

Sports Management and Education: Empowerment and Balance for the “Scholar Athlete” through a Cross-cultural Analysis

Howard HIGA¹⁾, Steven E. QUASHA²⁾, and Fumie KATAGIRI¹⁾

Abstract: This paper draws upon the intercultural perspectives of foreign basketball coaches in Japan to offer insights into balancing the affairs of the “scholar” athlete. The premise held throughout the discussion is that there are valuable insights which can be gained through a cross-cultural analysis of aspects that affect the academic and athletic performance of scholar athletes in Japan. The specific areas of investigation include scholastic support, health and nutritional support, emotional support, strength and conditioning support, and cross-training. Providing support in these areas, in line with the cross-cultural insights which arise, can optimize performance on and off the court. Furthermore, the recommendations hold the potential to impact Japanese basketball and other sports in Japan as a whole.

Key words: scholar athlete, support, strength training, cross-training, nutrition

Introduction

In the US, there has been a strong movement over the past two decades to refer to college athletes as “scholar athletes” (or student athletes) with the intent of stressing “scholar” (or student) first and foremost. In fact, the movement has resulted in cementing the term “scholar athlete” into the vernacular surrounding the discussion of sports in the US, with “sports player” being largely replaced by the desired term.

The use of the term has not been merely a semantic shift but has paid dividends in the lives of the scholar athletes as institutions, coaches, and the community have had to address and focus on the balanced needs of the students — toward their scholarship and their athletics.

This paper follows up on the discussion on

“intercultural perspectives on the state of basketball in Japan” (Higa, Quasha, Katagiri, 2016a). The discussion here turns to balancing the needs of the “scholar athlete” in order to create optimal conditions and opportunities for their academic and athletic development. This paper relays the international perspectives of two basketball coaches in Japan: Steven E. Quasha, who formerly coached at Gifu Shotoku University, and Coach Carter, who has been affiliated with teams in Tokyo and Gifu.

Scholastic support

In Japan, one of the glaring deficiencies that Carter has noted in the system of college sports is the lack of the “academic counselor.” In the US, all major and most minor level universities and colleges employ full time staff members for athletics who oversee the academic progress of the students (Broughton, 2001; Carodine et al., 2001; Lanning, 1982). These

1) 人間福祉学部 2) 椋山女学園大学現代マネジメント学部

counselors work closely with the faculty at the school (the course teachers and professors) to provide tutoring, guidance, and test preparation in order to make up for the substantial amount of time scholar athletes devote to practices and games.

There is also usually a large room or center near the athletic facility that serves as a study hall or library for the scholar athletes to gather after practice and through the evenings. It is analogous to a study hall but with equipment, materials, and tutors who specialize in attending to the specific academic needs of the scholar athletes.

Health and nutritional support

Scholar athletes also need support for other facets of their daily living in order to fulfill their full potentials in the classroom and on the playing fields/arenas. One area that lacks attention in Japan according to Carter is diet. “You are what you eat,” is a phrase that seems to overstate the connection between diet, exercise, and lifestyle. Yet, fitness experts and nutritionists often swear by this assertion. For them, the connections between diet, physical development, and peak performance are clear (Burke, 2007; Campbell, 2007; Dunford, 2006; Ivy et al., 2004; Schroder, 2000; Taylor et al., 2015).

Carter sees a glaring disconnect between the vast scientific knowledge that is available for diet and nutrition and what normally transpires for the scholar athletes on a daily basis in Japan. In short, according to Carter, the vast majority of athletes eat a normal diet, no different from an ordinary student. And since students are usually on a low budget that diet often includes the cheapest fast food items such as instant noodles and curry rice and sugar-laden snacks from the convenience stores.

In most cases, very little information is provided to scholar athletes to allow them to make informed decisions regarding their meals. Also, in many

cases little funding is provided to allow them to follow a healthier diet should they desire to do so.

In the US, most scholar athletes adhere to a “meal plan” specifically arranged for them by a sports nutritionist. This nutritionist works in conjunction with the school or dormitory cafeteria to prepare meals for the athletes that meet all the requirements of a set plan. In the US, scholar athletes can be seen carrying a different meal card in the dormitory cafeteria. This special meal card designates their scholar athlete status and alerts the cafeteria staff to serve them the meal prepared in conjunction with the sports nutritionist for the day. These meals are usually high in protein and low in fat.

Carter relayed that his niece who played volleyball at a mid-level university in the States had specific instructions about her diet — what was allowed and what was prohibited. At Thanksgiving meals, for example, when the family gathered, he observed his niece following those instructions to the tee, passing on dishes that were restricted and only partaking of dishes that were allowed. And this was for women's volleyball at a mid-level university.

This pales in comparison, according to Carter, with eating instant ramen on nearly a daily basis — which was the case for some of the members of the basketball team Carter coached. But Carter realized that convenience and budget also came into play at that time. No matter how much Carter desired to set a different agenda for the players, regarding diet and nutrition, he felt bound by cultural and financial factors. Carter surmised that the system was negligent in the lack of support that was provided to scholar athletes regarding this aspect of their livelihood.

In similar fashion, Quasha was appalled that members of his basketball team would gather to take a smoke break following practices. This was

something he had never encountered in all of his years in basketball. Quasha's recollections are as follows (Quasha, 2001: 15):

Yet another nuisance I had trouble living with as a basketball coach was the number of smokers on our squad... As soon as practice ended, this group immediately headed for the hallway and gathered around the ashtrays to smoke. At first glance, I joked about the situation and hoped they would realize the absurdity of a serious athlete also being a smoker. They embarrassingly laughed at my comments. For most of them, the addiction to nicotine makes the notion of quitting unthinkable...

I thought about putting my foot down and barring smoking on our team, but I wondered if this was cultural imperialism on my part? Many Americans disdain smoking and in recent years have enacted laws which forbid smoking in public places...

In the end, I explained that a personal act such as smoking makes individuals physically weaker by damaging the cardiovascular system. Since basketball is a team sport which demands maximum physical conditioning, smoking contradicts this because it is a selfish act. Therefore, I wanted to have non-smokers playing for our team as they are far less likely to get fatigued at the end of the game and will make fewer mistakes than tired smokers. A few players understood my point and actually quit, but most, much to my chagrin, kept on smoking.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to further substantiate the connection between health and nutrition and sports performance, as the topic area

is wide-ranging. A small sample of the studies in this area include: American College of Sports Medicine, and American Dietetic Association, 2000; Rodriguez, 2009; Vogel, 2015; Williams, 2005.

Emotional support

Quasha had noted in 2001 that the men's basketball games at his Japanese university attracted few students from the regular student body. Carter also was surprised by the sparse attendance at university games in Japan. This seemed to be a norm across many universities and colleges in Japan, as Carter noted that away games at some of the bigger schools drew very small crowds.

The lack of interest should have been demoralizing for the players and the team. Yet, they carried on without a loss in motivation. At least on the outside it seemed that way. Some of the students on Carter's team that had come from high schools with a high reputation for basketball seemed dismayed by the lack of interest and support by the student body at the college level.

To generate interest at Carter's university in Tokyo, he arranged with the captains of the main sports on campus to agree to send team members to each other's games as a show of support and school unity. Initially, a few specific games for each sports team on the yearly calendar were designated as “unity games.” It meant that other teams were required to send members of their team to those games to sit in a cheering section. Since teams had to carry on with their normal practice schedules, a 10 percent ratio was set for the requirement of the team's attendance. For example, for the American football team, which boasted a membership of about 40 members, any four members were instructed to attend the “unity games” when it appeared on the schedule. For subsequent “unity games”, a different group of four members from the football team were sent to cheer on the other sport. Pulling 10 percent

from various sports teams was adequate to fill a cheering section at the designated “unity games”.

Over time, familiarity bred interest, and, in turn, interest bred a true following. Friendships were made among the sports fraternity. Non-designated games (non-unity games) were attended freely. In addition, regular student body members became associated to the games through “friend of friends.” Word of mouth and the buzz created on campus were enough to generate good support across campus for sporting events.

What began as a grass roots type of movement, spread among the general student body. The enthusiasm at the games became palpable. It served to offset the drudgery of yearlong practices and games. Carter believes that the emotional burn out factor (and physical too) was partly offset by more enthusiasm at the games, connections with players on other teams, and recognition by the student body.

It did not approach the level of fervor that can be witnessed at university basketball games in America, especially exhibited by the raucous student section. But it was a step in the right direction and it changed the culture of sports events on that campus for the long run.

Strength-conditioning support

According to coach Carter, there is an entire body of science in the sports training arena that is largely being underappreciated, underutilized, and ignored here in Japan. At the elite Olympic level, the evidence seems rather clear. Japanese athletes are indeed competing on the world stage, on par with the competition in every realm, including displaying optimum strength and fitness for this elite stage of performance. However, this kind of approach to strength training is widely being applied even to high school athletes in the US. For university

athletes in the US, it is a staple of their training regiment — a standard requirement and expectation. When high school athletes in the US visit prospective universities to consider offers for athletic scholarship, they expect to encounter “world class” strength training facilities on the campuses.

The Chubu Gakuin University students who visited the University of Hawaii for a study abroad program indeed encountered a world-class facility for strength training. And by all accounts, the University of Hawaii sports training facility may be “average” among the universities of America. They visited the Alexander C. Waterhouse Physiology Research. According to the mission statement (Hawaii Athletics, 2015), the student-athletes utilize “various strength, flexibility and conditioning methods” to “achieve optimal strength and conditioning performance and to prevent injury.” They also receive an “education in body-type testing and nutrition.” The student-athletes “are charted from their first training session through their athletic careers to establish their athletic progression.”

For Carter and others, who have had experiences in sports training in the US and Japan, it is perplexing to witness the level of disregard for the science connected to sports training in Japan. The preference to build strength and stamina here seems rooted in practices that honor the “process” more than the results — the process of adhering to a regimented program that builds character, cements the hierarchy of coach-player and upperclassman-lowerclassman, and epitomizes the sacrifices for the sake of the team. Tens of thousands of repetitive calisthenics, for example deep knee bends, can build team spirit, mental strength, and even a solid physique, but they probably cannot mold you into an elite world-class athlete.

So the questions become, “What is the root of the reluctance, i.e., stubbornness, to accept and adhere to the science of strength training?” “Is the process more important than the results?” “Is there a *gatekeeper* status that the process maintains and secures?”

In “*From Bushidō to science: a new pedagogy of sports coaching in Japan*”, Miller (2011:385) touched upon some of these aspects. Miller discussed “a new pedagogy of Japanese sports coaching, which is based on science rather than *Bushidō*, rational thought rather than samurai wisdom.” Miller claims that “scientific pedagogies of sports coaching currently face various difficulties making inroads in Japan because they are ‘too new’, ‘too confusing’, ‘too difficult to understand’, ‘not authoritarian enough’ or ‘too Western’, and therefore not seen as suitable to the ‘traditional’ Japanese sporting landscape.”

Support for the athletes in Japan needs to include a better balance of affairs related to this fundamental aspect that embodies the scholar athlete: strength training. Scholar athletes need to be provided with the opportunities to excel through the assistance of sports science and not be hampered by a process that aims to instill other, extraneous, lessons.

It should be mentioned here that the old adages that muscle bound athletes will lose finesse and flexibility, that bench pressing can throw off a shooter's jump shot, etc. have significantly been debunked (Haff, 2001; Wilson, 1993). Indeed, the extreme examples of muscle-bound physiques are cause for concern for sports performance. For example, it would be difficult to envision a competitive bodybuilder (of the physiques that grace the covers of the popular bodybuilding magazines) as possessing the optimum body type for a pitcher, point guard, quarterback, etc. However, the science of strength training has addressed these concerns and the balance of power,

fitness, flexibility, agility, etc. are at the center of the focus.

And the concerns have also been addressed by a large array of alternative exercise methods, equipment, and routines developed through contemporary sports science which do not include free weights. Many of these sports training regiments, including plyometrics (Haff, 2001; Miller, 2006), high-intensity interval training, the use of training ropes (heavy ropes), resistance cables, and modern adaptations of the medicine ball, would suit the Japanese approaches in this area well. They provide alternatives or balances to the mindset that weightlifting is detrimental or non-beneficial for athletic performance. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this wide array of exercise and strength building methodologies.

In brief here, many elite level professionals adhere to these training regiments. Carmelo Anthony of the New York Knicks is one of many. He has largely sworn off dead weights (plates, barbells, dumbbells) in lieu of using a routine that employs suspension straps. In 2011, under new manager Don Wakamatsu, the Seattle Mariners stripped the training facility of traditional weightlifting equipment and commissioned exercise physiologist Dr. Marcus Elliot to employ his Peak Performance or P3 System (Harris, 2011).

In the context of the discussion of this section, balancing the affairs of the scholar athlete, it is noted that the neglect of strength training can lead to an imbalance for athletes on several fronts. Without a proper strength training program, athletes must struggle to compensate for a lack of strength, speed, and even flexibility — which is a proven benefit of strength training (Arazi, 2011; Beedlel, 1991; Morton, 2011; Stone, 2006) — through less efficient means. Less efficient training methods not only have poorer results but they also expend more time and energy. For example, running long distances as

a staple of the training program can be fatiguing and time consuming, leading to physical and mental burnout (especially given the grueling yearlong schedule in Japan). And since physical development through proper strength training is progressive — an exponential effect rather than a cumulative effect — the disadvantages are significant and mount. Efficiency and time management are significant for the scholar athletes in balancing their devotion to studies and sports.

In addition, strength training can prevent sports injuries. Which, in turn, can prevent the downward spiral that can ensue in a scholar athlete's daily life and academic and athletic career after suffering a serious injury. Furthermore, strength training can prevent acute injuries (Faigenbaum, 2010; Kraemer, 1993;), improve chronic/recurring injury conditions (Mattacola, 2002), and accelerate the rehabilitation process (Henja, 1982; William 1999). There is a wealth of scientific research and case studies to back up these claims. These aspects of providing “balance” in a scholar athlete's life can have far reaching effects — both on and off the court.

Cross-training

As Quasha pointed out in 2001, the lack of youth leagues in Japan sets players years behind their counterparts in other countries. Learning the game from age 13 in junior high school is a relatively late start, as compared to other countries. This factor has not changed since 2001. Other assessments that Quasha made in 2001 have not changed either. They include the lack of basketball courts and facilities in the communities and the requirement for students to choose one sport to play for the entire year.

As Quasha (2001) mentioned, the requirement to commit to one sport for an entire career, junior high school and beyond, limits the pool of the best athletes that are available for all sports. The most

popular sports, like baseball and soccer, might attract the best athletes while the lower tier sports might have to settle for a pool of players with a lower level of athletic ability.

Playing multiple sports, as is the norm in the US, is considered a favorable and positive approach to player development and the success of team play. Playing multiple sports is considered a form of cross training as the players are able to benefit from the rigors of utilizing and stressing different muscle groups as required for specific sports. The development through one sport can be utilized to enhance performance in another sport. Eye-hand coordination, the employment of hip rotation, developing quick and explosive jumping ability, etc. are some of the more refined aspects of development that can be utilized in all sports.

Nearly all of the top athletes in the US were multiple sport athletes growing up, from elementary school through high school. A few carried on as two-sport athletes in college. LeBron James was an outstanding wide receiver in high school. Hall of Fame NBA guard Allen Iverson excelled in football and nearly pursued football in college, forgoing his basketball dreams. Danny Ainge of the Boston Celtics, now President of Basketball Operations, was a high school All-American in football, baseball, and basketball. And Shaquille O'Neal nearly followed the path of his football career in college.

Baseball commentators have relayed that playing ping-pong is an excellent aid for training eye-hand coordination for batters. Some of the notable enthusiasts of table tennis who believe in the connection are David Ortiz and Pablo Sandoval of the Boston Red Sox. Sandoval is considered one of the most skilled table tennis players in the league by some. It is reflected in his ability to make contact with pitches in all areas of the batting zone in an uncanny fashion. Some MLB clubhouses have installed ping-pong tables for this purpose.

There are also elements of mental and social development attached to cross training approach, including developing sports acuity, teamwork, sportsmanship, leadership skills, concentration skills, etc.

A major shift in the landscape for Japanese sports would have to occur for this to become the norm in Japan. The seasons for the major sports would need to be arranged to allow an “off-season” for one sport to coincide with the “on-season” for another sport. Spreading the various major sports across the yearly calendar in a manner in which they can be played without overlapping provides an important “down time” for every sport and player of that sport. That down time can be utilized as “rest” for athletes who choose not to be involved in another sport. This rest is important for balance — to allow the body to heal, to allow the mind to settle down, to allow the “scholar athlete” to concentrate on his or her studies (Raglin, 2000). In sum, it can help to avoid chronic injuries and to prevent burn out on different fronts.

Final thoughts

This paper has discussed aspects of balance for the scholar-athlete related to scholarship, nutrition, emotional stability, strength training, and cross-training. The most fundamental value and need of the true scholar-athlete, whereby “scholar” precedes athletics, remains the reverence for the athlete's education. This shift has been made in American society. Rules and governing bodies have been enacted to try to prevent the appalling violations of the past from reoccurring, whereby schools circumvented the educational system to falsify the scholastic standing of the athlete. It is certain that violations continue to take place. But schools are on notice that heavy penalties will be levied for the violations and toward the violators. In fact, the governing body for university athletics, the NCAA (National College Athletics Association), has

imposed severe sanctions against violating institutions and there is genuine fear and trepidation among the parties to remain within good standing of the NCAA — lest they suffer the consequences of the NCAA's ire.

More significantly, a majority of the coaches from youth leagues to university have aligned with the movement. Current-generation coaches, more than in the past, are apt to repeat the educational mantras to their players: “You need to do well in school”; “Only a very small percentage of players ever become professional athletes, so education is the key to your futures”; etc. And increasingly, there is genuine sincerity attached to these guiding principals with each passing coaching generation. It has been a rather significant and swift adjustment in America. It was only two decades ago that some of the most egregious college cases of education fraud came to light. Through awareness and enforcement, a change in the mindset and educational landscape regarding scholar athletes has been achieved in a relatively short time.

An honest assessment needs to be made in Japan, America, and any country. Are the needs of the children and young adults being met in the classroom? Are the grueling schedules and requirements for sports overwhelming for the scholar athletes, disallowing time and energy for their scholastic endeavors? Do the coaches sincerely care about these basic needs of the athletes or are they blinded by their own personal goals to succeed and win championships? Are there rules, governing bodies, and supporting entities built into the system that ensure the right of student athletes to gain a fair and good education? In the end, these are the main challenges that will provide the most balance for the scholar athlete.

Jeremy Guthrie, starting pitcher for the 2015 World Champion Kansas City Royals, was asked what it took to become a Major League pitcher. He replied

(Leahey and Leahey, 2015):

People ask me all the time, 'What does it take to get there?'... You have a God-given ability. You maximize it to your fullest through hard work... For me it meant working hard in class as well. Because I eventually got to play at Stanford because of my grades and I received coaching there that took me to another level that I had never been to before. So had I not worked hard in school and got good grades and not gone to Stanford, I would not be sitting here, you know, doing what I'm doing now for the past 13 years professionally... So everyone thinks it's all about what you do on the field or in the weight room. That's all important and but it's all inclusive...

Indeed, the factors that lead to success for a scholar athlete are all inclusive. Providing support for balancing the affairs of the scholar athlete can lead to optimal performance in the classroom, on the court, and in life.

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