

Exploring the Development Opportunities Open to British Basketball Players in the Post-Bosman Era: A Figurational Analysis of the Psychological Contract Between Professional Coaches and Players

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Abstract

The increasing dependence of professional game sports on migrant workers has created widespread concerns within host countries over the loss of development opportunities for indigenous athletes, as team places are taken by migrant workers, professional clubs choose to hire rather than train new talent, and indigenous role-models are lost to a global market-place. Changes may also be taking place in the working and career expectations of players and coaches and their felt obligations to one another, in other words, in their mutual understanding of their 'psychological contract'. An empirical study, informed by figurational social theory, was carried out to explore the ways in which sports migration might be shaping the psychological contract between players and coaches working for professional and semi-professional British basketball clubs. The present paper will seek to explore the findings of this study from the perspective of the Bosman ruling, which has had a significant impact on athletic migration in Europe in the last decade, but nevertheless represents only one of a number of critical enabling and constraining pressures impacting on labour mobility in this sport. It will show that, while the Bosman ruling has undoubtedly expanded the European market for migrant basketball talent, it has worked paradoxically to enhance the Americanisation, rather than the Europeanisation, of the British game, by exacerbating the already polarised access to court-time between North American 'starters' and British 'bench-players'. It appears that the psychological contract between coaches and players may be working, reflexively, to reinforce this polarisation, as coaches adopt differing expectations of the work of North American and British players, and commercialising processes enhance the bargaining power of the game's elite athletes.

Introduction

The increasing dependence of professional game sports on migrant workers has created widespread concerns within host countries over the loss of development opportunities for indigenous athletes, as coveted team places are taken by non-nationals, professional clubs

choose to hire rather than train new talent, and indigenous role-models are lost to a global market-place (e.g. see the discussions by Giulianotti, 1999, and Maguire, 1999). The increasing expansion of the global market place for elite athletic skill may also be leading to changes in the career expectations and motivations of athletes. For example, Stokvis (2000) argues that the last quarter-century has seen an increase in individualism among elite athletes, as athletes take it upon themselves to 'shop around' for the most promising development opportunities, and a lessening of their commitment to club and country. He also shows how these changes can create serious problems for the quality of the working relationships they form with their coaches. Stokvis' work is notable for its attempt to make connections between athletes' and coaches' experiences of their working partnership and the nexus of local and global (or 'glocal') social pressures within which they are located. However, it is a primarily theoretical work, supported by references to coach-athlete relations in a single elite sport (Dutch Olympic rowing) and Stokvis acknowledges that an athlete's ability to make independent choices about career development paths is likely to vary considerably between different sporting forms. There would therefore seem to be value in exploring these issues further, by carrying out an empirical study of the coach-athlete relationship in a professional game sport where clubs' commercial agendas might be expected to restrict athletes' freedom of choice to a greater or lesser degree. This paper describes such a study, designed to explore the experiences of coaches and players working in British basketball, a game sport that is currently undergoing commercialising changes and, at its professional levels, has come to rely heavily on migrant labour (Maguire, 1988). It seeks to clarify the ways in which coaches' and players' understanding of their professional obligations, that is to say, the mutual expectations of reward for effort expended, often referred to as the 'psychological contract', might reflect social changes

taking place at global levels, including the increasing mobility of athletic labour, and the impact of the Bosman ruling (European Communities, Court of Justice, 1995), which has led to changes in the working conditions and career expectations of athletes in many sports (e.g. Blanpain, 1996; Giulianotti, 1999; Maguire, 1999; Morrow, 1999).

In highlighting these issues for discussion, the aim is not to identify simple, causative connections between global developments and lived human experience. Rather, it is to explore the personal dilemmas experienced by workers who are obliged by the conditions of their employment to reconcile many conflicting demands on their sense of self and their behaviour towards others. Within the employment settings offered by contemporary game sports, these dilemmas are prompted by: the need to maintain family connections and support family livelihoods while at the same time being obliged to adopt a migrant lifestyle that distances athletes in a literal sense from the support of family networks; the need to compete against highly skilled colleagues to secure critical development opportunities such as team places and playing time, while also committing wholeheartedly to their clubs' espoused philosophy of sharing, equal treatment and teamwork; the need to promote local team and spectator identities in the face of national and ethnic workforce diversity; and the obligation to commit to a form of employment in which workplace injury, or even a temporary departure from high performance can lead to the loss of a livelihood. Such dilemmas are experienced by both athletes and coaches in contemporary game sports, and inevitably create areas of uncertainty and dissonance in their working relationships.

This paper will follow Stokvis in exploring these issues from an Eliasian theoretical

perspective. The paper will commence by offering some preliminary discussion of the coach-athlete relationship, and the ways in which coaches and athletes in game sports conventionally work to promote high athletic performance. It will then consider the ways in which the expansion of the market for elite athletic skill is altering the career opportunities of game sport athletes, with particular emphasis on the situation of indigenous British basketball players prior to and following the Bosman ruling. This will be succeeded by a short introduction to figurational theory and its relevance to the present study. The study's methodology and its empirical findings will then be described. The concluding sections of the paper will offer an evaluation of these findings, paying particular attention to their implications for the career choices open to contemporary players of this British game.

Working partnerships between elite coaches and athletes

In order to ensure high performance in competitive sport, coaches and athletes must develop strong and constructive working partnerships (e.g. Poczwadowski et al. 2002; Jowett, 2003; Owen-Pugh, 2006). Conventionally, the coach is primarily responsible for instructing athletes in the technical aspects of their chosen sport. At higher levels of performance, and depending on the requirements of the sport in question, this responsibility for directing technical development may be superseded by a responsibility for maintaining athletes' motivation, skills and fitness, by putting them through their paces in training and competition. The coach may also need to offer emotional support and guidance to athletes, particularly in cases of sports injury. However, the professional demands placed on sports coaches may often require them to act against the interests of individual athletes. Critically, those who act as team selectors or have managerial

responsibilities for ‘hiring and firing’ (a common situation in game sport clubs) must make decisions that effectively block some athletes’ access to development opportunities while promoting the interests of others. In professional game sports, coaches are also likely shoulder obligations to external ‘stake-holder’ groups, such as sponsors, spectators and the media, that oblige them to prioritise commercial priorities over the interests of their athletes. Consequently, their roles as instructors and motivators can readily become compromised by conflicting managerial responsibilities. This problem is exacerbated further when sports clubs have limited commercial funding (a common problem even at the professional end of British basketball), since coaches may be obliged to take on additional roles within their clubs, and even look beyond their clubs for paid employment. For example, it is not uncommon within British basketball for the head coaches of professional clubs to be player-coaches. They are often club directors, and they may have full-time or part-time commitments to external employers or to their own private businesses.

For their part, young athletes committed to high performance sport must be prepared to make complex personal adjustments as they develop their skills. Those committed to game sports must learn to work co-operatively with others, balancing their personal interests against those of their team-mates. At the same time, they must learn to work competitively, not only by taking part in league competitions, but also by competing against their fellow-players for team places and playing time. As they approach elite performance levels, they have to be increasingly willing to conform to the vision and direction of their coaches and to adapt to the physical and mental training regimes appropriate for their chosen sport. They will be obliged to build their lives around their

chosen sport from a relatively young age, even to the extent of making major geographical and cultural adjustments to obtain access to the best coaching opportunities. For example, once they reach their teens, British basketball players who wish to pursue their sport at elite level must become sports migrants to obtain access to the highest levels of technical instruction and competition. Many will be encouraged to gain entry to North American high schools and colleges. Once playing in the highly competitive North American college league, the NCAA, they can expect their coaches to work them hard, not only in deconstructing and reconstructing their technical skills, and in developing their competitive skill, but in keeping them focused on their academic studies. The need to adapt to a different national culture, and different educational expectations, while also adapting to the pressures of competition in the presence of so many other highly skilled players, can place intense pressures on these young migrants' emotional resilience, and it is understood within the sport that not all British entrants to the NCAA circuit will be able to stay the course. Those who do may eventually graduate from college with excellent basketball CV's. However, if they wish to remain in high-performance sport, they then have to choose between a migrant lifestyle, offering the route to the best salaries (in these post-Bosman days, many British graduates will look for work in mainland Europe), or they can look for work within the UK, where basketball players are poorly paid by the standards of many European countries. Wherever they choose to work, they will have to adapt quickly to a 'hire and fire' commercial culture in which little attention will be paid to their personal career development, including any ambitions they may have to play for their national team.

An elite athlete and coach therefore bring to their working partnership, not only a shared

commitment to performance excellence, but conflicting commitments to other parties and stakeholder groups, as well as the development of their separate professional careers. Writers have suggested that, to work effectively together, coaches and athletes must be compatible at emotional levels. For example, studies have shown that mutual respect, trust and loyalty are as critical to their joint success as agreement over performance targets and training strategies (Poczwardowski et al. 2002; Potrac et al. 2002; Jowett 2003). However, even when athlete-coach partnerships have a long history of success, it seems that they remain vulnerable to misunderstandings, disagreements and changes of circumstance. For example, Jowett (2003) offers a case-study in which Olympic success in a track and field sport appeared to alter the psychological contract between a coach and athlete in ways that undermined their relationship and subsequent athletic achievement. Where coach-player partnerships are not easy to dissolve, perhaps for contractual reasons, such breakdowns in relationship can result in professional boundaries being crossed in damaging ways, and even to forms of physical and emotional abuse. Within basketball, probably the most notorious example of this kind in recent years has been the case of Latrell Sprewell, an NBA player who reputedly tried to kill his head coach, P. J . Carlesimo after frustrations built up in their working relationship (Walton, 2001). More commonly, coaches and athletes who are obliged to work together in the absence of mutual trust may resort to subversive forms of ‘getting even’. For example, athletes might deliberately under-perform or feign injury, and coaches might find pretexts for dropping players from teams (Jowett 2003; Poczwardowski et al. 2002).

British basketball as an employer of migrant labour

As Maguire (1999) notes, the employment of skilled ‘foreign’ players can offer many

advantages to game sports, over and above the added value that such players may offer to a club's local talent pool. The use of migrant players can enhance the spectacle of sports competitions by helping to build an atmosphere of mystique and excitement, thereby helping to attract interest, and revenue, from sponsors, media and spectators. It also offers opportunities for host clubs, as well as national sides, to draw on the knowledge of their foreign workers in developing new game strategies and trying out new styles of play. Foreign players can also act as positive role models for younger players and boost recruitment to junior teams. Maguire (1988) describes how, from the mid-1970's onwards these considerations led the owners of some British basketball clubs to work to attract North American players and coaches to the UK. He describes how the efforts of these entrepreneurs, assisted by the global oversupply of highly skilled NCAA graduates, led to significant changes in the national and ethnic make-up of the elite British game, transforming it from an amateur sport in which players were predominantly British, 'respectable' and white, to a sport in which 30% of its registered players were North American (all of these, of course, occupying coveted places among their teams' 'starting fives') and the overwhelming majority of players, both migrant and indigenous, were black. These changes were associated with a significant rise in spectator and media interest and in the number of registered senior teams, but attracted criticism from the game's participant lobby over the damage that the introduction of so many foreign workers was doing to the playing opportunities open to indigenous players. By 1988, relations between the participant and commercial lobbies had deteriorated to a point where a number of club owners withdrew from English national league (EBL) competitions and formed a breakaway league (currently the British Basketball League, or BBL). While the BBL's fortunes have both waxed and waned in the 18 years since it came into being, it continues

to fund professional teams and employing migrant players. However, its franchised clubs struggle to survive in a market dominated by the 'traditional' British sports of football, rugby and cricket. Consequently, club closures and relocations are far from uncommon.

Writers record that sports migrant flows tend to move along cultural lines. For example, Maguire (1999) notes that French-Canadian ice-hockey players have tended to migrate to French speaking European countries. The cultural leveraging factors that have brought so many North Americans into British basketball include: the common language; the American and Canadian connections of many British basketball coaches and club owners; and hiring practices built on networking and personal recommendations. In addition, British entry regulations have historically tended to favour American migrants at the expense of players from former Soviet Block countries, in particular, players from the former Yugoslavia, who now contribute significantly to the global oversupply of elite basketball labour (British rules permit entry from these countries only to the comparatively small numbers of Eastern European players who are members of their national teams - these superstars, of course, can command higher wages elsewhere in Europe and have no interest in working in the UK). In addition, the low wages on offer in Britain have served to deter basketball migrants from EU countries. Instead, along with many migrant British players, they prefer to try out for teams in countries such as France, Germany, Greece and Spain, all of whom have better developed, and better financed, professional games.

The salience of so many overlapping and conflicting social processes is characteristic of sports migration. For example, adopting an Eliasian perspective, Maguire (1999) talks about migrant flows being subject to networks of enabling and constraining figurational

forces. Critically, however, the expansion of the market for athletic skill appears to be driving some significant changes in game sports, including: significant increases in wages for some athletes (often combined with heightened variability of pay levels within teams); flows of skilled labour into richer countries, combined with the deskilling of poorer donor countries; and a tendency for sports clubs to abandon development initiatives such as feeder teams and academies, as it becomes cheaper for them to hire, rather than train, new players (Maguire, op. cit). Within British Basketball, some these effects will already have been apparent prior to the Bosman ruling: British players were already leaving UK shores in the search for better paid work elsewhere; levels of pay offered by clubs to their elite 'starters' will already have been considerably in excess of those offered to their bench players (many of whom will have been paid sessionally or expected to work for nothing); and, given the hostile commercial environment within which the British clubs have to operate, it is safe to assume that the funding of development initiatives was already taking second place to the funding of elite player salaries.

The effect of the Bosman ruling has been to exacerbate all of these various trends. In combination with the BBL's response to the ruling, working conditions in British basketball have altered in ways that have left the British talent pool increasingly empty, promoted the interests of the North American migrants and marginalised most of the indigenous British players who still remain in the home game. These points will now be explained.

Prior to the Bosman ruling, BBL eligibility rules limited the number of work-permitted foreigners to two per team, although it was, of course, still possible for some additional

North American players with dual nationality to be employed as 'British' players. The intention of the Bosman ruling was simply to bring the movement of sports workers into line with the freedom of movement legally allowed to other groups of workers from EU countries. However, the owners of the UK's BBL clubs saw it as a threat to skill levels within the British game's talent pool, as it seemed probable that more UK players would be encouraged to move to mainland EU countries in the pursuit of higher wages. This, not unrealistic, consideration led them to make an immediate but significant change to their league's eligibility rules. Towards the end of the 1995/1996 season, they agreed to move from an allowance of no more than two foreign and no less than eight British players per team, to a maximum of five 'non-nationals' and a minimum of five 'nationals' per team (eligibility for national status was now defined as eligibility for national team membership under FIBA rules, that is to say, nationality became defined, to all intents and purposes, as the possession of an EU passport). While, predictably, this change was heavily criticised by UK basketball's participant lobby, it did appear to have served the purpose for which it was intended. The following explanation was offered to this author in 2003 by a BBL contact:

The [rule change] was widely regarded as overreaction to Bosman, but proved actually to be reasonably accurate. Pre-Bosman there were a maximum of 2 or 3 English players playing in other European leagues each season. Post-Bosman there have been at least 35 English players playing in European leagues every season. Given these players would previously only have been capable of playing in this country, that left a shortfall of a minimum of 3 players per team in the BBL, hence increasing the overseas contingent from 2 to 5 was a fair reflection on the realities of life.

However, fans of British professional basketball are now left with few opportunities to cheer British 'star' players, as the majority of their teams' 'starting five' places as well as their 'Number 6' and 'Number 7' substitute slots are increasingly taken by North American players, either classified as work-permitted 'non-nationals', naturalised 'British' players (their British nationality often having been acquired through marriage or years of residence), or EU passport-holders. The large numbers of indigenous players who work in the UK professional game are far from unskilled but, since they tend to lack the credibility offered by an NCAA CV, they now often find themselves restricted to support roles as BBL 'bench' players and denied the minutes of court time they require to maintain and develop their game. While these players may gain more court time and exposure by moving to a lower league, such as the EBL's Division 1 where foreign players are still restricted to two per team, they may well find themselves competing for court-time with British veterans who have retired from migrant careers and are looking to continue their sport at a recreational level. In any event, it is generally held within the game that players who move to 'lower league' basketball are effectively making themselves unavailable for selection to their national team. If they have aspirations for national selection, or wish to develop their skills to a point where they can look for paid work in Europe, these indigenous players are now caught in an unenviable 'Catch-22' situation. While the BBL modified its regulations for the 2004-2005 season by reducing the numbers of permitted non-nationals to four, in the run-up to the 2006 Commonwealth Games, this change appears only to have benefited those veteran migrants who chose to return to the UK during the 2005-2006 season, to make themselves more readily available for Commonwealth 'call-up'.

Effectively therefore, from the perspective of the British fans and those indigenous players still playing in the BBL and lower leagues, the Bosman ruling has served to exacerbate the already marked division between North American ‘haves’ and indigenous British ‘have-nots’. To date, it appears to have had two contrasting effects on the development of British players at the time of writing. While many British players have benefited from it in financial terms, by gaining access to higher paid work in mainland Europe, others have found themselves increasingly marginalised within their home teams. While struggles over access to playing time are common to all game sports, they have therefore become polarised within UK basketball as a struggle between powerful American ‘starters’, and powerless British ‘bench’ players. This suggests that there are at least two forms of psychological contract between coaches and players in the British game, reflecting their coaches’ differing expectations of these two national groups: while the North American players are required to shoulder primary responsibility for winning matches, the indigenous British players are expected to play support roles, providing challenging opposition in training and acting as substitutes during matches.

A figurational view of the psychological contract

The psychological contract is conventionally theorised from the monetary-based perspectives of social exchange and equity theory. In the business and management literature, research has tended to focus on the tangible benefits received by employees in return for their labour, such as salaries and other immediate forms of reward (often referred to as the ‘transactional’ contract) and, over the longer term, the employer’s contribution to their career development (the ‘relational’ contract) (e.g. see Herriot et al., 1997). However, this emphasis on tangible returns overlooks the emotional dimensions of the contract (e.g.

Herriot et al., 1997; Anderson and Schalk, 1997) and the ways in which these are influenced by the day-to-day events of the workplace, including subjective impressions of contract violation (Conway and Briner, 2002). This paper will seek to show that there may therefore be advantages in theorising it from the process perspective offered by Eliasian theory.

It is assumed that readers are already familiar with Elias' theorising of human interdependency networks, or 'figurations', and his view that human social development is driven by the 'interweaving of countless individual interests and intentions' (Elias 2000: 312). Within sports sociology, his work has been widely used to inform studies of the globalisation of sporting forms and the social practices associated with sports 'fandom' (e.g. Maguire 1999; Dunning, Maguire and Pearton, 1993; Dunning 1999). It has also been used to explore the ways in which sports organisations such as clubs and governing bodies manoeuvre for power opportunities, as in Maguire's (1988) discussion of British basketball. In his analysis of coach-athlete relations, Stokvis (2000) employs Elias' ideas in a rather more unusual way, drawing on the 'I-we balance' to suggest that elite athletes are increasingly identifying with their individual development goals (their 'I-identities') at the expense of development goals shared with others (their 'we-identities'). His work offers an invaluable illustration of the ways in which figurational theory can be used to make connections between individuals' subjectivities and interpersonal relationships, and the working out of power relations in their wider social worlds. When applied to the psychological contract, Elias' ideas would oblige us to recognise it as a nexus of potentially conflictive figurational tensions, acting at global, local, inter- and intra-personal levels.

In applying Elias' ideas to the coach-player partnership, this paper will also draw on his theorising of 'established-outsider relations' (Elias and Scotson, 1994). This aspect of Elias' theory seeks to explain the ways in which long-standing or 'established' human communities work to defend themselves against incursions by groups of 'outsiders' and offers a useful conceptual framework for exploring the relations between indigenous and migrant athletes. One again, it is assumed that readers are already sufficiently familiar with Elias' work for 'established-outsiders' theory to need no further introduction at this point.

Methodology

To fulfil the aims of this study, it was important that participants were allowed opportunities to explore their lived experience of British basketball in depth and detail. Consequently, a qualitative methodology was adopted, in which semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were carried out with players, coaches and key informants. A number of clubs in the BBL, and the highest senior men's division of the EBL, Division 1, were invited to participate. Representatives of four BBL and two EBL Division 1 clubs were approached and all agreed to take part.

Structured sampling was employed in order to ensure as much diversity as possible among informants in terms of their country of origin (in practice it proved to be impossible to locate non-nationals who were not North American), their ethnicity (informants were classified as black or white), and the length of their playing and

coaching careers (players ranged from ‘rookies’, in their first professional year out of college, to ‘veterans’, with more than 10 years in the game, while coaches ranged from assistant coaches, and newly appointed head coaches, to coaches with over 20 years elite experience). The player sample was also structured in terms of level of expertise (informants were classified as ‘starters’ or ‘bench players’). By structuring the samples in this way, it was hoped to maximise diversity of opinion among informants. All participants in the present study were men. This was unavoidable since, at the present time, the UK still offers very few professional playing opportunities to women (while a few EBL teams use migrant female players, the BBL is open to men only).

Out of ten players interviewed, three were work-permitted North Americans, one was a North American with acquired dual nationality, and six were indigenous British players. All four North American players were regular starters for their teams while, out of the six indigenous players, one was a regular starter, three were occasional starters, and two were regular bench players. Of the six coaches interviewed, two were North American, and four were British. Two coaches and seven players were black, while four coaches and three players were white. Three key informants were interviewed, including two club directors with a lifetime’s experience of the British game and extensive coaching experience, and a migrant international coach with recent experience of the British game. Several of the coaches interviewed also had prior experience as elite players. Two participants were working concurrently as both players and coaches: one coach was still playing regularly for his team, while a player was also an assistant coach at the time of his interview.

Figurational theory was drawn on in the structuring of the interview questions, which covered topics such as: participants' understandings of coach' and players' work obligations; the ways in which the coaches and athletes might help or hinder one another's careers; the strategies used by players to boost their chances of selection to teams and court-time, relations between black and white, and migrant and indigenous players; coaches' and players' obligations to other commercial stakeholders; and the conditions under which forms of psychological contract violation might occur.

Sports clubs are notoriously suspicious of 'outsiders' and professional athletes are notoriously reluctant to take part in research interviews. Consequently, access to informants was initially sought via club directors and coaches, and individual players were only approached once permission had been given by club representatives. The researcher talked to all informants on at least one occasion before carrying out each interview, both to establish her credibility as an 'insider' and to ensure that participants felt comfortable with the aims of the research, interview venues and times. Respondents and clubs were guaranteed anonymity. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and, with the permission of the respondents, data was recorded on audio-tape and subsequently transcribed. Data analysis was carried out on the transcribed interview records, and took the form of saturation point analysis, proceeding from the initial identification of a priori themes (themes emerging from the original research questions) and emergent themes (those introduced by the respondents themselves) and subsequent searches for all identifiable sub-themes.

Findings

The psychological contract

Coaches and players of both nationalities agreed that the foundation of a strong coach-athlete partnership lay in mutual respect and trust. When asked to explore coaches' obligations in more depth, there was general agreement that coaches should be able to acknowledge and work with players' individual differences, and work to maintain their self-confidence. Players of all backgrounds acknowledged the value of having a coach who was prepared to push them hard, with the proviso that this was done in ways that were constructive and not humiliating. While there was general agreement that coaches should motivate players, not all players felt they needed motivating. This comment was offered by one experienced North American:

This is my fourteenth year of playing ... and I like to think of myself as a very self-motivated person. There are some players that need coaches to push them all the way to do everything. There are some players that are just self-motivating I think it's important for a coach to push them but I think for a player or an athlete really - well at the end of the day it's up to that athlete, that player to push themselves. The coach is there to encourage and help.

When asked to consider players' obligations, all participants stressed the need for hard work and the highest possible levels of performance, the need to be good team-players, and the importance of listening to coaches' instructions. Some respondents also referred to the need for consistency in performance. Loyalty to coaches was considered critical: for example, a number of respondents, both players and coaches, referred disparagingly to players who complained to the management or media behind their coach's backs.

However, respondents disagreed about the need for coaches to offer technical instruction to players. Several players referred to the BBL as a ‘showcase’ league that served largely to advertise the skills of its star players. These respondents considered that the BBL coach’s role was therefore one of man management rather than player development. For their part, coaches varied widely in the stress they laid on the technical side of the game: some talked about this at length, but others made no reference to it at all. None of the North American players felt they needed technical instruction, but the younger British players took a very different view. For example, this was said by a BBL player with some experience of the American college circuit:

I’ve been playing [in the BBL] for a while and I’d say that when I first started playing ... I didn’t really get much feedback then.... most of the extra coaching and all the feedback I got was from the older players and that was about it. The coaches would just like make demands on you, sort of “do this” and that would be it A lot of technical information is really lacking over here. I think a lot of coaches just want to get players in, draw players up and then send everybody out there. They don’t really develop players as such.

However, players’ difficulties in accessing technical instruction did not appear to be confined to the BBL clubs. Several players in the EBL’s Division 1, often thought of as a ‘developmental’ league, also complained about the lack of instruction.

The influence of commercialisation

There was widespread recognition that the British game was becoming increasingly commercial. This was something that the young North American players took in their stride. By and large, they took a positive view of its commercialism, with one veteran player pointing out that professional basketball was 'just a business, like any other'. It was clearly a business that the migrant players were all proud to be part of, a means of making a living that gave them an opportunity to travel and see the world. However, other respondents did express concerns over the ways in which the game was changing, making reference to such things as: the increasing commodification of players' labour; the selfishness of professional players and coaches; and the damaging commercial ethos of winning at all costs. These comments were offered by two highly experienced British coaches:

There are very, very powerful coaches who will... plenty on record in the States ... who will basically use the players for their own preferment if you like, for their own careers, and they won't have a great deal of sympathy at an individual level, or empathy at an individual level. The players are just almost objects in a game of chess and they use them to their advantage – sadly.

Sometimes coaches will ask players to play through injuries and that to me is horrendous. We've often played against teams where the coach puts a lot of pressure on the player to go out and do it even though the player is injured ... and that is an area that is a problem. I think the coach is in a very poor position where he's putting the player under pressure to play if he's injured, but that does happen. I've seen situations where players have worsened the injury to the extent that

they've lost their job in the end because it's become so acute. But, you know, the coach is under pressure and he's put the player under pressure, it's not a good situation.

As the last quotation illustrates, respondents were generally aware that, in a commercialised game sport, the coach is always vulnerable to dismissal. Explanations offered for this included the suggestion that it was simply easier for management to dismiss a coach rather than a team of players when wins were proving hard to come by. But the vulnerability of the coach was clearly also related to the ways in which individual elite players were often able to forge strong alliances with club power-holders. A number of informants, both players and coaches, offered examples of individual players who took on coaches and won by trading on alliances with club directors and sponsors. The following story, offered by an experienced British BBL coach, was one of many:

I remember a situation with a player who I've worked with... and he's a difficult player but a very, very effective player, ... he had a row with a coach, ... and pinned him against the wall by his throat. [The coach] went to the club management because he wanted him sacked and the management refused to sack him and so the coach left. Management wouldn't support the coach because he was an outstanding player. They wouldn't do it, but you know I think that was the management's loss.

Ethnic stereotyping

When questions were asked about the changed ethnic mix in the British game, there was disagreement among respondents. Some, both black and white, considered that ethnic

differences made no difference whatsoever to players' development opportunities. Others acknowledged problems, admitting, for example, that some British clubs and coaches appeared to have 'whiter' teams than others. A number of respondents, again both black and white, were prepared to acknowledge the presence of ethnic stereotyping in coaches' selection decisions, explaining that some coaches might view black players as 'stupid' but also athletic (and therefore good at 'dunking') while white players were perceived as 'smart' but unathletic (and therefore better at floor-shooting). One black British player explained:

Coaches may say that black players are stupid, but also that white guys aren't athletic. They also say, and this is a serious stereotype, that all the white guys can shoot and the black guys can dunk I don't know how this will influence my career. I know it's going to influence it ... but I can't say whether it's going to be good or bad. It might be good because someone's going to see me and say "he's athletic so we'll give him the opportunity to do this". But even if they do, they're going to think "oh he's athletic so we're not going to put him in a position to play where he's going to be shooting a lot", like for example if I was the same height [but white], I'd get more chance to shoot from the floor.

Generally, respondents appeared to take the view that such stereotyping did no overall damage to the interests of either ethnic group as it appeared to cut both ways. Many also argued that past hiring prejudices were rapidly becoming resolved by the increasing commercial pressures on clubs to hire the best players regardless of ethnic origin. For example, one black American player said:

I think in the last, say, fifteen, twenty years the game has become so ... specialised that people are put into categories, not by colour anymore, probably doesn't have anything to do with your colour. It is your size, your athletic ability, your weight, your speed, your strength, they categorise you in that class now rather than just more colour than anything.

Sports migration

Both players and coaches made many references to the drawbacks of a migrant labour market. There were frequent references by players to promises made by foreign coaches not being kept, and by coaches to foreign players not living up to their promise of their CV's. There were many references to the problems experienced by migrants in adapting to foreign ways of life, foreign weather, and foreign languages. The migrant respondents interviewed expressed regret that they were unable to settle down and have a family, admitted that they missed their girlfriends and talked about homesick colleagues and the problem of 'burn-out'. They emphasised the importance of their families, as well as their local fan base, as sources of support. They also stressed the importance of networking and making use of friends and trusted contacts who could act as intermediaries when brokering deals, a theme that emerged, too, in interviews with coaches.

Tensions between migrant and indigenous players

In contrast to the predominantly positive views expressed about race relations, it was clear that indigenous players were very unhappy about the presence of so many North Americans in the British game. In particular, they complained about unfair differences in

pay and conditions, and considered that coaches were more respectful to American players. This was one young British player's view:

Sometimes I've been on teams where the coach will talk to the American players totally different to the way he talks to an English player. Basically, he'll ask an American player to do something and he'll tell an English player to do something ... there's a total change in his respect ... as though you're not really as important. And you feel it as well, a lot of times you feel like you're just making up numbers, you're just there to practice and it doesn't matter really what you do in practice you're not going to play [in competition]. It takes a lot of character to stay, stick with it. ... I've heard it from English coaches and I've heard it from American coaches also.

For their part, the American players were aware, and clearly proud of the fact that their national background and superior basketball skills made them popular with coaches, club owners and spectators, although several were prepared to acknowledge that their skills might sometimes be overrated.

The Bosman ruling

The impact of the Bosman ruling was viewed very negatively by British respondents, because of the damage it appeared to be doing both to player development and the standard of British national teams. One veteran British player, with international experience at youth level, graphically described its effects on his career prospects and confidence:

When I first started playing at 16 for the senior team, at that point only two Americans were allowed on your team I didn't play loads for the senior team because I was just a little kid but I still got to play, as far as I was concerned, enough for me. I was happy with what I was getting. When I moved to [name of club] I was still happy with what I was getting and then something changed. The Bosman ruling came in which dictated that you could have five and in some cases six, maybe seven [Americans], depending on work permits or if your mum or your dad was born in England, all of that kind of stuff. And then it changed, my court time was just gone! And if you're not playing regularly on your domestic team, how do you expect to do well on a national level, it's not going to happen. So in terms of your career progression then it's greatly reduced because you're not getting competitive experience week in, week out, you're not getting game fitness, you've only got practice fitness and once you're not playing regularly your confidence starts to you know if your coach doesn't put you on eventually you're going to be "am I that bad?" you know, forget how much I was revered or looked up to as one of the top three players in the country for my age group, all of a sudden you're not playing at all - "well I must be really not that good any more".

Development opportunities for British players

Respondents disagreed as to whether or not it was possible for indigenous bench players to move into starting roles, and so gain the court-time they needed for development. Many felt that bench-players could increase their court-time by working hard in training and showing what they could do in matches, in particular, by using any allocated court-time to play good defence. This was the view of one key informant:

If the players are good enough they can play. If they get to a standard where they are so good that they're too good for the BBL they go into Europe and they earn a lot of money ... I always say to English players who've got that "well it's all Americans", I say "hey, you get yourself to a standard where you can compete with them and you'll be on the floor".

Other informants took the view that coaches had little realistic room for manoeuvre, given that they needed to keep their most reliable combinations of players on court at all times, to maximise their chances of winning matches. However, the bench players were inclined to view the inequitable allocation of court-time as politically motivated, on the grounds that the sponsors who were paying the Americans' wages would want to see them being used, and that clubs also needed to keep their Americans on court in order to be able justify their applications for work-permits. It was also suggested that coaches liked to 'buddy up' to the North Americans and giving them the majority of the court-time kept them happy and 'oiled the wheels' of this 'buddying' process. From this perspective, then, court-time was being used by coaches as their contribution to a quid-pro-quo arrangement with their star players.

However, despite - or perhaps because of - their negative experiences of British clubs, many of the indigenous players interviewed had plans to try their luck in Europe. Among this group of respondents, the following quote was typical:

My aims are to try and get out to Europe and try and play professionally out in

Europe because playing here in [name of club] was a stepping stone on my way there, to try and develop me as a player to get out there. I've just got to get my name out there, get video tapes from games and stuff and get it out there. And in terms of development as a player, that's something I've just got to work at every day, put the hours in in the gym, put the hours in over the summer when everyone else is resting and going on holidays and that, just putting the work in to try and get better.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper set out to explore the work obligations of players and coaches in British professional basketball, and the ways in which these are shaped by the constraining and enabling pressures of athletic talent migration. It has argued that, although the Bosman ruling has expanded the European market for migrant basketball talent, it has led to a worsening of the already polarised access to court-time between North American 'starters' and British 'bench-players'. This study's empirical findings suggest that the psychological contract between coaches and players may be working to reinforce this polarisation, with much needed technical instruction and court-time not being made available to indigenous players. While coaches appeared to believe that they were treating all players equally, indigenous players complained about disparities in treatment. In particular, they felt that the playing skills they had to offer were valued less by their coaches and that they were treated with less respect than their American team-mates. The study's findings appear to confirm that the coaches are indeed offering differing forms of psychological contract to their North American and British players. While they suggest that some coaches may also be offering different contracts to black and white players, it

appears that British basketball teams are divided along national rather than ethnic lines. Indeed, this implicit division may extend to off-court relations, since several indigenous respondents referred to the ways in which commitments to outside employers and families prevented them from sharing the social lifestyle of their migrant players. The rivalries between the British and American players can be seen as an example of ‘established-outsiders’ tensions, but one in which the migrants have acquired the role of the ‘established’ community, while the indigenous players have become ‘outsiders’. This reversal of status appears to be being maintained primarily by the continuing drain on the British talent pool and the commercial alliances formed between American players and their paymasters, in particular, their clubs and sponsors.

Many similar stories of the player displacement and the deskilling of donor countries can be found in studies of game sport migration. However, the critical question for British basketball is: is the present situation likely to change? Unless the BBL’s financial position improves significantly, and clubs are able to offer players salaries comparable with those in mainland EU countries, British players are unlikely to be tempted to work within their home game. Many of the game’s supporters believe that the BBL should bring its eligibility regulations into line with those of the EBL, that is to say, by limiting its foreign players to two per team. However, the sport is about to undergo a new wave of immigration, with the imminent entry of ex-Soviet states into the EU. The market for basketball skills within Europe will therefore shortly be flooded with highly talented Eastern European players who, for the first time, will have open access to employment in British clubs, and may well be willing to accept lower salaries than those currently on offer to North Americans. While British-American cultural connections will continue to

attract North American players to the UK, it appears inevitable that they will shortly lose much of their present dominance in the British game.

Sadly, these considerations offer little encouragement to the demoralised British bench players, who will shortly have two enemies to fight instead of one. At this point in their sport's history, these players have few power opportunities other than the threat to withdraw their labour. The Basketball Players' Union is weak and funded by established power-holders, including American players. In recent years, it has also received grant-funding from the BBL itself. In many cases, the problems faced by individual bench players appear to have come about, not because of a lack of athletic skill and potential, but because they were unable to obtain access to the proving ground offered by the North American colleges. For example, interviewees told stories of receiving bad advice from coaches or simply being unable to afford college living expenses. Unfortunately, at the present time, many British players discover their talent for basketball at an age when it is almost too late for them to capitalise on it. However, the examples of world-class players like Britain's John Amaechi (who first played basketball at the age of fifteen) and the ex-British resident, Michael Olowakandi (who is reputed to have discovered the game when he went to university) show what can be achieved when players have vision, determination and the resources to make up for lost time. The British game's governing bodies may need to decide whether it really is in the interests of the game to overlook the potential talent pool offered by a significant group of British players who appear to be capable of greater achievement.

For their part, BBL coaches are faced with the dilemma of achieving high team

performance at low cost. Stories told by the coaches in this study suggested that all of them would have preferred to be doing more development work. However, with their clubs' meagre financial resources being channelled into 'starter' salaries, many of the coaches interviewed, like their bench players, were working in the sector for love rather than money. They can therefore hardly be criticised for prioritising the development of their proven match-winners at the expense of a group of players whose game contributions were less reliable.

In conclusion, this figurational analysis of the coach-player partnership demonstrates that, while coaches and athletes can forge highly effective alliances, the power relations characterising these alliances can vary considerably. At the present time, it appears that British basketball's North American players currently wield considerable power over the psychological contract, and that they and their coaches can become locked in an uneasy alliance where both need the other to ensure career success. Within this alliance, it seems that the power opportunities of the parties are either relatively equal or, particularly in the case of a team's 'star' player, may favour the player rather than the coach. It is therefore hardly surprising that, as one young player noted, coaches will *ask*, rather than *tell* their elite players to do something. The alliances formed by British players and coaches are configured in a very different way. While both still benefit from the relationship for a variety of reasons, the bench player, unlike his North American team-mates, has no powerful allies within his club and can be replaced relatively easily. Here there is a marked power asymmetry that favours the coach. Is it possible that the bench-players are being deprived of court-time primarily in order to maintain the coach's power opportunities? A skilled bench-player would become more difficult to replace, would

expect a higher rate of pay and, as one informant suggested, 'If they get to a standard where they are so good that they're too good for the BBL they go into Europe'. Perhaps the biggest problem faced by these players is that British basketball cannot do without them.

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