

All Professional Athletes are Amateurs – They, too, Love Their Work

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All Professional Athletes are Amateurs – They, too, Love Their Work

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Common sense, including the conventional wisdom in organizations that judge the qualifications of amateur athletes, has it that their main defining quality is that they are not paid for their athletic activity. In other words, this kind of amateur status is still required of participants in American college and university sport, even though we shall see here that this is increasingly an empty requirement.

In their essence amateurs and pros are the same: both types love the core activity and the experience of doing it, while in principle at least, money is only a means to pursuing these two. Therefore, if the two types are to be further distinguished, it would be done most logically by achievement: what level of achievement does the passion for engaging in the activity generate? Level of achievement being operationalized by level of commitment, experience, perseverance, effort, expertise, and the like (Stebbins, 1979). But, under certain conditions, excellence can also be measured by money or payment in kind offered to an amateur, and if the emoluments are enough to live on, they turn that person into a professional.

Today's pros of all stripes receive such emoluments, though they are sometimes barely enough to live on (Stebbins, 2004/2014). Nevertheless, amateurs, too, must somehow survive economically. That is, they need a job, pension, or inheritance or a partner who has one or more of these. Another possibility is to try to find paying work as an amateur, fired by the hope of eventually becoming a professional and as such able to pursue the amateur activity full time. This kind of work has been labelled "devotee work" (Stebbins, 2004/2014). These enthusiasts are paid so that they may work (Marshall, 1963), a reversal of the usual formula of people working so that they may be paid.

Being paid in kind amounts in the case of university athletes to being fed and given lodging and tuition for which money would otherwise have had to be found to pay for these needs. Those studying at certain institutions of higher education — ones primarily in the United States — are professional in this sense.[1] Let me be clear about the meaning of

“professional,” however: these athletes are paid, which makes them professional in the sense that all paid workers are professional – plumbers, shop keepers, sales people, governmental employees, and so on. But are the athletes are also *liberal* professionals, those who serve as models for like-minded amateurs and, for some of the latter, the ones whom they aspire to become (Stebbins, 1992). That is, the “liberal professions” are, according to the European Union’s Directive on Recognition of Professional Qualifications (2005/36/EC): “those practiced on the basis of relevant professional qualifications in a personal, responsible and professionally independent capacity by those providing intellectual and conceptual services in the interest of the client and the public.” The liberal professionals exercise a calling; theirs is a vocation. Their clients are served by physicians, lawyers, architects, teachers, and the like, while (I add here) their publics are served by, for example, musicians, actors, writers, painters and, yes, athletes.[2]

Semantic Problems

At this juncture we run into semantic problems. Professional athletes are not usually defined in the language of love for their sport activity, but rather in terms of high achievement and, in some sports, concomitant high remuneration (ie, money, not in-kind goods and services). This latter definition of professional – call it an economic definition – is not that of liberal professional, but is alas the popular view of the pro athlete. Meanwhile, the principal motive for taking up a professional sport, which is for the love of it, is not well understood outside its social world and, it appears, is rarely discussed in media circles or among fans. Perhaps, further along in an athlete’s professional career in sport, the pay does become ever more attractive and, at that point, another reason for staying with this kind of work. And still later it may become the only reason. Careful research on this hypothetical change in leisure/work motivation remains to be done.

Additionally, during my 47 years of studying amateurs in art, science, sport, and entertainment, it has become clear that the essence of amateurism is not the absence of remuneration. That is, people do not pursue an activity in these four areas because they will make no money there. Rather, they go in for them to find self-fulfillment, sometimes to experience flow, contribute to collective effort (often as part of a team), participate in a distinctive social world, acquire a valued identity, and similar values. In other words, the benefits and rewards of amateurism are many and first and foremost non-monetary (for a list of these see Stebbins, 2007/2015, pp. 11-14).

Most amateurs in the four fields just mentioned seldom think about making a significant amount of money from their pursuit. As adults they are involved in individual and team sports, community theaters and orchestras, science societies, and entertainment organizations (in magic, circus arts, commercial music groups). Some amateurs receive a small fee for certain services (eg, pitching for a professional batting practice, performing an archaeological survey on a future construction site, winning a small cash prize for the best watercolor at a local art show), but it is hardly enough to constitute a living however meagre.

University Sport

Nevertheless, in certain sports, because their competitions draw vast crowds of paying spectators, the ethical question arises about whether university-sponsored athletes should share in the abundant proceeds. The revenue from the latter when they play in prominent team sports in the United States (primarily football and men's basketball) is substantial, and the universities have come to depend on it. Elsewhere in the world such sports are generally organized by private clubs or by state-sponsored organizations. Some of these groups are professional and therefore do offer a livelihood. For the amateurs and some young professionals, commercial endorsements, medals and prizes (funded by government, industry, nonprofit associations), non-playing part-time jobs, sponging off parents, and other resources must be found, with which to help meet the expenses of food and lodging and those of training and playing games (eg, injuries, clothing, equipment, transportation).

Should the search for talent for competitions (from local to global) be reconceptualized as a hunt for the best athletes, whether professional or amateur? This would at least honor the principle of athletic excellence founded on love of the activity, which has guided recruitment to the Olympic Games from their inception in the 8th century B.C. Those games were necessarily amateur, there being few sports pros until the 20th century A.D. Thus this distinction is rooted in the historical development of sport now a highly valued set of spectator interests in modern society, but now also a set that is anchored in the achievement of excellence in executing that activity *and* its professional remuneration.

True, professional athletes are commonly viewed as better than their amateur counterparts, which assumes that professional involvement over many years makes this possible. That is, the pros have more time to practice and gain experience in competition, because they have no need to work in external jobs. Nevertheless, many excellent amateurs also exist, as is evident in pro-am tournaments, occasional exceptional rookie professionals on team sports, and fine purely amateur players with no interest in paid employment in their athletic passion. Some of them are fully employed in non-athletic jobs. Indeed, sufficient time beyond the modern standard work week is available for personal development in even the most demanding serious leisure activities.[3]

The professionals in art, science, sport, and entertainment are in fact “occupational devotees.” They evince “a strong, positive attachment to a form of self-enhancing work, where the sense of achievement is high and the core activity (set of tasks) is endowed with such intense appeal that the line between this work and leisure is virtually erased” (Stebbins, 2004/2014, p. 2). In that book, *Between Work and Leisure*, I set out the proposition that serious leisure and devotee work occupy a great deal of common ground; the latter is effectively serious leisure from which participants gain all or part of their livelihood by pursuing a passion, by being an *amator*.

Conclusions

In other words, the professionals and amateurs in sport are cut from the same cloth; namely, a profound love for the activity. They are distinguished, rather vaguely, by their overlapping levels of excellence in executing it (Stebbins, 1979, p. 25). To allow both types to play in the same competition sometimes as teammates is to open up the range of experience for all who are involved and enhance thereby the rewarding experience of personal enrichment, actualization, and expression in the sport in question. Through such arrangements the participant's love for the sport puts down still deeper roots.

Progress has recently been made toward easing the monetary criterion for separating amateur and professional participation in sport. The 1988 decision to allow professionals into the Olympic Games was a necessary step. Now, in the United States, the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) has signaled its intention to allow college and university athletes to "cash in on the use of their fame" starting with the 2021-22 academic year (Witz, 2020). For example, they will be free to make deals as media influencers, appear in commercials, and hold paid autograph sessions. These athletes cannot, however, be considered employees of their educational institution.

Nevertheless, in all this, the passion for the chosen sport and its core activities will probably be increasingly diluted at the professional end. Indeed, it may eventually be mostly forgotten as the pros are pushed by the profit-generating ambitions of team owners to participate in more games (practices, conditioning sessions, etc.) than they can tolerate. More and more the able-bodied professionals in the most remunerative sports appear to continue in their athletic careers primarily because "the money is so good." At this point they will have abandoned Marshall's precept and started working so that they may be paid, working at something the love for which they lose as each seemingly endless season grinds on.

"The medals don't mean anything and the glory doesn't last. It's all about your happiness. The rewards are going to come, but my happiness is just loving the sport and having fun performing." (<http://www.quoteland.com>)

Jacqueline Joyner-Kersee[4]

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Endnotes

[1] The world over most sports are organized on a club basis and not affiliated with such an institution. Amateur club-like groups also exist in these institutions; they organize play in “intramural” competitions. By contrast, the “varsity” sports athletes play in interuniversity and intercollege competitions for which there may be some payment in kind (eg, paid or partially paid tuition, room, and board).

[2] Client-centered and public-centered professionals are discussed in Stebbins (1992, p. 22).

[3] I have noted elsewhere (Stebbins, 1992, p. 138n2) that, in the typical 168-hour week, a person might devote 40 of them to work and work-related obligations and 74 to sleep and body maintenance, or existence time. Fifty-four hours thus remain for leisure and non-work obligations.

⁴ Jacqueline Joyner-Kersey is an American athlete, ranked among the all-time greatest athletes in the heptathlon & long jump. She won 3 gold, 1 silver, & 2 bronze Olympic medals, in those two events at four different sets of Games.

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