

**International College Athletes and the Gateway to the
American Dream**

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Introduction

There are deeper issues involving international student-athletes competing in college athletics within the United States, honing in on the question of whether or not college sports within the United States can act as a major factor in achieving the “American Dream” in these athletes’ eyes. Opportunities such as traveling internationally to complete both their academic as well as athletic careers within American universities offer many positives to these student-athletes. This can be seen as broadening diversity on campus, as well as improving personal growth and development for these student-athletes. Although many positives can emerge from these opportunities, conflict can arise as well, leading to a growing rise in anxiety as well as stress levels amongst these international student-athletes. These negative feelings fostered by moving internationally can be tied to language barriers and feelings of isolation being so far away from home. Students’ cultural adjustment and long-term development are often overlooked when hearing about athletes transitioning internationally. These negative factors can more than often be overlooked, especially with many of these athletes taking the extra step to play college sports and soon being thrown into the thick of it within American culture. Although they can be seen as valuable additions to their team’s rosters, there are limited works exploring the mental effects of these athletes going through these intense transitions. It is worth exploring the long-term mental health effects of these athletes, both through transitioning to American culture as well as being a full-time student-athlete, which is what this review will further highlight.

What are International Athletes?

The concept of the idea of student-athletes competing internationally is described as the “Push and Pull” method (Bryan Romsa et al., 1998). This method sums up the idea of the “Push factors” being undesirable conditions in their home countries which force the students to seek better opportunities elsewhere, while “Pull factors” are the attributes of another country that the students find attractive (Bryan Romsa et al., 1998). A research experiment is conducted involving 8 international student-athletes, 6 female and 2 male, all above the age of 18. The research experiment consists of a series of in-depth interviews with questions aiming to unsheath the true purposes of what these student-athletes long to achieve when searching to play within the United States. The overall outcome of this experiment found that these athletes believe that this process is as highly sought after as it is due to the fact of “motivated by a desire to have a great experience: feel a sense of belongingness with the team, connecting with the head coach and coaches, as well as succeeding academically and athletically.” (Bryan Romsa et al., 1998).

Positives in International College Athletes

When looking at the positive factors that emerge when looking at the process of playing sports within American universities for international student-athletes, numerous articles support the transition. In an article written by the Journal of International Students, it’s been proven that international student-athletes have a much easier transition than international students who do not play a sport. It’s no surprise that a transition as serious and difficult as traveling

internationally as a student can cause long-term effects on the individual however, this article proves that the idea of entering into a team environment surrounded by a coaching staff as well as advisors and team meets themselves offers a much easier transition for these students, that many others who do not play a sport do not experience when going through a similar process (Forbes-Mewett, H., & Pape, M, n.d). This article dives into a research report similar to many experiments conducted regarding this topic by a group of international student-athletes, or as a series of interview-like questions to run in the understanding of the outcomes of taking on an opportunity such as this one (Forbes-Mewett, H., & Pape, M, n.d). Upon concluding the experiment, numerous factors were tied into what makes the overall transition as positive as it has been for many of these athletes. Migrant communities on campus have offered these international athletes a more in-depth way to connect with fellow international students who come from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds Besides that the idea of the location of these college campuses has also impacted their ability to adapt to their new environment, and fully grasp their new way of life (Forbes-Mewett, H., & Pape, M, n.d).

Offering these important factors when looking through these transitions for student-athletes is much more important than people tend to realize. When looking at stories of international student-athletes, they can fully grasp the idea of the privileges that they have when making this transition as well as the positives that can come from it since their respective universities offer them much help and guidance. For Duke University's men's basketball freshman, Khaman Maluach, being an international student-athlete came as an easy transition since he grew up watching players similar to him. Hailing from South Sudan, Maluach explained that growing up he didn't quite understand basketball until watching NBA star and fellow Duke Blue Devil Zion Williamson dominate in his college career (Nair, 2024). Being now seen as a

flag bearer for a young country regarding representing basketball, Maluach has further exemplified that the support he has gained from his coaches and teammates, as well as advisors, has aided in helping him transition to the United States, as well as continue to broaden his understanding of the sport (Nair, 2024). Alongside Maluach, Stanford University freshman and Japanese native, Rintaro Sasaki, is following a similar path to dominating in international sports. Sasaki had the opportunity to skip out on gaining a college education and head straight to the Japanese majors, however, due to the highly sought-after need to play sports in the United States, the young freshman chose to further his opportunities at Stanford, thus demonstrating the appeal of these international student-athletes to jump headfirst into American collegiate sports (Baggarly, A. n.d).

Negatives in International College Athletes

Humanity seems to be forgotten when looking at international athletes at times. This means that more often than not people tend to see these international athletes as an addition to make the rosters of their respective sports teams more diverse and much more talented. However, the long-term negative effects that can come from transitions, such as the misunderstandings that go behind these transitions, have proven to cause detrimental, long-term mental health effects on these young international student-athletes. In an article written by the University of Arizona, there have been increasing issues regarding the challenges and difficulties faced by African student-athletes. It is stated that there is a considerable lack of information on international student-athletes, despite the extent to which colleges and universities heavily rely on them to

heighten their winning reputation within their respective Swartz programs, especially regarding students from Africa (Lee, J., & Opio, T. (2011). That being said, a series of 16 interviews with different athletes were conducted all from seven different African countries (showing the range of their experience upon entering universities within the United States). Unlike past interviews, this focuses on the challenges in the negatives that they have faced regarding the challenges of stereotypes and discrimination based on their race (Lee, J., & Opio, T. (2011).

Another negative factor that we tie into playing sports internationally is odea feeling isolated due to language barriers may seem like a small problem that can be easily fixed over time however for many athletes, it is directly tied to an increase in anxiety and stress throughout their process of transition (Danilevičienė, 2016). It is seen that foreign language anxiety has been a major demotivation for these international students both in the classroom and in their sports, however, it's shown that over time and through maturity these students begin to feel more confident in their classes and environment regarding learning English (Danilevičienė, 2016). Patience is seen as a virtue regarding this topic however, it does not seem that it is as common as it should be (Danilevičienė, 2016).

What Can Be Done?

So what more can be done to aid in the transition for international student-athletes when coming to the United States to play college sports? However, there are ways that advisors, coaches, as well as fellow teammates of these international athletes can offer some type of support as well as an understanding of the stresses and anxieties that emerge from transitions as

intense as this one (Newell, 2015). It is proven that international student-athletes demonstrate lower adjustment to U.S. colleges than their U.S. counterparts. Taking on a solid understanding of this transition is deemed greatly beneficial in taking the beginning steps of aiding in this process (Newell, 2015). Another factor that can be seen as beneficial is supporting student-athletes' academic aspirations in addition to their athletic experiences (Newell, 2015). Going straight to the NCAA for help and guidance is proven to be just as beneficial, especially with resources being readily available (Brown, 2024). What needs to be understood in helping this process is understanding each student's "education, student life and development, immigration regulations, benefits and services, well-being and daily life, safety and security, taxes and legal matters, cultural aspects and opportunities." (Brown, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The cultural adjustment and long-term development of students are often overlooked when hearing about athletes transitioning internationally. Many of these athletes take the extra step to play college sports, especially at the Division One level, and are thrown into the thick of it within American culture. Although as fans, many view these athletes as a major addition to their respective sports teams, there isn't enough to say about the mental effects of these athletes going through these intense transitions. More should be said and reported on the long-term mental health effects of these athletes, both through transitioning to American culture as well as being a full-time student-athlete.

Looking at the idea of cultural assimilation framework can help better understand what these student athletes are experiencing when making this transition. When looking at the framework, it's smart to understand the certain phases that each student goes through. For starters looking at the initial "honeymoon phase" demonstrates the excitement and fascination that ties into adjusting to a complex culture within the United States (Forbes-Mewett, H., & Pape, M. (n.d.)). However, following through the honeymoon phase comes culture shock that comes to the barriers in issues with adjusting and integrating into American culture (Forbes-Mewett, H., & Pape, M. (n.d.)). This can be tied into the psychological adjustment in language barriers that these students typically face thus tying into the ongoing issues of mental health, struggles and anxiety with taking this step. Before research can be fully explained and the topic can be further explored, there has to be a solid understanding of what exactly is an international student-athlete as well as what goes into the process of transitioning to the United States. 24,000 international student-athletes are competing at the Division 1, 2, and 3 levels across the United States (NCAA, 2024). With international student-athletes taking up a decent percentage of college sports within the United States, it makes sense that the numbers are only anticipated to grow more and more with time, leading to more resources becoming readily available. According to an article written by the Sports Journal, the increased competitiveness of college, recruiting, and training of high-caliber international athletes is seen as fundamental to the success of sports teams, and the idea of recruiting internationally becoming particularly important for smaller mid-major NCAA schools due to the likelihood of falling behind talent by top-tier institutions are major factors that can be seen in the driving cause behind the growing popularity we have seen within these growing numbers (Bryan Romsa et al., 1998).

Media Review

Initially, when looking at this topic, there isn't much said in the media about the struggles that these students go through. Typically what is reported or often more good than bad demonstrating how well a certain international athlete performs and their initial adjustment into the American culture, but very rarely are the negatives highlighted. Although it may be seen as a good thing, it's not wise to see an issue such as this one with rose colored glasses on truth must be brought to light about what these international student athletes go through to better comprehend who they are as a only the athlete, but the person. When exploring various types of media on this topic, one of the key players that comes up time and time again is freshman phenom Khaman Maluach of Duke Men's basketball. The 7 '2 freshmen hailing from South Sudan is more often than not portrayed in the media as a happy go lucky athlete who dominates weekly on the court however what we don't see are the struggles that go on behind the scenes, especially in recent articles, highlighting his performances in most recent games (Nair, 2024). Bouts of anxiety, cultural shock as well as the initial language barriers have been seen holding Maluach back when he first stepped foot on Duke campus, but the media and written works had never highlighted that. These articles don't talk about the struggles that he faces as an 18-year-old navigating not only a new culture, bouncing academics at a rigorous institution while also performing as a key player for his respective sport (Nair, 2024). Maluach is not the only athlete experiencing this he's just the most well knownthe showing that these media outlets need to dive deeper into what these students are truly experiencing.

Conclusion

This research aims to focus on bringing to light the positives and negatives that emerge from the transition of playing sports within the United States for international student-athletes. Research demonstrates both sides of the spectrum, being the positive and negative sides of being an international collegiate athlete. These sources give further insight into the process of going through recruitment as well as the transition process to playing college sports within the United States. The positives are highlighted as well as the negatives, allowing for further insight to be seen by the readers into what this process truly does to the international athletes involved in this process. Through accounting the real stories of these international athletes are mentioned, allowing for these athletes to be humanized and recount their own experiences. The potential strategies that are explored offer support that can be given to improve the mental well-being of athletes facing struggles due to the intense transition.

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