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**Good Work in Professional Basketball: The Responsibilities of
Stardom**

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ABSTRACT

If professional athletics were a true “profession”, the features of Good Work would be clear. Since athletics does not meet the characteristics of a profession, the question arises about whether Good Work is in fact possible in this domain and, if so, on what basis. Focusing specifically on professional basketball, I argue that, while players are not professionally obligated to act as moral individuals, they have cultural and social/societal obligations. Obligations to culture include the expectation that athletes epitomize human goodness, and that they uphold standards not only during competition but also in everyday life. Obligations to society include an expectation that professional basketball players serve as good role models. A morally sound lifestyle is important for meeting the cultural and societal obligations of an athlete, and hence the achievement of Good Work within professional basketball.

INTRODUCTION

Since the time of Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato, athletes have held a unique place in society. In the original Olympic Games, athletes were idolized as gods. The spirit of the Games revolved around athletes who were regarded as personifications of divine virtue, physique, mental perspicacity, and integrity (Lipsyte, 1999). While professional athletes continue to hold a prominent place in American society, their precise role has become increasingly complex.

The commercialization of professional athletics has catalyzed this increase in complexity. More specifically, media coverage serves as a conduit not only for the transmission of professional athletes' accomplishments in the athletic arena, but also of their activities outside this arena. Often, this transmission results in the publicization of information that reflects unfavorably upon an athlete's character. Due to this coverage, many professional athletes have condemned the media: they charge that the nature of their personal lives is not relevant because they are not role models; their performance in the athletic arena is where their job begins and ends. Charles Barkley, a former professional basketball All-Star, has been outspoken about this perspective: "I am not a role model...[T]he ability to run and dunk a basketball should not make you God Almighty. There are a million guys in jail who can play ball. Should they be role models? Of course not" (quoted in Platt, 1992, p. 33).

Other professional athletes have reacted differently: they argue that because of their standing in society, they have automatically been elevated to a position of role model. This elevated position requires them to accept personal accountability for their

actions both within and outside of the athletic arena. Karl Malone, also a professional basketball player and former All-Star, adopts this perspective:

You can deny being a role model all you want, but I don't think it is your choice to make. We don't choose to be role models, we are chosen. Our only choice is whether to be a good role model or a bad one...I love being a role model. (Malone, 1993, p. 84)

Where does a professional athlete's responsibility truly begin and end? Is a professional athlete held unreasonably accountable for maintaining a higher moral standard than that of an average citizen? Can a professional athlete be considered a Good Worker if he lacks in his moral character outside the athletic arena? I approach these questions by drawing upon the work of Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001). For the purposes of my discussion, I will use the definition of Good Work as it has been framed for their Project: "Good Work is work that is both excellent in quality and socially responsible... [and/or] whatever advances development by supporting the fulfillment of individual potentialities while simultaneously contributing to the harmonious growth of other individuals and groups" (Gardner, et al., 2001, p. 244).

Over the course of the GoodWork® Project, a number of different realms have been examined (Fischman, Solomon, Greenspan, & Gardner, 2004; Gardner, et al., 2001). Until this point, however, the Good Work Project has not examined professional athletics. Therefore, I build upon the ideas set forth in the Good Work Project, and develop a (partial) Good Work model in the realm of professional athletics. While Gardner, et al. (2001) have proposed four major controls in their Good Work model (culture, social/societal, personal standards, and outcome controls), I have specifically

chosen to concentrate on the cultural and social/societal controls for the model derived in this discussion.

In order to build my model, I must narrow the scope. I have chosen to focus on professional basketball, but the ideas could easily be extended to other athletic domains. Through the use of academic literature and popular media, I argue that a morally sound lifestyle is an important prerequisite for a professional basketball player to be considered a Good Worker. I begin with a discussion about how professional basketball fits into the definition of a profession.

DISCUSSION

Professional basketball: A true profession?

A number of researchers have sought to conceptualize professionalization. Hughes (1963) and Barber (1963) cited such requirements as symbols of achievements, specified bodies of knowledge, community interests, required training procedures, and codes of ethics. Abbot (1988) identified the importance of a specified body of knowledge, as well as three essential modalities that define the “cultural logic” of professionalization: diagnosis, treatment, and inference. The most important function of a profession, according to Abbot, is to generate new methods of application within each of these three modalities. Freidson (2001) emphasized the occupational control of work. This occupational control has an influence on the labor market, training program, division of labor, ideology, and official body of required knowledge (Freidson, 2001).

A signal trait of the professional model is the presence of an accepted code of ethics, mission statement, or set of core values (Barber, 1963; Hughes, 1963). It

appears that this characteristic is absent from the National Basketball Association (NBA); my research efforts failed to uncover any identifiable code of ethics, mission statement, or outline of core values for the Association. While most professional organizations proudly post their mission statements and/or codes of ethics in public domains such as official websites, the Association has not taken these steps. Attempts to contact the Association for information relating to this subject have also been fruitless. This is an important point. Even if there are established codes, they become ineffective if they are not both well-known and enforced with meaningful sanctions.

Efforts have been made by the Association to educate rookies about how they might build a positive image and better understand their roles as public figures (The National Basketball Association, 2003). In 2003, the rookie transition program held a panel on "Character, Image, and Ethics". This program was meant to "better prepare new players for interaction with the media and the public...and to help players acknowledge their roles as public figures" (The National Basketball Association, 2003, para. 2). These types of programs do not offer a sufficient substitute for a well-established code of ethics or mission statement. Yet the Association may be acknowledging that its players are held to a standard as public figures, and that the Association should help players understand and meet demands related to this standard. Until the League takes a stand by implementing an organized and well-publicized code of ethics or mission statement, it will be difficult for players to understand their professional responsibilities.

Another key aspect of a profession is the possibility of sanctions if constituents within the profession do not provide the required level of service. It is necessary to

distinguish between sanctions that are imposed for actions on the court, as opposed to actions that take place off the court. Players are routinely fined for showing up late to practice, fighting during games, and even failing to tuck their shirts in during a contest. Depending on the severity of the incident, these sanctions may be imposed by either the player's team (i.e., in the case of showing up late for practice), or the Commissioner of the Association (i.e., in the case of a fight during a contest). In either case, players have the right to appeal a sanction, and will have the support of the Player's Union in the case of such an appeal.

An example of recent disciplinary action that was imposed by the Commissioner of the Association was in response to a "riot" that occurred in late November 2004 during a game between the Detroit Pistons and the Indiana Pacers. Commissioner David Stern took a firm position in disciplining the players involved with this incident. Suspensions ranged from a single game for those who had a minor role in the incident, to an entire season for those who had a more significant role in the incident.

However, players rarely (if ever) receive sanctions for their actions off the court. Kobe Bryant, who was on trial for rape and faced a possible sentence of life in prison, was not held accountable to any type of professional discipline from the Association. In fact, Bryant routinely used his team's private jet to fly between his games and his trial. Commissioner Stern has commented,

We can require every NBA player be a choirboy. But actually business wouldn't be so good then, because people know our league reflects life. And that's part of our attraction... [and] because we operate in a very public way...it's very instructive to society. (Wise, 2001, p. D1)

As evidenced by this comment, the Association seems more comfortable with trivializing the behavior of players and justifying it through business motivations, than with acknowledging and upholding the responsibilities of a professional.

Professions typically have requirements of credentials, education, and licensing (Barber, 1963; Freidson, 2001; Hughes, 1963). A lack of standards or uniform education procedures is encountered by players selected to enter the NBA. Many players are being drafted directly out of high school, while others are selected after playing in college or in leagues overseas. In fact, many young rookies are drafted when they clearly lack meaningful experience; they are seen as a possibly profitable investment.

So in certain circumstances the NBA seems to welcome players into the “professional” organization based solely on their potential for development, as opposed to players having met a certain level of education or credentials, as would be the case in a profession such as medicine or law. If a “basketball education” were to exist, one might envision this to include classes in ethics, decision-making, and public relations that would be required of aspiring players. Furthermore, the Association might consider a minor league organization, similar to that found in professional baseball. Under this model, the Association would offer training for those who wish to enter the profession. This required step would prevent players from going directly from high school or college into the Association, and would also give them semi-professional experience prior to being thrust into the spotlight of the NBA. The aforementioned training classes could also be taken during a player’s tenure in the semi-professional league.

Based on these guidelines set forth by Barber, Freidson, Hughes, and other authorities, I have argued that –despite its adjectival name- basketball does not qualify as a profession. It is clear that the Association currently lacks fundamental mission/ethics statements, consistent and holistic sanctioning procedures, and required credentials/education.

From Professionalism to Good Work

If professional basketball does not seem to be an example of a true profession, what implications follow for the workers? Since players are not bound by professional obligation to act as moral individuals (as a doctor or lawyer might be), then it becomes more difficult to define the requirements of Good Work. It also becomes more difficult to argue that a player who is a poor moral exemplar off the court does not qualify as a Good Worker. Therefore, this discussion must be extended to take into account how our culture has classically defined the role of athletes, and the importance of role models within our society. My argument rests on a claim that morally-sound athletes are an important part of our culture, and that our society consistently identifies professional basketball players as role models.

Obligation to culture: Classical roots

Obligation to culture relates to the manner in which athletes have been classically defined. Since ancient Greece, professional athletes have inherited a certain responsibility to culture because they have been expected to epitomize human goodness, the good in society, and the good in one's country (Sailes, 2001). The

Greeks measured excellence not only by an athlete's strength, speed, or dexterity, but also in the balance of the athlete's overall attributes. Victory at the Games was not met with great physical rewards (winners received merely an olive branch). Instead, athletes reveled in great public adulation (Betcher and Pollack, 1993). In the modern Olympic Games, athletes are asked to take an oath, which challenges them to "take part...in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and honor of our teams" (Berlow, 1994, p. 115). It is expected that athletes commit themselves to this oath not only during the Games, but also as a part of their everyday lives (Berlow, 1994). It is noteworthy that these oaths were designed to be taken by amateur athletes. One wonders if American sports may be a domain where the amateurs are the true professionals and the professional athletes act in a nonprofessional way.

How is it that so many NBA players seem lax when it comes to upholding these classical notions of pride and honor in their everyday life? Some insight into this question can perhaps be reached through a brief discussion of moral freedom. The term moral freedom, coined by Wolfe (2001), describes a modern phenomenon where individuals expect to have the freedom to choose for themselves what it means to lead a "good and virtuous life." Wolfe goes on to elaborate upon this idea: "we decide what is right and wrong, not by bending our wills to authority, but by considering who we are, what others require and what consequences follow from acting one way rather than another" (Wolfe, 2001, p. 48).

Regarding popular athletes and this notion of moral freedom, Cedric Dempsey, executive director of the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) has stated: "Athletes who refuse to accept their obligations as role models are blind to their

responsibilities as adults” (Sailes, 2001, p. 56). This comment brings up an important aspect of moral freedom relevant to professional basketball: the distinction between seeking individual freedom for choosing how to live, and seeking an exemption from moral rules (Wolfe, 2001). It seems that professional basketball players, due to their prominence in American society, are prone to feeling entitled to a moral exemption. Large salaries and constant fan adoration seem to provide the fuel with which players feed their egos, and unfortunately these inflated egos often seem to translate into feelings of omnipotence. Depictions in the popular media regularly confirm this notion:

The times have produced a remarkable chemical reaction in some players: it has fattened their wallets and bankrupted their wits. It seems that, like [Charles] Barkley, who, in a commercial of all places, said he was no role model, too many athletes believe they can do whatever they want, whenever they want. (Berkow, 1997, p. C1)

This distinction has important implications for Good Work. While moral freedom implies an element of individual choice, it can be argued that players still have an obligation to uphold their sport through living a morally sound lifestyle. “This is beyond being simply a good role model. It is about being a good citizen” (Berkow, 1997, p. C1).

Based on these ideas, it seems part of the Good Work model might incorporate obligations that take into account cultural expectations of what it means to be an athlete.

Obligation to society: Role models

Part 1: The importance of role models

Empirical research has shown that role models point to pathways towards goal achievement, and highlight specific goals for which one might strive (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997, 1999). Researchers have also shown that role models can enhance motivation and provide tangible personifications of an individual's idealized sense of self (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, & Dakof, 1990; Collins, 1996; Taylor and Lobel, 1989; Taylor, Wayment, & Carillo, 1996; Wood, 1989). Erikson (1977) wrote about the persuasive influence that heroes have on individuals. Identification with these heroes helps children to understand society, and older individuals to learn about values, and develop moral frameworks.

Bandura (1977, 1986) recognized that modeling could be vicarious. Individuals need not be in direct contact with their models, but can also learn values, attitudes, and skills through observations of electronic (or print) media. Congruent with this notion, role models from popular media can have a significant impact on an individual's occupational goals (Christiansen, 1979) and career objectives (King and Multon, 1996). And when it comes to choosing career objectives, African American adolescents seem especially prone to the influence of role models from the popular media (King and Multon, 1996). In fact, children identify "ideal models" significantly more from the popular media than from people known personally (Duck, 1990). I have chosen to include these research results because they seem especially important for this discussion: the professional basketball player as a role model is an indirect relationship

that exists as a result of exposure in the popular media. This situation contrasts with the usual conceptualization of role models as individuals with whom one has direct interaction (i.e., one's parents).

Some have argued that role models are inspirational only when their achievements seem relevant and attainable (Aspinwall, 1997; Blanton, 2001; Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Lockwood and Kunda 1997, 2000). In fact, it has been empirically shown that research participants demonstrate better performances when they observe a model who is "moderately superior" versus a model who is "highly superior" (Seta, 1982), and that a role model who embodies unattainable success can actually lead to discouragement and self-deflation (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). Negative behavior displayed by role models can activate individual fears, and motivate strategies for avoiding similar negative outcomes (Lockwood et. al., 2002).

I cite these examples because critics might use them to dispute the Good Work perspective. These individuals might argue that players who show their human frailty seem more like "real" people, and also can still be "good" role models by providing examples and motivation of how an individual should not act. However, this argument seems insufficient. If amoral acts make professional basketball players seem more like real people, then it is also possible that children and adolescents may see their own amoral behavior as more "normal," and therefore also more justified. Furthermore, when children and adolescents note the lack of significant disciplinary action for this type of off-court conduct, they are unlikely to avoid similar negative behaviors in their own lives.

Part II: The identification of basketball players as role models

Children and adolescents actually identify athletes (and specifically, professional basketball players) as their role models. For boys, sporting heroes were identified as being the most important role models, above other choices such as friends, parents or other relatives (Duck, 1990). Lockwood and Kunda (1997) also indicated that athletes were identified as role models for adolescents. Assibey-Mensah (1997) showed “the overwhelming choice of athletes or sports figures as role models by all age groups, ranging from 85% for the 10-year olds to 98% for the 18-year-olds. Basketball players were the overwhelming choice by all age groups” (p. 244). In this same study, not a single participant identified an educator as his/her role model.

On the day that Kobe Bryant was involved in a courtroom hearing for his sexual assault case, he was honored as winner of the Teen Choice Award’s favorite male athlete (Ward, 2003). When teens were confronted about why they voted for Bryant as their favorite athlete despite his recent legal battle, individuals responded by saying “you have to look up to him for his work ethic and he was a clean player on the court” (Ward, 2003, para. 8). Other individuals voiced, “I think Kobe is a good guy, and...if the Lakers start winning, people will forget about it” (Ward, 2003, para. 14). This illustration documents that adolescents not only idolize professional basketball players, but are also willing to excuse players for their poor behavior off the basketball court.

From the evidence regarding the important place occupied by role models in the lives of children and adolescents, and the frequency with which professional basketball players are identified as role models, it seems reasonable to include “being a good role

model” as part of the Good Work model’s social/societal control branch for professional basketball.

Professional basketball players: A special obligation?

In reality, the behavior of any individual can affect the behavior of another. Therefore, one might argue that all human beings have the responsibility for acting as good role models, and that professional basketball players should not hold a greater responsibility than any other individual (Wellman, 2003). It is important to consider on what basis the notion of a professional basketball player’s responsibility rests. Why does accountability for being a good role model seem more directed towards professional basketball players, as opposed to individuals such as religious leaders or teachers, who are members of a field that by definition seems better suited for providing positive role models?

This accountability rests on the bold fact that large numbers of children do not view religious leaders and teachers as role models, while they do so view professional basketball players. This is not to say that some children don’t identify religious leaders as role models, but most children do not make this identification. This unique identification gives professional basketball players additional reasons, above the reasons of other individuals, for engaging in a morally sound lifestyle (Wellman, 2003).

Implicit in this notion is that only the professional basketball player who garners public attention should be held to this moral responsibility (Wellman, 2003). I believe this point of view is correct, though it is not uncontroversial. Aside from classical definitions of the role of professional athletes, there is nothing fundamental about the

sport of basketball that requires players to be good role models (and I have shown that they are not professionally bound). Rather, if it were not for the public attention that players received, players would not have this additional responsibility to engage in a morally sound lifestyle. Given this premise, along with the contribution of societal factors to Good Work, it seems legitimate to consider a player's level of prominence when making assessments of his/her Good Work.

Good Work model for professional basketball: Cultural and social/societal controls

I propose a model of the cultural and social/societal controls of Good Work for professional basketball players (see figure 1). The cultural branch of the model is defined by obligations that players have to upholding classical definitions of an athlete. As discussed above, classical definitions of an athlete imply that players should epitomize the good in humanity, society, and nation. The social/societal branch of the model is defined by an obligation that a player has to being a good role model, and the level of a player's prominence does seem to figure into this obligation. A morally sound lifestyle is an important condition for a player to meet in order to uphold the classical traditions of an athlete, and the obligation to being a good role model. Thus, by virtue of the cultural and social/societal facets of the model, living a morally sound lifestyle may in turn be an important criterion for Good Work in professional basketball.

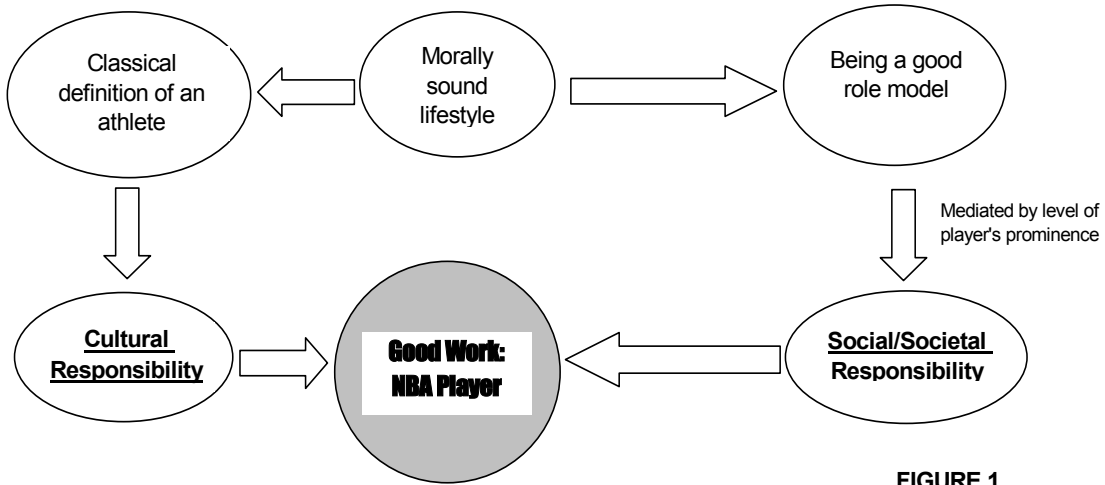


FIGURE 1

CONCLUSION

My argument rests on two premises:

1. It is difficult to characterize professional basketball as a true profession.
2. Professional basketball players are part of a field with long-standing expectations of honor and respect, and they are also consistently identified as role models. Due to these factors, I have argued that players have significant cultural and social/societal obligations to conduct themselves in a morally sound manner off the court, even though they do not have a professional responsibility to do so.

As such, it seems unlikely that moral responsibility is merely an optional condition for a professional basketball player. Rather, professional basketball players have a responsibility for engaging in morally sound behavior, and being a good role model. This responsibility rests on the influence that role models are understood to have on

children and adolescents, and the proclivity that children and adolescents have for identifying basketball players as role models. Due to this potential for influence, the only responsible choice a player has is to use that influence to good effect by accepting his duty as a role model and engaging in morally sound behavior in everyday life.

Unfortunately, due to the misalignment of the domain that I've presented, it is difficult for players to understand their responsibility towards Good Work (Gardner et. al., 2001). This lack of clarity also serves as fuel for players to ignore the additional responsibility they have as role models. Players will continue to struggle in defining the accepted parameters for their behavior, despite the facts that young people view professional athletes as role models, and that role models play a role in the development of these young people. Until the National Basketball Association defines and maintains certain standards, this ambiguity will remain.

Limitations and future directions:

My discussion has been limited by a lack of empirical research. We do not know whether individuals actually imitate the amoral behavior of professional basketball players. If it could be empirically shown that children and adolescents actually emulate players' amoral behaviors, then the social/societal portion of the model becomes more significant. If it is shown that children and adolescents do not emulate this behavior even when they cite basketball players as role models, then this facet of the model becomes less significant.

Social scientists could test this relationship by conducting a large-scale longitudinal study, whereby individuals would be asked to identify their role models at

various stages in their lives (childhood through adulthood). Because it is statistically probable that some participants might end up as convicted felons, it would be instructional to investigate whether their crimes correlated with the behavior of the role models (i.e., rape, drug abuse, spousal abuse) they had identified at various points in their lives. Though less reliable, social scientists might consider a retrospective study. In this design, researchers would interview convicted felons, and ask them to identify role models from their childhood.

This area of research is rich in opportunity for future social scientific analysis. In view of the significant role assumed by athletes since classical times, it is germane to explore the responsibilities professional athletes have in modern society, and will continue to have in the future. My model of Good Work in the domain of athletics was constructed from a classical view of athletes, as well as a contemporary view that describes athletes as role models. This line of reasoning, however, is not unique to professional athletics. Social scientists could also apply this reasoning to construct Good Work models in other domains where professional norms also do not yet exist, such as entertainment, business, or politics.

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