Professional Athletes and their Duty to be Role Models

Sandra Lynch (Centre for Faith, Ethics & Society, University of Notre Dame, Australia)
Daryl Adair (University of Technology, Sydney)
Paul Jonson (University of Technology, Sydney)

ABSTRACT

This chapter takes an interdisciplinary approach combining expertise in sports management and in philosophy to examine the premises underpinning the contested claim that professional athletes have a special obligation to be role models both within and beyond the sporting arena. Arguments for and against the claim are briefly addressed, as a prelude to identifying and elucidating a set of factors relevant to a consideration of this alleged special obligation. The chapter considers understandings of sport, play and athleticism from an ethical perspective and examines their relationship to professionalism to determine the extent to which ethical imperatives can logically be upheld or undermined within the professional context. The chapter concludes that professional athletes cannot be expected to be able to respond to the demand that they act as role models within and beyond the sporting arena unless the tensions implicit within that demand are articulated. The chapter calls for recognition of the complexity of ethical decision-making in the context of professional sport and recommends that the training of professional athletes should prepare them to deal with this complexity. Recognition of the complexity of decision-making with the professional sporting context suggests the need for further research into optimal training strategies for young professional athletes and into the genesis and reasonableness of the demand that such athletes act as role models both within and beyond the sporting arena.

Keywords: role model, professional, athlete, sport, play, public expectations

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely claimed or assumed that professional athletes are (or should be) role models for sports fans (particularly young people who look up to them). These expectations involve questions of athlete responsibility underpinned by ethical principles associated with the conduct of public sporting figures. These are complex issues, partly because the concepts of athleticism, sport and play are interrelated within a network of meanings; in some respects they share meanings and in other respects their meanings differ. As we shall argue, variance in their meanings draws attention to different and somewhat contradictory values that complicate ethical reasoning in the context of sport, and create confusion or ambivalence in relation to what can be expected of professional athletes, both “on and off the field”. Player codes of conduct attempt to ensure that professional athletes do not behave in ways which bring the game they play into disrepute, but the language used in these codes is typically very general and consequently the clauses of these codes are very much open to interpretation.

This paper explores a set of factors relevant to a consideration of the intuition or demand that professional athletes have a duty to be role models both “on and off the field”. It begins by exploring responses to the expectations associated with this demand and then investigates tensions that are implicit in requirements that professional athletes accept the designation of role model. The second section of the paper considers understandings of sport from an ethical perspective and its relationship to professionalism; its aim is to examine the extent to which the ethical imperatives associated with sport can be upheld or undermined within the context of professional sport. Finally, the third section explores a complex range of issues to be taken into account in any attempt to justify the idea that professional athletes should accept the designation of role model.

ROLE MODELING: EXPECTATIONS AND INTUITIONS

Both the media and the academic literature (Wilson, Stavros and Westberg, 2008) regularly alert us to the transgressions of professional athletes on and off the field and to the negative repercussions of such behaviour for players, their colleagues, clubs, organisations or
other stakeholders. A recent weekend newspaper report provides a typical illustration referring to the previous week as one in which “yet another slew of NRL [National Rugby League] footballers’ misadventures with alcohol seeped through the headlines”; and in which “the players’ role model status and their apparent habitual problems with alcohol” focus attention on concerns about the players’ personal irresponsibility (Murphy, 2013). However, calls to professional athletes to recognise their alleged obligations as role models for younger players within their sports are sometimes rebuffed by the athletes themselves. For example, in 1993 Charles Barkley, a U.S.A., National Basketball Association player, famously said: “I’m 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; .... Just because I dunk a basketball doesn’t mean I should raise your kids” (Wellman, 2003, p. 332).

This is a somewhat hyperbolic position, given that the suggestion is that Barkley ought to accept the designation of role model, rather than that he ought to take on the rearing of other people’s children. However, he is not alone in his view. Phil Gould, the General Manager of an Australian Rugby League Football Club and a former professional coach and player, recently commented in the following terms about the responsibility of those involved in the professional game.

What about parents taking responsibility for the education of their own kids, instead of demanding rugby league set the standard for socially acceptable behaviour? If the school principal doesn’t like what he sees on TV, then he should tell the students why he won’t tolerate it in his school. What makes you think the game should have to pull in its horns to educate your students? And why do our game’s leaders so meekly give in to these complaints? (Gould, 2013)

Gould’s comments appear to reject the notion that professional football players should be expected to be role models; moreover, Barkley’s statement identifies an uncontentious minimalist approach which implies that role models ought to be chosen from among the cohort of law-abiding citizens. The implication, therefore, is that a person’s athletic talent is distinct from his/her status as a law-abiding citizen as illustrated by the fact that convicted felons ought not be seen as role-models regardless of their competence on a basketball court.
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In making a distinction between being a talented athlete and being a law abiding citizen or failing to be a law-abiding citizen, Barkley misses the main point motivating the common intuition that professional athletes have a responsibility to behave as role models for their young fans – if not for the community in general. That point does not turn on the fact of Barkley’s talent - although that talent and the dedication necessary to develop it are admirable and inspiring. Rather, the point underpinning the common intuition turns on the fact of what Barkley’s talent has made possible for him. His talent has enabled him to play basketball professionally, to make his living in this way and to gain public attention because of this. The response of Karl Malone (an NBA colleague of Barkley’s) to Barkley’s claim deals with these issues, associating the call to be a role model with notions of choice and responsibility.

Charles, you can deny being a role model all you want, but I don't think it's your decision 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 don't think we can accept all the glory and the money that comes with being a famous athlete and not accept the responsibility of being a role model, of knowing that kids and even some adults are watching us and looking for us to set an example. I mean, why do we get endorsements in the first place? Because there are people who will follow our lead and buy a certain sneaker or cereal because we use it (Malone, 1993).

Christopher Wellman’s response to Barkley’s claims supports Malone’s approach. Wellman argues that our responsibilities toward others fall into at least three categories; the first identifies presumed social responsibilities to others generally, e.g. normative responsibilities not to lie, cheat or harm others; the second identifies our special responsibilities to those others with whom we are in particular relationships (e.g. our children, our clients, our employers, our patients or our students); and the third deals with responsibilities we acquire by virtue of our capacities. Wellman appears to assume that because of their “on-field” capacities professional athletes also acquire responsibilities to take the moral “high road” by comparison with the average person who lacks these capacities. However, this point does not take account of the necessary connection between the professional athletes’ capacities and their high public profiles. Wellman argues that many of those who admire professional athletes’ talents and capacities are likely to take their cues from those athletes in contexts other than sport (Wellman, 2003). We might challenge the claim that professional athletes are obliged to act as role models solely because
their admirers take behavioural cues from them, perhaps on the basis of the (admittedly contentious) assumption that fans have a choice as to whether or not they do this. The broader question remains of whether professional athletes have an obligation to act as role models because others have that expectation of them. But Karl Malone’s position is simply to acknowledge that it is a matter of fact that “there are people who will follow our [the professional athletes’] lead and buy a certain sneaker or cereal because we use it”; and then to argue that if a professional athlete accepts the glory and the money associated with being a famous athlete, endorsements being one aspect of this fame, then that athlete must accept the responsibility for being a role model. Malone’s position raises questions for the individual professional athlete of fairness and responsibility in relation to the expectation to be a role model.

The extant scholarly literature is ambivalent as to conclusions on the question of the nature, scope and relevance of professional athletes as role models, especially in terms of their lives off the field (Fleming, Hardman, Jones, & Sheridan, 2005; Hahn, 2010; Lines, 2001). But there are evident tensions between the values definitive of living the life of a professional athlete and the values we associate with living an ethically defensible and virtuous life in general. There is evidence that some professional sportspeople attempt to quarantine the values implicit in living life well - the set of values that we take to be shared by members of a civilised society and which theorists such as Mary Gentile identify as honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness and compassion (Gentile, 2010) - from their lives as professional athletes. Larry Holmes, the U.S.A. heavy weight boxing champion claimed in a 60 Minutes interview that “to be good in sports, you have to be bad.” Holmes claims that he deliberately adopts an aggressive attitude toward his opponent when he enters the ring, one which is at odds with his usual behaviour. “I have to change, I have to leave the goodness out and bring out all the bad...like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (Boxill, 2003, p. 217). Bredemeier, Shields and Horn (2003) discuss other examples of competing moralities in sport by comparison with everyday life. Comments such as that made by Steve Finnane, an Australian Rugby Union prop who broke the jaw of an opponent in a match against Wales in 1978, also suggest the adoption of an “on-field” attitude which is at odds with “off-field” behaviour: “I regret breaking his jaw. Terrible. But I don’t regret hitting
him. I think anyone regrets hurting someone in a match. Afterwards you like to think it’s all over” (Fishman, 1985, emphasis added).

On the face of it, we might question whether the acceptance of what might appear to be aggressive “on-field” or “in-the-ring” behaviour is consistent with the notion of the professional athlete as a role model in wider society. The comments of Holmes and Finnane suggest that attitudes to aggression in sport are ambivalent or at least unclear. Accidents do occur during robust physical contact as players legitimately attempt to assert their dominance over one another; at the same time, aggression is regarded by some as an integral part of professional sport. Holmes’ comments suggest this, as do further comments made by Phil Gould.

How can anyone think that sanitising a product built on all-out aggression will improve its appeal? This is poor analysis. I don’t know where we draw the line. I just fear that the rugby league game our administrators are leading us towards could become a game that eventually loses its appeal (Gould, 2013).

Aggression’s role in sport will be discussed below, but this discussion will firstly focus on the ambivalence or confusion about morality which is manifest within the context of play and sport, and which attitudes to aggression illustrate. Some theorists attribute the source of this confusion to a failure to distinguish between sport, play and ancient notions of athleticism and the consequent (mistaken) assumption that a single set of ethical imperatives relating to sport might apply in different contexts (Keating, 2003). It is our view that there are ambiguities about values and ethical imperatives within sport, which when investigated have implications for our understanding of the concept of the role model. In particular, these ambiguities have implications for codes of ethics and sporting contracts which attempt to enforce a code of behaviour for professional athletes that applies to “off-field” behaviour, while also addressing the constitutive and regulatory rules associated with “on-field” behaviour.

THE VALUES IMPLICIT IN SPORT AND ATHLETICS

This section explores the meanings that have been and are attached to the terms “sport” and “athletics” and examines the connections between sport and play in order to establish how the expectations associated with these activities interact with one another and how they might affect our expectations of professional athletes. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines sport as a
“diversion, entertainment, or fun; a pastime”, although it recognises that this definition is somewhat archaic (OED, 2013). Sport is also defined as “an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). These definitions encompass notions of fun, play and recreation as well as notions of competition and physical exertion. However, the Australian Sports Foundation specifically precludes from its definition of sport activities which are purely recreational or whose purpose relates primarily to social activity or entertainment; rather sport is defined as “a human activity capable of achieving a result requiring physical exertion and/or physical skill, which, by its nature and organisation, is competitive” (ASF, 2013). Keating (2003) points out that the moral attitude appropriate to sport – that of sportsmanship (or perhaps sportswomanship) - is often broadened to a notion of moral excellence more generally (an all-encompassing moral category). He acknowledges that the notion is sometimes associated with a moral minimum which includes the detailing of penalties for assaults or threats to officials by players or fans. But he emphasises that sport in some contexts is also associated with a kind of diversion [from the serious side of life] and is dominated by a spirit of moderation and generosity. Keating appears to have in mind parklands sport or sport dominated by Corinthian ideals, rather than professional, competitive sport. When compared with the comments of Holmes, Kinnane and Gould (above) making a connection between sport and characteristics or social values applicable to living well generally, indicates a disparity in the use of the term “sport” in these different contexts due to the ambivalence or ambiguity to which this paper draws attention.

By comparison, athletics is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the practice of physical exercises by which muscular strength is called into play and increased” (OED online, 2013b); the athlete is defined as “a competitor in the physical exercises—such as running, leaping, boxing, wrestling”—[exercises] that formed part of the public games in ancient Greece and Rome (OED online, 2013c). Keating argues for a clear distinction between athletics as a competitive activity for which the prize awarded to the victor is the *raison d’etre* of the activity, and sport as an activity engaged in for pleasure (Keating, 2003, pp. 65-66) – if not for its own sake. Certainly, Keating’s comments generally reflect historical understandings of the athletic
ideal which centre upon assumptions about manliness, physicality and aggressive competition (Dunning, 1990). The Ancient Greek athlete as exemplar was an avowedly masculine figure and the feats of athletes at the early Olympics exemplified male power and the subjugation of women. Athletes competed at the Olympic Games in the hope of pleasing the Gods, the most powerful of whom were male, and of bringing glory to themselves and the towns they represented. They also participated in the hope of financial or in-kind rewards. Thus on the ancient conception, athletics is essentially a competitive activity with religious overtones, aimed at victory in a contest between men and characterized by values of perseverance and self-sacrifice (Young, 1984; Kidd, 2013).

However, the notion of the prizes for achievement is at stark odds with the so-called revival of the modern Olympic Games, which were devoted to the 19th century code of amateurism, to its rejection of pecuniary interest, any extrinsic reward, and religiosity (Young, 1984; Kidd, 2013). The modern or 19th century Olympic ideal regarded amateur sport as a form of play; financial reward for taking part in sport was rejected since it made the playing field a type of workplace. Fundamentally, an amateur athlete was thought to have a strong sense of fair play and, since he (sic) competed in sport for its own sake rather than for material reward, he represented the ideal of an athletic gentleman (Vamplew, 1988b; Allison, 2001). Nonetheless, a common misconception of the congruence between the ancient and modern Olympic ideals persists, despite the fact that “[t]he true aims of the athletes in ancient Greece were rewards and life-long appointments to various positions in the military or the city administration” (Menenakos et al., 2005, p. 1348).

Menenakos et al. (2005) go on to argue that the Olympic idealism dominating modern athletic culture is in fact a myth and the interaction between that myth and the rise of professional sport conceals a process that begins to undermine the distinction between athletics and sport which Keating defends. In Victorian England when sports like rugby and rowing were first codified, they were taken to have a civilising and character building effect on young boys and were associated with a wider movement referred to as “muscular Christianity”. This movement valued the development through sport of both a strong body and a powerful mind for young men
who were to become leaders (Mangan, 1981). However, the adoption of various organised sports in the Victorian era had unintended consequences; sports became popularised – particularly among the working classes – and were sometimes associated with payment of players and with wagering.

Since both professionalism and gambling were deemed to contradict the intrinsic character-building purposes of the sports, their emergence in sport was challenged by the force of the amateur ideology (Vamplew, 1988a; Holt, 1989). From the perspective of the amateur code, if a player could be paid to win he could also be paid to lose. However, the last quarter of the 20th century clearly illustrated the challenge that professionalism and gambling presented as they escalated the decline of the power of the amateur ideal in elite-level sport. Professionalism and gambling in modern sport in fact suggest that professional sport has more in common with the ancient ideal of athletics – given the fierce competition and financial reward involved - than it has with the modern Olympic ideal or with Keating’s notions of sport as an activity engaged in for pleasure and for its own sake. The pervasiveness of aggression in much professional sport is one point of similarity. It is also worth noting that competition for rewards in some ancient athletic events (e.g. boxing, wrestling and pankration) involved significant aggression and violence leading to physical trauma and, on some occasions, death. Again, this is in profound contrast to the modern Olympic Games, where physical clashes in contact sports have undergone what Nobert Elias has described as a “civilising process” (Elias, 1986). Our argument here is that it is worth noting the similarities between professional sport and ancient athleticism firstly in relation to the place of competition, material reward and aggression; and secondly in relation to the appeal and force of athletic excellence which leads to public admiration and adulation of athletes.

Rules against professionalism were removed from the Olympic charter in 1986, though some sports – such as boxing – chose to quarantine the Olympic Games for amateur boxers. Tennis had already gone “open” in the late 1960s, international cricketers were full-time professionals by the mid 1970s, and rugby union eventually succumbed to professionalism in the mid 1990s (Allison, 2001). This coincided with the expansion of television and, crucially, with live
broadcasting – all of which added to exposure and to the commercial value of the sports as products. Athletes were now paid handsomely as both sports performers and media entertainers (Whannel, 1992) and their appeal to the general public was obvious. Ideals of “civilising” participation in sport for its own sake became overshadowed by the quest for excellence and its associated rewards (Strenk, 1979); and this helps to explain Keating’s claims that the essential distinction between sport and athletics is invariably ignored today (2003). Professional sportspeople have much in common with Ancient athletes and the features of both begin to affect or “infect” modern notions of sport in general.

Like Keating, Reid (2002) challenges this kind of infection, by emphasising notions of sport as play, as a diversion from the demands of the serious, practical pursuits of everyday life and as entirely distinct from any form of professionalism. Reid argues that:

In fact, sport is only possible as long as the contestants decide to view it as play. We create sport and attribute meaning to otherwise meaningless activities. Why else jump things you could go around, why flip on a balance beam...why flip at all?

We even create sports like mountain-climbing, in which participants purposely risk their lives. It’s hard for many to see anything playful about that. But just as sport may be a metaphor for life, so it may be a way to confront death – to tap it on the forehead and run back to life – before the game is truly over. There’s a sense in which risking life forces us to take responsibility for our lives (Reid, 2002, p. 78).

Clearly, as Reid’s comments emphasise, this definition of sport cannot be applied to professional sports people. Sport may well be best understood by analogy with Wittgenstein’s notion of a “family resemblance” concept. Such concepts, as Davis (2002) explains, “are like equilibria that contain discordant elements” (pp.139-140); their generality is produced out of the overlapping and criss-crossing senses in which that concept has come to be used in society, so that no single or essential meaning is shared by all uses of the concept. On this view, sport can be seen as a phenomenon created to serve different social purposes and involving different expectations. The use of the term “sport” in the professional arena differs from its use in recreational and other contexts because it serves different purposes. Suits (1988) appears to take a Wittgensteinian
approach when he distinguishes between the concepts of play, game and sport by means of using three overlapping circles. Professional athletes cannot view their careers as play. This is partly, as Reid’s comments imply, because play requires a particular kind of intentionality – a recognition that when we are playing our activity is non-serious, that it is purposeful but also without particular purpose (Huizinga 1950, Bateson 1972). 21st century professional athletes survive – in terms of their value – by what they achieve in the sporting arena and to the extent that they satisfy their professional and contractual obligations. Their activity is serious for them and has a definite and particular purpose. At the same time, cultural assumptions persist about the intrinsic value of sport from an ethical perspective, about its contribution to the development of traits and virtues that are constitutive of living life well and about its connections with play. Interplay inevitably occurs between these cultural assumptions about sport and understandings of professional sport. This interplay leads to confusion or ambivalence about the ethical values which ought to guide the professional athlete. Given the demand that the goal of the professional athlete is to win and to achieve the extrinsic rewards associated with winning, ambivalence about the role of aggression in professional sport should not be unexpected. Consequently, disagreement about the expectations of professional athletes as role models is also to be expected.

ETHICAL REASONING IN SPORT

The difficulty of distinguishing the ethical ideals associated with sport from the ideals of athleticism and the characteristics and dispositions regarded as necessary to the professional athlete has led some theorists to investigate the kind of reasoning which is typical within the sporting arena. Bredemeier and Shields (1994) argue that a transformed notion of reasoning – what they refer to as “game reasoning” - occurs in sport. Their research compared the performance of 50 US college students, both athletes (basketball players) and non-athletes, in relation to reasoning about standard moral dilemmas. They found discrepancies in performance in that the non-athletes’ moral reasoning was evaluated as more mature than that of the athletes; and further, the athletes’ reasoning in response to sport-specific dilemmas was less mature or adequate than their corresponding reasoning about everyday life (1994). On the view
of Bredemeier and Shields (1994) mature moral action is marked by a focus on relational responsibility, i.e. on equalising the obligations and benefits in one’s various relationships. By comparison, sport is generally characterised by a greater degree of personal freedom, a lessening of relational responsibility and by more egocentric moral thinking. The researchers explain these discrepancies by arguing that sport is somehow “set apart” or bracketed from everyday life; the concept of “bracketed morality” in reasoning within sport has been supported in previous research by Bredemeier and Shields (1986a and 1986b). Bredemeier and Shields argue that unlike everyday life, sport allows participants to focus narrowly on performance and to largely set aside other concerns. Moral issues do arise in sport, but participants are appropriately and legitimately acting egocentrically in this context. Sport is taken to involve a transformation of cognition and affect and hence the egoistic change that moral reasoning undergoes when one moves from everyday life into sport, is generally regarded as legitimate by players and observers.

The researchers argue that this change occurs partly because moral authority in sport is by design externalised and placed in the hands of officials; and partly because moral issues of fairness and protection are already presupposed within the concept of sport. But they also argue that the morality of sport is inevitably characterised by a certain leniency. Reid notes that “it’s hard to imagine sports without deception, fouls, and incessant attempts to get away with something” (2002, p.186) and this may explain the attribution of leniency; but as Reid also points out, sports consist of rules and hence there is a quandary here as to how we discern when rule-breaking actually threatens the game and when leniency is appropriate on the field.

While one might reasonably challenge the extent to which data about competent college athletes can be applied to professional athletes, the comments of Holmes, Kinnane and Gould (above) might recommend consideration of the applicability of the data to professional athletes. The focus of this paper is not on the nature of moral reasoning in sport, however the research of Bredemeier and Shields suggests that defending the intuition that professional athletes have a duty to be role models both within and beyond the sporting context will be a more complex matter than distinguishing the nature of various types of ethical responsibility, as Wellman
(above) has done. The “on-field” context is itself the site of moral dilemmas, while both “on and off-field” contexts are complicated by the interplay we have identified in understandings of sport and ideals of athleticism. The consequent confusion that arises in relation to our expectations of professional athletes gives some support to two related claims: firstly, that competing moralities exist in sport in general and in the professional context; and secondly, that given these competing moralities, explaining the relationship between the values attached to living well “off-field” in everyday life and the values attached to living well as a professional athlete is not a straightforward process.

The question of articulating the ethical responsibilities of professional footballers as role models “off-field” is particularly problematic, given that the contracts of employment they are required to sign can unrealistically imply that those responsibilities need not be limited. Such contracts usually require the athlete to behave in a manner that will not bring the sport into disrepute and to observe the association’s code of conduct. The code will include rules of behaviour that the athlete must observe both on the field (the constitutive and regulatory rules of the sport) and off the field. It will also contain reference to the sanctions that will ensue if there is proven breach.

A typical example of such contractual rules and codes is that of the Australian Rugby Union (ARU), which was developed in consultation with the Rugby Union Players Association (RUPA) and forms part of the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the ARU and RUPA. Contracts such as that of the ARU require that all participants in the game are bound:

> to promote the reputation of the game and to take all reasonable steps to prevent the game from being brought into disrepute... not to conduct themselves in any manner, or engage in any activity, whether on or off the field, that would impair public confidence in the honest and orderly conduct of matches and competitions or in the integrity and good character of participants... and not to do anything which adversely affects or reflects on or discredits the game, the ARU, any Member Union or Affiliated Union of the ARU, or any squad, team, competition, tournament, sponsor, official supplier or licensee, including, but not limited to, any illegal act or any act of dishonesty or fraud (ARU, 2013).
What is immediately evident is the generality of the language in these clauses, which refer to “anything which adversely affects or reflects on or discredits the game” or “may damage the image of Rugby Football”; to taking “all reasonable steps to prevent the game from being brought into disrepute”; and to protecting “the integrity and good character of participants”.

These legal devices are very powerful both because of their generality and their breadth of scope. What is of particular interest is that they not only relate to “off-field” behaviour but they in effect allow the sporting association (the ARU in this case) to sanction all behaviour by an athlete, whether or not it is illegal and whether or not it relates to the sport. The ARU is no doubt justifiably concerned with the extent to which infringement of these clauses might cause reputational damage to the game and impact upon its viability as a sport and as a commercial enterprise. However, from the perspective of the professional athlete bound by this contract, the demand would suggest not that the professional Rugby Union players have an ethical responsibility to behave as moral exemplars, but that they have a contractual obligation to do so. Of course, there is an ethical imperative to honour a contract. But the ARU contract measures the reality of the threat which the action of a particular footballer might pose to the game in terms of the perception of loss to the sporting association and the sport, rather than in terms of a commitment to particular ethical standards or to what can realistically be expected of professional athletes from an ethical perspective.

In fact, competing ethical imperatives might suggest that a professional athlete’s right to free agency is limited by extremely general but restrictive contracts. This is so despite the fact that athletes are (theoretically) free to refuse to sign such contracts; and despite the fact that sporting associations and the community in general are right to be critical of unethical behaviour on the part of revered and well-remunerated professional athletes. However, there is room for questioning the reasonableness of some of the demands made of professional athletes, for recognition of the complexity of ethical decision-making in the context of sport and for attention to be focussed on alerting professional athletes to that complexity. Part of that process ought to involve providing training which assists professional athletes in: developing an appreciation of the nature of ethical responsibility in the context of sport, critically reflecting on their own
patterns of ethical reasoning and learning to defend, articulate and act on their own values. This is an area for further research, as are the questions of the genesis and reasonableness of the demands made of professional athletes to act as role models.

CONCLUSION

The literature and media commentary indicate some confusion or ambiguity about the nature of the ethical demands which attach to sport, given the different contexts in which sport is played, its association with play and the different ways in which the concept of “sport” is used and has been used in the past. As a consequence the claim that professional athletes have a special obligation to act as role models for their fans and the community more generally is a matter of debate and disagreement. This paper argues that disagreement is to be expected because the meanings attached to sport overlap and interconnect, but in some cases conflict. Deciding whether or not professional athletes should accept and respond to the designation of role model, both within the sporting arena but beyond it, requires a recognition of the complex nature of sport. Further research to examine claims in the literature that competing imperatives might have an impact on the nature of athletes’ capacity for ethical reasoning would provide clarity. Effective ethical decision-making in this context must be founded on recognising the competing imperatives associated with sport in different contexts; but it must also recognise the rights of professional athletes, their preparedness to respond to ethical demands and the responsibilities of those who contract them to play in assisting them.

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