Psycho-social attributes of elite African women volleyball players

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the psycho-social attributes of elite African women volleyball athletes. These psycho-social attributes included the influence of significant others, reasons for specializing in volleyball, motives for participation and players’ retirement prospects. Questionnaires were administered to 100 players from 10 countries who participated at the 16th Africa Cup of Nations for senior women held in Nairobi, Kenya. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, i.e. frequencies and percentages. Results indicated that the players had late entry into volleyball, 78% of them were influenced by family members to play volleyball, 81% continued to play the game due to success, and 64% envisaged that they would pursue careers outside sport after retiring from competitive volleyball. The study recommends the retraining of physical education (PE) teachers to design and implement volleyball talent identification and nurturing programmes. PE teachers and coaches should guide young volleyball players to further their education alongside playing volleyball so that they can have alternative career choices upon retirement. Further studies need to be conducted to unearth the technical and tactical shortcomings of elite women volleyball players in Africa.

Key words: Volleyball, female players, Africa Cup of Nations.


Introduction

There are many factors which are associated with successful athletic performance in different athletic contests. These factors include the genetic constitution of the players, technical and tactical preparation, physical and psychological attributes. Career orientation and paths of an elite athlete is constructed by the socialization process in which socialization agents (significant others), socio-cultural influences, the self and the environment have significant roles to play (Steveson, 1990; Philips, 1993). The interaction between an athlete and socializing agents’ changes over time as is evident in the different phases of becoming involved and committed in a quest for sporting excellence.

The role of significant others (parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, coaches and peers) in sport socialization has been a topical issue in sport sociology.
Numerous research studies have alluded to the fact that for athletic ability to be translated into good performance, the athlete must get support and encouragement from significant others (Mcpherson, Curtis & Loy, 1989; Ipinmoroti & Ajayi, 2003; Rintaugu, 2005). It has been reported that a significant number of successful athletes come from families where family members are involved in sport (Rintaugu, 2005). Research studies have also shown that parents transmit attitudes and values about physical activity in general and sport in particular, pay activity fees, are powerful role models and provide physical and emotional support to their siblings (Grevis, 1991; Wasonga, 1996). Beyond the family support, the athletes can get play partners from their peers and from the neighbourhood while teachers and coaches have been credited to be instrumental in determining continued participation in sport by young athletes. Social learning theory as propounded by Bandura (1971) underscores the importance of significant others as they are role models and provide the necessary social reinforcement for participation in sport. Bandura’s social learning theory demonstrates the effects of identity formation and learning through the observation of models as represented by significant others (parents, family members, the coach or team members) (Stroot, 2002). The two major influence that contribute to athletes pursuing an athletic career are success and positive support from significant others.

Several theories have been propounded to explain why man engages in physical activities and sport, and the values he receives from such participation. Some of these theories overlap and have been given different nomenclatures. Many of the reasons listed in the theories of why man participates in sports are working together subconsciously to motivate and induce sport participation (Gitonga, Njororai & Wahome, 2003). For example, competence motivation theory (Harter, 1981), achievement goal orientation theories (Nicholas, 1984), social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) have all been applied by sport psychologist and sociologists to guide research in participation motivation and attrition. However, consensus has remained elusive and understanding motivation as a reinforcer of human action is one of the key issues pursued by sport psychologists and educators for purposes of theoretical development analysis. Motivation is considered critical to sport participation and performance because it demonstrates the intention, activation and regulation of the driving force of behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the light of these theoretical underpinnings, it is important to evaluate the participation motives of elite African women’s volleyball players. Such information will be useful to coaches, managers, parents and significant others to motivate players to continue seeking excellence in volleyball.

Research on athletes’ specialization in sport has reported numerous and diverse findings and the pros and cons of early specialization, have been viewed
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differently by sociologists and psychologists. However, studies in the west have revealed that athletes who represent their countries in global competitions such as World Cup and Olympic Games began participating in sport at the age of 12 years (Clarke, 1980; Therberge, 1997). Indeed, Hill (1993) reported that baseball players in their study took part in baseball after having participated in other games. Burnett (2005) found that the mean age of specialization of South African athletes in the sport in which they competed at international level was 15.7 years.

Athletes cannot continue being involved in competitive sport through their lifetime. They are called upon to retire either voluntarily or involuntarily from a given sport due to age, psychological fatigue, poor performance, injury, new interests, conflict with occupational demands, family pressures and a shift in the relative importance of sports compared with other age-appropriate activities (McPherson, Kurtis & Loy, 1989; Blinde & Stratta, 1992). Most times, athletes are caught up with retirement by surprise and they face untold challenges when they retire from active participation in sport. For example, Baillie and Danish's (1992) survey of former baseball players regarding their preparation for post athletic careers found that many felt unprepared for life beyond sports. Theories of thanatology and social gerontology have been applied to address retirement from sports with diverse outcomes (Duquin, 1980; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Baille & Danish, 1992). Indeed, Greendorfer (1986) opined that competitive emphasis, lack of enjoyment and coaching style are the main contributing factors to early retirement from competitive sports participation.

Therefore the purpose of this study was to determine the psycho-social attributes of African elite women volleyball players. Understanding the psycho-social attributes of the volleyball players is critical to the development of their sporting careers and will enable stakeholders to provide meaningful assistance as well as create an appropriate nurturing environment. This is consistent with Amusa's (2003) call for the need to study African athletes and unearth some factors such as family and psychological factors that influence performance. Thus, the study was guided by the following objectives.

1. To establish the influence of significant others in socializing women athletes into volleyball.
2. To determine the participation motives of the elite women volleyball players.
3. To find out why women athletes specialized in volleyball.
4. To examine retirement prospects of elite women volleyball players.
Methodology

Design

A descriptive survey design was used to collect data.

Sample

Data were collected from 100 participants, who competed at the 16th African Volleyball Cup of Nations for Senior Women held in Nairobi, Kenya from 3-17 September 2007. The following countries participated at the tournament: Algeria, Botswana, Cameroon, Egypt, Senegal, South Africa, Tunisia, Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya. The study targeted 120 participants but 20 questionnaires were incorrectly filled and were discarded. Only 100 of the questionnaires were processed, representing a return rate of 76.92%. The players’ age range, mean and standard deviation (SD) were 14 to 36 years, 23.0 ± 4.0 years, respectively. Their playing experience at the national level ranged from 1-17 years, with a mean and SD of 4.77± 2.3 years, respectively. The players had older and younger siblings who were active in sports.

Research Instrument

A self-administered questionnaire was utilized for data collection. The questionnaire had two sections. Section A sought the participants’ bio data such as age, playing experience, family members engagement in sports, while section B had sport-specific issues concerning reasons for specializing in volleyball, motives for participating in volleyball, influence of significant others and retirement prospects. Items on the influence of significant others had Likert-type response scale, i.e. positive, negative, no influence and not applicable which were scored on a four point scale. Items in the other sections regarding reasons for specializing in volleyball, motives for participating in the sport and retirement engagements, required categorical responses, i.e. ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

The instrument was validated by a team of physical education (PE) specialists who were lecturers in research methodology and sports sociology. The draft questionnaire was modified based on their comments and suggestions before it was used for data collection. The questionnaire was also piloted among 18 students of Kenyatta University’s volleyball team. A reliability coefficient of 0.78 (Split-half method) was obtained and considered adequate for data collection (Borg & Gall, 1989). In order to collect data for the actual study, questionnaires were administered to the players in the games village with the assistance of their team managers. The players’ responses were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics.
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Results

The age at which the elite women specialized in volleyball revealed that 26% of elite women volleyball players started specializing in volleyball at the age of 13-15 years, followed by 20% of them who commenced playing at ages 16-18 years and then 17% at 10-12 years. Only 8% of the players specialized in volleyball at ages 7-9 years. The reasons for the players' specialization in volleyball are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that elite women athletes specialized in volleyball mainly due to enjoyment (86%), followed by achievement (78%), talent (75%), psychological benefits (62%) and family members' influence (54%). The least reasons why they participated in volleyball included influence of media, availability of facilities, teachers' influence, external rewards and the influence of friends.

Table 1: African women athletes' reasons for specializing in volleyball

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>% Yes</th>
<th>Rank of Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological benefits</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External rewards</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaches</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport Heroes</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social status of sport</td>
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<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results on the influence of significant others in the socialization of elite women volleyball (Figure 1) showed that family members were regarded as being the most influential in socializing the volleyball players into sport (78%), followed by themselves (69%), team mates (62%) and friends/peers (60%). The least influences were judged as being exerted by employers (28%), teachers (34%) and coaches (42%).

Reasons which motivated African women elite players to continue participating in volleyball are illustrated in Figure 2, where the major reasons for the women athletes' continued participation in volleyball were reported to be success (81%), personal development (66%) and career opportunities (52%). Other reasons
included religious beliefs (83%), recognition (79%), self-actualization (70%), financial rewards (69%) and prestige (66%).

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**Figure 1**: Influence of significant others on socialization of elite African women volleyball players into sport.

Presented in Figure 3 are the preferred undertakings of the elite women athletes when they retire from active participation in volleyball. Figure 4 shows the preferences of post-retirement engagements of the volleyball athletes: careers outside sport (64%), sport-related careers (63%) and sport management (59%). Careers that the players were least likely to be involved in were sport medicine – related fields (60%), recreational sport (49%) and sport-related careers 46(46%).

**Discussion**

The results of the study revealed that the majority of the elite women players started specializing in volleyball at ages 13-15 years. Although the consequences of early specialization in a specific game have been hardly studied in African countries, the results of this study contradict observations by Ipinmoroti and Ajayi (2003) in which subjects started competitive sport before age 12.
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Reasons for continued participation

**Figure 2:** Reasons for elite women athletes’ continued participation in volleyball.

Post-retirement Prospects

**Figure 3:** Preferred post-retirement engagements of elite women volleyball athletes.
Similarly, Clarke (1980) and Therberge (1997) reported that athletes started taking part in sport in their early ages and consequently it can be said that their socialization into sport began in childhood and continued through adolescence. Rudsepp and Viira (2000) opined that family members especially the father or older same sex siblings seem to exert the strongest influence on athletes younger than 14 years, whereas the influence of peers seem to be more dominant among late adolescents. Secondly, the elite women athletes had an average playing experience of 4.77 years. The high turnover rate of these players could be attributed to socio-cultural factors which militate against women’s continued participation in sports including domestic chores, marriages and cultural stereotypes. However, the fact that some of the volleyball players reported representing their national teams for over 10 years, suggests that few younger girls take active interest in playing the game and clearly demonstrates a shortcoming of volleyball development in the countries.

Reasons which made women players to specialize in volleyball included enjoyment, achievement, talent development, psychological benefits and the influence of family members. Burnett (2005) found that athletes ranked achievement, the recognition of their talent and desire to win and thus compete successfully as major components in the formation of their athletic identity and indicators of possible future success as an elite athlete. These findings are supported in Harter’s (1981) competence motivation theory which holds that young people who perceive themselves to be competent in the achievement domain of sports will be more motivated to continue their involvement than those who have a low sense of perceived physical competence.

The findings on the influence of significant others on elite women athletes participation in volleyball are in agreement with those of Mbaabu (1997) as well as Ipinnorot and Ajayi (2003) which showed that athletes were significantly motivated by their parents and peers to become involved in sports. This is because parents provide encouragement and support through volunteering as coaches, providing equipment, participation fees, practising with the athletes and occasionally attending their training sessions. Such parental support has been reported for elite swimmers (Carlson, 1988) and tennis players (Bloom, 1985). However, the weak influence of PE teachers on elite women volleyball athletes is of great concern as PE teachers are supposed to motivate the girls to continue playing volleyball. Previous studies have shown that PE teachers have little or no influence on female sport involvement (Synder & Spreitzer, 1990). This may be attributed to a number of factors, including teachers’ lack of necessary competencies, limited equipment and facilities and non-conducive working environments, amongst others.
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The reasons which motivate women players to continue participating in volleyball included success, personal development and career opportunities. This scenario corroborates Duquin’s (1980) opinion that athletes are most likely to participate in an activity in which they feel they can provide and account for their successful outcomes. This is also underscored in the achievement goal orientation theory which states that greater pride is felt when we attribute success to ourselves via our effort or ability than if we attribute our success to external factors (Nicholas, 1984). That probably explains why factors such as religious beliefs, recognition, self-actualization and financial rewards were poorly rated by the volleyball players. According to the social exchange theory as propounded by Thibaut and Kelly (1959), social behaviour is motivated by the desire to maximize positive experiences and minimize negative ones. An individual weighs the costs, benefits and satisfaction of a current situation with those alternative situations and makes a decision accordingly.

Future engagement of the elite women volleyball athletes after retirement will revolve around pursuance of careers outside sport, sport careers and sport management. These findings are not in agreement with those of Burnett (2005), in which a majority of the athletes indicated that they viewed sports coaching as the first option for a possible future career. The elite women athletes will not extend their retirement plans in sport medical fields, recreational sport and coaching. The finding that they will pursue other careers outside sports begs the fundamental question whether they have the required academic qualification to undertake such careers. McPherson, Kurtis and Loy (1989) stated that many sport people do not have meaningful education to fall back to when their athletic careers are over. Indeed, Morakinyo (2003) suggested that coaches and sports administrators should advise athletes about the importance of acquiring academic certificates in addition to developing their sports skills. Kleiber et al. (1987) also reported that most retired athletes had a good attitude toward sport yet they felt loss of identity, friends, opportunities and additional sense of unfinished business. This is probably why a number of elite volleyball players in our study preferred to pursue other careers outside sport after retirement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study have shown that elite women volleyball players had late entry into competitive volleyball and partly explain their poor performances at continental and global competitions. The players’ significant others, especially immediate family members was a predominant factor which sustained their interest in competitive volleyball. Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are made:
1. There is need to widen the pool of talented girls who can play volleyball. This can only be possible if PE teachers could implement talent identification and development programmes targeted at primary schools.

2. Coaches and administrators need to be wary about the driving force of female volleyball players. Consequently, the use of external motivators to enhance performance needs to be reflected upon.

3. There is need for volleyball administrators and governments to address retirement prospects of volleyball players. This can be done by encouraging the players to pursue relevant academic and professional courses in addition to playing volleyball. This will capacitate them to pursue careers outside sport upon retirement.

4. Future studies need to unearth the technical and tactical short-comings of elite women’s volleyball teams in Africa. This will ensure that Africa competes effectively at the global level.

References


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