
Higher level of competition	35.1%
Learn new language	29.9%
Better facilities/access to professional coaches	15.6%
Bridge two seasons	5.2%
Other motivation	14.3%

Table 5. Perceived challenges of self-initiated sports expatriates

<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Athlete (n = 77)</i>
Coaching Style	50.6%
Language/Communication issues with the team	50.6%
Language/Communication issues outside work	46.8%
Staying in touch	40.3%
Homesickness	32.5%
Social Isolation	28.6%
Issues with salary/benefits	28.6%
Adapting to cultural differences	26.0%
Different food	24.7%
Dating	22.1%
Social isolation of trailing family	11.7%
Other challenges	3.9%
No perceived challenges	6.5%

Table 6. Areas where self-initiated sports expatriates felt they needed the most support

	<i>Athlete (n = 77)</i>
Translation/language tutoring	57.1%
Understanding cultural differences	41.6%
Getting in touch with locals	14.3%
Understanding differences in the sport (rules etc.)	13.0%
Contract/legal help	13.0%
Understanding the medical system	13.0%
Finding housing options	10.4%
Finding a job for spouse	2.6%
Finding daycare/schooling options for children	2.6%
Other area of support	3.9%