

**“LIVING THE DREAM”: THE DIALECTICS OF BEING  
A CANADIAN STUDENT ATHLETE  
IN THE UNITED STATES**

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Simon Fraser University, 2004

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## **ABSTRACT**

Many young Canadian athletes seek athletic scholarships from universities and colleges in the United States that will enable them to become student athletes. Among parents, coaches, and children who are involved in Canadian youth sports, a commonly encountered discourse characterizes athletic scholarships as offering beneficial opportunities, including playing American intercollegiate sports, earning an education, and living abroad. From a young age, Canadian athletes witness this discourse and it becomes a part of their lived experiences, especially should they attain “the dream” of winning an athletic scholarship and going to the U.S. as a student athlete. Drawing on original ethnographic research conducted in Boston, MA and the surrounding area, this thesis critically examines what “living the dream” involves for some student athletes and considers the dialectical relationship between their actual experiences and the popular discourse that both shapes and is sometimes contradicted by the realities of these young Canadians’ lives.

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# **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

## **An introduction to athletic scholarships and student athletes**

Each year, young, elite Canadian athletes attend American colleges and universities, funded in part by athletic scholarships. "Student athletes" travel south to get a postsecondary education while competing in their sport. In exchange for these scholarships, student athletes compete at an exceptionally high athletic level and seek to win for their team and the school that has recruited them, acting as labour for college sports programs while simultaneously attending classes like their non-athlete peers.

Yet when athletic scholarships are discussed in Canadian youth sport circles, an exchange equation like the one outlined above is rarely acknowledged. Other more privileged meanings that serve to dissociate an athletic scholarship from an economic context are put forth instead, ones that value these scholarships as honourable awards for athletic excellence given to the "best" athletes. In fact, certain renderings of this discourse may not recognize an exchange at all. Rather, athletic scholarships are idealized and portrayed as only offering benefits: "winning" a scholarship allows one the "privilege" of achieving an education and the "opportunity" to compete at an American collegiate level.

What this discourse of collegiate benevolence and individual accomplishment – promulgated by local<sup>1</sup> coaches, parents, teachers, U.S. college officials, and the student athletes themselves – serves to do is create, perpetuate, and normalize privileged meanings that are ascribed to athletic scholarships and the experience of being a student athlete. I use the term

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<sup>1</sup> Local here refers – with both a spatial and temporal meaning – to the people (coaches, teammates, and friends) "back home" in Canada.

“discourse” here according to Daniel Miller’s definition: “the manner in which language and practice become routinized and externalized beyond the expressions of particular individuals and become, therefore, a common location for the standard generation of normative ideals and sentiments” (2001:15). Specifically, my interest lies in uncovering what those *normative ideals and sentiments* are in this particular discourse of American athletic scholarships and their dialectical relationship with the actual lived experiences of Canadian student athletes in the United States.

One important aspect of this discourse is how attaining an athletic scholarship and being a student athlete are framed as a dream, both in terms of a goal to strive for, but also, and perhaps more notably, as something that has a mythic quality. The exceptional cases of Canadian student athletes who attain athletic scholarships and excel at top-ranked universities are cited as evidence for how “good” and “worthy” athletic scholarships are, thereby furthering this dream.

When discussing the dream of obtaining athletic scholarships, it is imperative to recognise that this discourse has real implications for the lives of young Canadians who strive to become student athletes in the United States. It is not sufficient to analyze this discourse and the values that underpin and help create it without examining how the dream affects the careers of young athletes for whom such scholarships and experiences are said to benefit. How do Canadians become student athletes at American institutions? What happens when a person has attained an athletic scholarship and is now living in the U.S. as a student athlete? What does “living the dream” involve?

## **Areas of investigation**

My initial exposure to American athletic scholarships came as an adolescent when I played for a competitive soccer club in Vancouver. Teammates, coaches, and parents would discuss other players and measure them according to their perceived ability to attain a

scholarship: “she’s so good that she could get a scholarship to the U.S.” Even at that early age, I could see more in these scholarships than simply financial assistance. Surely the parents of my teammates, who owned homes in affluent neighbourhoods, went on annual family vacations, and had all the other markers of being middle-class<sup>2</sup> in Canada could afford the cost of sending their children to a Canadian university. So what made an American athletic scholarship a yardstick for measuring athletic ability and why was attaining a scholarship and becoming a student athlete so highly prized?

Part of the value of an athletic scholarship lies in the tangible benefits that its holder can reap: an opportunity to play in *American* intercollegiate (or “varsity”) sport while earning a diploma or degree. The athletic scholarship discourse purports that American college sport operates at a more elite level than its Canadian counterpart does; perhaps this assertion is accurate. The scope and scale of American intercollegiate athletics is greater than anything in a Canadian context<sup>3</sup>; for example, at “NCAA Division I” schools, tens of thousands of spectators will attend big-ticket sporting events, such as football and basketball games (Bale 1991). In practice, the quality of sports programs can vary greatly, within divisions and even between teams

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<sup>2</sup> I do recognize that “class” is a complex term, as how it is defined varies (economics, status, education, etc). From a social science perspective, using the term “class” to signify a bounded group can be problematic as there can be substantial and significant differences of income and status within this rough yet popular term. However, it is a social construction that has widely shared and understood (though admittedly differing) meanings as it is employed by *Canadians*; for example, all of the student athletes described themselves and their families as “middle-class” and assumed that I understood what this meant.

<sup>3</sup> The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is the major governing body of collegiate athletic programs in the United States. There are three main classificatory groups that the NCAA divides schools into: *Division I* has the “big sports” schools that place a high importance on athletic excellence and offer “full-ride” scholarships that cover all basic costs associated with a university or college education; *Division II* institutions offer a combination of athletic and academic scholarships; and *Division III*, the final group, has athletic programs, but does not offer athletic scholarships. Ivy League universities are an exception to this categorisation, as regardless of their NCAA division, they do not technically offer athletic scholarships. The NCAA divisions exist so that in theory, teams will compete against others who possess a similar skill level and have the same type of emphasis on athletics within their schools. To set a team from a Division I team against a Division III team would presumably result in the first team winning, due largely to the massive financial advantage in funding sports that the former institution generally has. Research has suggested, however, that differences between and within NCAA divisions blur these boundaries so that they are not as clearly defined as the above description suggests (Wheeler 1996).

in individual schools. Therefore, the landscape of intercollegiate athletic programs in the United States is highly diverse and nuanced, a fact often overlooked by the discourse of athletic scholarships that circulates in Canada<sup>4</sup>.

The ability to compete in American intercollegiate sport would be unachievable for many Canadians if it were not for the assistance of an athletic scholarship, as the cost of post secondary education is, on average, far greater in the United States than in Canada. Unlike in the United States where athletic scholarships are promoted as a way of enabling a postsecondary education for young athletically-abled people (often African-Americans) who could not otherwise afford to attend university (Harrison and Lawrence 2003; Sailes 1996), it is largely members of the middle-class in Canada who value and seek athletic scholarships. Interestingly, while many of these families could afford to pay for their children to attend Canadian universities, they choose instead to send them to the U.S. for the “free” education an athletic scholarship is said to offer<sup>5</sup>. The “golden egg” people aim for is the “full-ride” athletic scholarship that covers all basic costs associated with attending school; at minimum, this includes tuition, food, and housing. As athletic scholarships of this type are only offered by American institutions, to achieve one inherently necessitates international travel and living abroad.

I became gradually more aware of the association of travel with athletic scholarships when I coached high school rowing as an undergraduate student. I listened at regattas to other coaches and rowers and the way they talked longingly about attending school and competing in the United States. While Canada has a reputation internationally for producing excellent rowers, people still wanted to go “away”. Attending school in another part of Canada certainly

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<sup>4</sup> There are also elements of intercollegiate sports that are unique to the United States. Athletic departments, particularly at NCAA Division I schools, can have substantial operating budgets, far greater than at Canadian universities. Funding for these departments might come from NCAA broadcasting contracts with major television networks, alumni donations, merchandise sales, advertising rights, and ticket sales, amongst other sources. Due to the greater budgets that many American schools have, they can offer full-ride scholarships and afford to spend massive amounts of funding on the operation of athletic programs and facilities.

<sup>5</sup> An analysis of this “free” education is presented in chapter 4.

constituted going “away”, but it was even more distinctive and worthy if traversing an international border was involved. A few of the coaches had themselves been to the U.S. on athletic scholarship. These coaches were viewed with a sense of reverence, again reflective of that measuring stick of ability (“she must be a really good rower”), but also because they had travelled and lived in a different country.

Increasingly, international travel and having “foreign experience” are being endorsed as necessary attributes for success later in life for Canadian middle-class youth (Amit and Dyck 2003). After graduating from high school, many young Canadians spend time travelling abroad; it is seen as an appropriate activity to engage in during a transitional phase of life and thought of as a rite of passage. In addition, in an era concerned with transnationalism and globalization, having international experience is thought to be beneficial for personal growth and future career success. The athletic scholarship discourse encompasses these notions of the value of international travel so that part of the esteem of being a Canadian student athlete in the United States is that it involves travelling and having a foreign experience.

More recently, while conducting this research, I spoke with a father who coaches several of the sports teams that his children are on. He unequivocally believed that going to the United States for university would be beneficial for his daughter, who was about to enter her final year of high school. According to this father, by receiving an American degree, his child would be at an advantage when seeking employment after graduation. He attributed this advantage in part to the difference in curriculum an American university might offer (that is, she might be able to enrol in a program that is not available in Canada), but his primary conviction was that having a degree that was different from her peers due to the simple fact that it was from an *American* university would give her a favourable advantage when returning to Vancouver and entering the job market.

In addition to playing intercollegiate sport, going to the U.S. on athletic scholarship requires attending classes and completing academic requirements with the expectation of

graduating and earning a college degree or diploma. Student athletes complete the same basic academic requirements as their non-athlete peers, the difference being that student athletes have the additional responsibility of participating in varsity sports. This dual role of “student” and “athlete” is appealing for many Canadian youth and their families.

While travel is seen as a beneficial activity to partake in as a young adult among Canadian middle-class families, attending university and attaining a postsecondary education around this time is expected. As it is no longer a mark of distinction for these young people to “become educated”, a degree that incorporates other valued elements – such as intercollegiate sports or travel – is thought to bear greater merit. Therefore, attending an American school to play sports *and* gain an education is seen as marking the Canadian student athlete as different, in a privileged and beneficial way.

Inherent in this discussion of athletic scholarships and being a student athlete are embedded assumptions about the value of international travel, intercollegiate sports, and postsecondary education. Additionally, the expectation of what a young Canadian person *should be* doing after graduating from high school (another assumption in itself) reflects the ability of discourse to generate normative ideals. Underlying the athletic scholarship discourse is a supposition that the *appropriate* action to be taking at that point in one’s life is to travel and attain an education; these are legitimate practices to be involved in while transitioning into adulthood. Therefore, the discourse is not simply about what athletic scholarships and being a student athlete entail; it also reflects the hegemonic values regarding what a young adult *should* be doing.

Fundamental to this argument is the point that discourse circulates ideas about what athletic scholarships and being a student athlete are *thought* to be, not necessarily what they actually *are*. Athletic scholarships in particular exist as both tangible financial aids and social constructions, which can be understood using Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of symbolic capital. For many Canadians involved in youth sports, the symbolic value of athletic scholarships

and the benefits they are thought to enable may be as great a draw as the financial worth. According to this discourse, athletic scholarships are valued as both a means of becoming a student athlete – which in itself is a highly valued position – and as a type of social capital due to its symbolic value. Consequently, athletic scholarships and the experience of being a student athlete in the United States have far more meaning and value for many Canadians than is often acknowledged.

### **Research statement – Specifics of the thesis**

The goal of this thesis is to provide an initial investigation into a field that has previously not been examined ethnographically: the experiences of Canadian student athletes on athletic scholarship in the United States and the meanings that those athletic scholarships and the accompanying experience hold. This particular ethnographic account provides an initial description of the lived experiences of student athletes in order to begin to understand what being a Canadian student athlete in the U.S. involves.

Throughout this description, I also examine how the careers of student athletes reflect, contradict, and even challenge the athletic scholarship discourse. Specifically, I analyze “the dream” of obtaining athletic scholarships to begin to learn about the dialectical relationship between the careers of student athletes and the popular athletic scholarship discourse<sup>6</sup>. This thesis, then, is an examination of how people move into this field, particularly those who try so hard and succeed in achieving the dream.

The careers of student athletes follow a structural logic aligned with the education system, beginning during childhood in Canada. A “career” is conceptualized here beyond a

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<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I draw again on Miller’s conceptualisation of dialectical relationships. Dialectic, for Miller, “stands for the centrality of contradiction” (2001:3); in his work, this contradiction occurs in the processes of shopping. He goes on to explain how his use of the term, influenced by Hegel’s *The Philosophy of Right*, allows a tension between discourse and practice to be revealed and how this tension is negotiated by individuals. I apply Miller’s use of dialectics in this thesis to examine the relationship between the lives of Canadian student athletes and the discourse of athletic scholarships.

professional definition to include a progression through life and a way of advancing oneself; it is rooted in a particular history and involves aspirations and future plans. Examining the careers of student athletes involves looking into how young Canadians receive their athletic scholarships, what being a student and an athlete in the U.S. entails, and considering where they see their lives moving as a result of both their history and present situation. The structure of this thesis, therefore, reflects a chronology and a shift at each stage in the expectations and demands of a student athlete's career as she pursues, attains, and later moves away from the dream of the athletic scholarship.

In chapter 2, I describe how the childhood careers of student athletes begin and progress to a point that culminates, in the cases of the people I interviewed, with the attainment of an athletic scholarship. Chapter 3 introduces the lives of student athletes during their college years in the United States and the responsibilities and demands that most student athletes, regardless of their nationality, face. Chapter 4 moves into the specificities and particular challenges of being a Canadian student athlete in the U.S. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis and re-introduces the athletic scholarship discourse in relation to the lived experiences of student athletes described in the previous chapters. What I describe here is not precisely what all student athletes go through, but rather some of the common elements – and at times, particularities – that young Canadian student athletes experience.

## **Literature review**

As Canadian student athletes and athletic scholarships have not previously been studied from an anthropological perspective, I have turned to two bodies of literature that complement this topic. The first is on American intercollegiate sport and has almost exclusively taken a political economy perspective, characterising varsity athletic programs as economic institutions and, often, student athletes as exploited labour that drive the college sport industry (Bale 1991; Sack 1987; Sack and Staurowsky 1998; Sperber 2001). According to Murray A. Sperber,



American intercollegiate athletics are essentially “College Sports Inc., a huge commercial entertainment conglomerate, with operating methods and objectives totally separate from, and often opposed to, the educational aims of the schools that house its franchises” (2001:147).

When this literature does acknowledge athletic scholarships, they are depicted as a product of exchange between student athletes and college athletic departments (Sack and Staurowsky 1998). Athletic scholarships – including how they are given meaning by and shape the experiences of student athletes – are rarely the subject of analysis. There are no ethnographic accounts of how student athletes, their families, and their communities understand athletic scholarships as offering particular opportunities and holding privileged meanings. This is an interesting gap as in Canadian popular discourse, the labour/business side of athletic scholarships is downplayed or even denied, while the prestige, privilege, and sense of accomplishment associated with scholarships are emphasized.

Furthermore, athletic scholarships are generally contextualized in regards to sports programs instead of locating them within the academic or social spheres of university and college. The academic side of being a student athlete is examined in terms of the difficulty of balancing academic and athletic requirements (Sperber 2001); the “dumb jock” stereotypes concerning athlete intelligence, particularly of racialized groups such as African-Americans (Sailes 1996); and quantitative analyses of student athletes’ educational performance (Brede and Camp 1987). There is little attention in this work to how student athletes understand academic success or even what role academics play in their lives. In addition, this literature focuses mostly on American student athletes, with some limited consideration of foreign student athletes more

broadly (Bale 1991). The literature on Canadian student athletes who pursue American athletic scholarships is minimal<sup>7</sup>.

Taking a political economy approach can be a productive theoretical perspective, particularly when considering the functioning of college sports programs and the necessary involvement of student athletes in those institutions as labour. American college sport is officially understood to be “amateur” as student athletes are technically not paid wages for competing on behalf of their schools. Indeed, the NCAA has strict rules to ensure that no student athletes compete in any type of professional sport prior to or while attending university. Despite the claims of university administrators, athletic department staff, and regulatory bodies such as the NCAA that student athletes are amateurs, observers of U.S. college sports have shown that many athletic programs appear more closely aligned to professional sport in all but name (Sack and Staurowsky 1998).

Complicit in this denial of the professionalisation of U.S. college sports are parents, coaches, and young athletes in Canada who often fail to recognise that by accepting athletic scholarships, student athletes are entering into a type of employment. Perhaps part of this denial is a form of self-preservation; student athletes and their parents, as members of the middle-class, do not want to admit that they could be a part of the cheap labour that a political economy perspective positions them as. There is something distinctly unpleasant for middle-class families in acknowledging that their children, as student athletes, might be used by universities and colleges in the United States as physical labour or to boost team academic scores and graduation rates.

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<sup>7</sup> Carl E. James (2005) looks at the experiences of high school student athletes and argues that for Black Canadian urban youth, athletic scholarships to the United States are one of the few viable ways of attaining a university education that educators push. In this circumstance, it is not just the American collegiate athletic industry, but also the structural racism of the Canadian education system that lead youth to desire athletic scholarships. James’ research is also the only work that I came across that utilises the perspectives of young athletes or examines American athletic scholarships in a Canadian context. However, his work is with highschool students who seek athletic scholarships, not student athletes who are already scholarship holders.

There is, however, a contradiction between the discourse of athletic scholarships in Canada and how the student athletes who hold those scholarships understand them. My discussion with some of the student athletes I interviewed suggested a basic understanding on their part of how college sports can be “big business” and more significantly, that as student athletes, they were a fundamental part of this industry. For example, the language student athletes used in their interviews included referring to their athletic and academic commitments as a “job” and the athletic scholarship as “payment” for their work. They also spoke of athletic contracts with their universities and the obligation to their teams in ways reminiscent of employees discussing their relationships with their employers.

During his interview, and in casual conversation after, “Nathan”<sup>8</sup> repeatedly indicated that he saw college athletics as a type of business. In his opinion, colleges invest a lot of money in their athletic programs, but they also see a return for that outlay as sports can bring in huge amounts of revenue for schools. Interestingly, he did not describe his own position as a student athlete in terms of labour, although he did recognise abstractly that when student athletes receive scholarships due to their athletic ability, their sport will inherently become their priority.

When asked if playing hockey for his American university had felt like a job, “Graham”, who had recently completed his final hockey season, said that when it was time to “buckle down”, being a student athlete became a job:

... My senior year [...] we really wanted to buckle down and, you know, try and get a contract out of it and, you know, just play our best hockey. So it kind of, I think this year, it kind of felt more as like a job. 'Cause once we get to pro, then it is a job and every day is like, you know, you go to the rink, you play, you've got to perform every time. You can't have any days off, so. But for my first three years, no, not really. Just having fun.

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<sup>8</sup> All real names have been replaced with pseudonyms in this thesis. Quotation marks are used the first time each pseudonym is introduced.

Much of the literature that takes a political economy perspective on college sport tends to present student athletes as being exploited by their universities, implying that they are powerless and entirely at the mercy of the school (Sack and Staurowsky 1998). I do not want to downplay the influence of colleges in managing the choices that are made available to student athletes by virtue of being institutionalized social structures. However, student athletes are certainly not “powerless” and utilise human agency in a number of ways.

Throughout her interview, “Natalie” outlined how she has taken full advantage of her athletic scholarship and the experience of being a student athlete, including attaining grants for books and other extra expenses and completing two degrees that are both covered by her scholarship. “I’m definitely squeezing everything I can out of [my university][laughs]. I might as well”.

Another issue that should be questioned is whether the student athletes feel that they are being exploited. This is a complex and debatable question that I am unable to explore adequately within this thesis. All I shall say here is that the student athletes I spoke with truly seemed to enjoy their experiences in the U.S. and would likely take offence to the idea that they were being exploited. Conducting research that recognises and values an individual’s understanding of his or her lived experiences would provide a more complex analysis of how student athletes comprehend this notion of exploitation.

What the ethnographic material presented here shows is that while the political economy perspective used in much of the literature on American college sports can offer interesting theoretical insights, it is inadequate for understanding the meaning of athletic scholarships and the experience of being a Canadian student athlete in the United States for those who live it. It is necessary, therefore, to turn to other literature from which to draw further theoretical approaches.

The second body of literature that informs this thesis does not specifically address athletic scholarships and the experiences of student athletes as these topics have not been studied

from an anthropological perspective. Instead, I have drawn on theoretical issues and perspectives from contemporary anthropological research on youth sport, transnationalism, travel, and migration to develop a framework for studying my thesis topic. In addition, I find Bourdieu's notions of capital and distinction (1984) appropriate for analysing why and how athletic scholarships and being a student athlete are privileged by Canadians.

Considering the anthropological literature on youth sport can offer insights into the attraction and meaning of this activity for children and their families, including the young athletes who later pursue the experience of being an intercollegiate athlete. Sport may be seen as a "social investment", as in the case of Canadian youth community sports (Dyck 2000:131). Parents enrol their children in community sports with the belief (grounded in socialization theory) that doing so will endow the participants with positive attributes, such as self-esteem, that will prepare them for success in their adult lives. Simultaneously, the parent is extolled for involving her child in sport and may be seen as a "good" parent. As most Canadian student athletes become involved in sports at a young age (usually in elementary school), these notions of "social investment" and sport as a "good" activity are related to the formulation of athletic scholarships by Canadians on a number of different levels. First, student athletes in Canada are generally exposed to sport at a young age by their parents who see a socialization value to sport. Secondly, student athletes pursue athletic scholarships as a means to play sport at an intercollegiate level, which is the penultimate amateur athletic experience, with the Olympics taking the greatest honour. Finally, athletic scholarships are conceived in the wider sporting community in Canada (and perhaps beyond) as representative of beneficial opportunities and experiences, partially due to the perception that sport is an appropriate mode of socialization and will lead participants to become

good citizens<sup>9</sup>. These three examples show the privileged status that youth sport is granted by many Canadians and how this relates to student athletes and the prestige of athletic scholarships.

In order to understand the significance of sport, transnationalism, travel and migration [see Appendix A] in relation to athletic scholarships and being a student athlete, utilising Bourdieu's theories on capital and distinction can be revealing. According to Bourdieu, an individual's class position and relationship to their wider culture is partly contingent upon the capital – economic, symbolic, and otherwise – that one holds (1984). The ability of an individual to exercise his capital is what establishes social rank and power in a particular market; thus, the value of capital is contingent upon the market that it is a part of. Athletic scholarships might represent symbolic capital in Canada for the people who believe that scholarships symbolize valuable and prestigious opportunities (such as travel abroad and an American education). In this context, athletic scholarships are valuable for what they are *believed* to offer rather than what they might actually involve.

The concept of capital is also highly relevant when considering education and being a student athlete. Educational capital is most often understood as being granted by educational systems as a certificate of learning (such as a degree or diploma). Yet, the value of that capital might not lie in the education or learning that one would expect. For example, educational capital, made manifest in the form of a degree or diploma, may not be valuable for the level of education it represents as for the assurance through its “possession of all the knowledge guaranteed by all the lower qualifications” (Bourdieu 1984:328). Being a student athlete in the U.S. is valued by many Canadians partially due to the educational capital that is accrued by

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<sup>9</sup> Another way of conceptualizing the value of youth sport is in how it can be a socially and/or governmentally acceptable way of participating in society. Sally Anderson's (2003) ethnographic work shows that many Danish children attend after-school, government sponsored sports programs. In these venues, children use their bodies to have fun and be physically active, but also to enact nationalist ideologies concerning inclusiveness. While I have not included it in this thesis, a similar recognition of how student athletes participate in state legitimized practice could be theorized in a Canadian-American context. Instead of inclusiveness, however, individual accomplishment, winning, and personal betterment might be the nationalist ideologies that are enacted by Canadian student athletes.

attending a postsecondary institution. This capital might in fact be more a result of the *alleged* opportunities and *assumed* abilities that come with attending university than the *actual* learning that takes place.

A final point on educational capital is that its value (as with other types of capital) is constantly in flux depending upon availability. As more people continue to enter the education system, first high school diplomas and now university degrees are becoming increasingly common. Academic qualifications and educational capital are only valuable if they are uncommon and signify something “special”. In order for educational capital to have value, academic qualifications need to be constantly inflated by making them more difficult to attain or by requiring a higher number of qualifications. In many parts of Canada, for example, possessing a bachelor’s degree does not afford the same assurance of employment nor social value that it once did as so many people now have a degree, or an even higher qualification. Possessing an American university degree that has been earned in part through the assistance of an athletic scholarship is relatively uncommon in Canada compared to the number of domestically-earned degrees. Athletic scholarships are highly regarded by many Canadians because they are thought to set student athletes apart from other college and university students and confer distinction on the holders and their families. Canadian student athletes in the United States are not only attaining a scholastic education; they are also attending university because of their athletic ability and are receiving an “award” due to it. Moreover, American athletic scholarships for Canadians intrinsically entail an international experience, which might also be perceived as a type of symbolic capital and thus a further mark of distinction.

## **Methodology**

I conducted fieldwork in Boston, Massachusetts and surrounding areas and states during four months in early 2006 [see Appendix B]. As no ethnographic research has been conducted thus far specifically on Canadian student athletes, I began my work by examining the following:

how and why young Canadians become student athletes in the United States; what their experiences at American schools entail; and, in the case of former student athletes, how their experiences are understood in relation to where they are today. In conjunction with these basic research concerns, I was attentive to the discourse of athletic scholarships in the U.S. that I kept encountering and considered this discourse along with the lived experiences of Canadian student athletes.

The purpose of this research was not to generate a typology of Canadian student athletes or describe all the experiences they have. I have taken a methodological approach that does not generate statistically representative research. Rather, my concern has been to speak in detail with some Canadian student athletes in order to learn about their personal experiences, including the similarities *and* differences between them.

I chose to base my fieldwork out of Boston primarily due to the high density of universities and colleges within the city and surrounding states and because of the high number of Canadian student athletes who attend those institutions. I was unable to locate any empirical evidence on the numbers or geographic locations of Canadian student athletes across the U.S. Therefore, I began the process of choosing a field site location by taking notice of cities that Canadians were going to on athletic scholarship, according to people I know who are involved in youth sports. After counting the number of Canadians on team rosters (listed on institutional websites) for the universities and colleges within a 100 km radius of several American cities, I found that Ann Arbor, Michigan and Boston had a high density of Canadians. I eventually chose Boston as the field site location because there are many different universities within close proximity as opposed to one large university in Ann Arbor.

Finding participants to interview was far more difficult than I had anticipated, although I came to appreciate that this frustrating process actually contributed to the research: I learned more about the organizational structure of university sports programs as well as the demanding



schedules and lack of free time that student athletes experience. In order to find participants<sup>10</sup>, I began by meeting with senior staff of athletic departments at American schools. I introduced myself, explained my research project, and asked if they could email my contact information and a statement about my research to the Canadian student athletes at their institutions. Most of the staff I spoke with complied with my request and I received a few responses to those initial emails from student athletes.

When this initial attempt to find participants stalled, I started contacting more athletic departments and individual coaches via email. A few of the coaches in particular were very helpful in facilitating contact with their athletes. Once I began conducting interviews, a few of the participants were able to put me in contact with their teammates, some of whom I later interviewed.

The research methods used during fieldwork included semi-structured interviews and participant-observation. I conducted interviews with twenty-one Canadian student athletes while in the field that varied in length from twenty minutes to over two hours [see Appendix C]. I also spoke with four coaches at American universities, two of whom were former Canadian student athletes. Upon returning to Vancouver, I conducted interviews with three former student athletes to gain a retrospective account of their experiences and to learn how they felt those experiences contributed to their current lives. I have used pseudonyms for all of the interview participants. In situations where confidentiality might have been compromised by attributing all of the information to one person, I have divided the information provided and used two different names for one individual.

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<sup>10</sup> This approach to finding participants was approved by the SFU ethics board who required that I not contact student athletes directly out of concern that they might feel coerced to participate. A second approach – posting fliers on university campuses advertising the research and requesting participants – was approved, but abandoned when I discussed the approach with department staff who claimed (rightly, I believe) that it was highly unlikely to be effective.

All of the interviews with student athletes and one with a coach were audio recorded and later transcribed in full. During the meetings with the other coaches, I took hand-written notes in order to diminish a sense of formality. Audio recording the interviews with student athletes was unavoidable, due primarily to the length of the interviews and importance of what the participants said. I asked the participants to “forget” about the recorder and I tried to create an interview atmosphere that was casual and un-intimidating. I always said that they could end the interview at any time or refuse to answer a question, but no one ever took up these offers.

The second research method, participant-observation, relied more heavily on observation. I attended practices and games/meets that student athletes participated in. Generally, I took notes at the events that I later typed as more detailed field notes on my computer. On a few occasions, such as at a men’s ice hockey game, I would have felt conspicuous if I had my notebook out, so I made brief jottings right after the event and typed them up the following day. I also took field notes while walking around school campuses and cities, anywhere that I thought student athletes might go.

While I experienced moments of frustration during my fieldwork, I never questioned how being there was necessary for conducting this research. To look at the kinds of questions I was interested in, it was necessary to observe first-hand the wider environments that student athletes are a part of. For example, when participants talked about the expensive, state-of-the-art athletic facilities that they had access to, I knew those facilities because I was able to see them in person. Similarly, I could appreciate the high level of competition the student athletes participated at because I witnessed that competition when I attended games and other sporting events.

I also began to comprehend the appeal of going “away”, both as an ethnographer and more experientially as a university student living abroad; I really enjoyed living in Boston while conducting my fieldwork. I recognize that my perception of Boston is a result of experiencing particular aspects of the city and that it is not representative of the city as a whole. However, I

spent most of my time around the university campuses and in the general downtown area, which is where the interview participants also said that they went.

In addition to discovering the appeal of Boston itself, participant-observation allowed me to observe the broader context of U.S. colleges and athletics that participants were situated within. Without the participant-observation component of the research, I could not have appreciated the energy that two thousand screaming fans generate or have seen the incredible displays of wealth, in terms of jewellery, clothes, and vehicles, which seemed so prevalent at some of the universities. Participants raised these themes and issues in their interviews, but I could not have appreciated them to the extent that I do without conducting participant-observation.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE CAREERS OF YOUNG ATHLETES – PREPARING TO PURSUE THE DREAM**

### **Introduction**

Becoming a Canadian student athlete in the United States is part of a process that begins in early childhood. As young children, future student athletes join community sports programs and continue to participate in various athletic endeavours that increase in commitment and competitive intensity throughout elementary and high school. Examining student athletes' introduction to sport and how their athletic careers extend back to their childhoods is necessary to appreciate how becoming a Canadian student athlete in the United States is not an instantaneous or unexpected event.

Taking the elementary and high school years into account also allows us to see how much is vested in the attainment of an athletic scholarship and the exalted meanings that these scholarships are granted. Parents and young athletes in Canada are introduced to the “dream” of athletic scholarships during childhood. Part of this discourse suggests that getting an athletic scholarship is “easy” and for the truly deserving – it should not necessitate any additional work, other than what a young athlete already does. The scholarship is an “award” for the talented young athlete who “deserves” it. Yet a tremendous amount of energy and effort does go into the careers of young athletes. So while the discourse paints attaining an athletic scholarship as a natural and trouble-free outcome, examining the childhood careers of Canadian student athletes shows us that it is anything but “easy”.

## Childhood – Elementary school

Without exception, all of the interview participants reported that their introduction to organised sport – though not necessarily the sport that they would go in to compete in at university – was through community sports programs that they joined in early elementary school (approximately 5 to 8 years old). Additionally, it was their families, including parents and older siblings, who led the participants to join these popular programs. Community youth sports programs are valued in Canada for the variety of benefits that they are thought to offer, from fun and healthy exercise to gaining skills that will benefit young competitors later in life as adults (Dyck 2006).

The functioning of these programs relies on parental involvement. Parents are needed to coach and manage teams, drive children to events and practices, and help in refereeing games. Therefore, a child's early involvement in sport is largely reliant on a parents' willingness to commit not only their child's, but also their own time and energy to these programs.

In addition to playing a role in the functioning of youth sports, parents act as gatekeepers who ultimately decide whether their children will participate in these programs. Parents are generally the ones who launch their children into athletics, as they sign-up their children to participate and pay the expenses associated with community sports programs (including registration fees, equipment, and fundraising). One example of how parents are involved in the childhood careers of student athletes was offered by "Evan":

[My father] coached me all the time growing up and that was a big - um, as a hockey player he definitely, you know, gave me a foundation that has got me to where I am. So as a hockey player on ice, he's helped and then off the ice, you know, just a good father, supportive and all that.

Evan's remark that his father was "supportive" is important. As Evan's father coached his hockey team, he was directly involved in the operation of the sport that Evan played. Other

participants also claimed that their parents were “supportive”, but without being directly involved in the running of their sports programs. This distinction might be reflective of a concern among young athletes to avoid portraying their parents as “overly involved” or “living through” their children.

Siblings can also be influential in leading future student athletes to become involved in sports. Watching one’s older brother or sister participate in a sport can be an impetus for young children to join their own teams. “Hannah” described how she became involved in swimming:

So, when I started swimming, I was - well, on a swim team, I was six years old. Um, my brother and sister had both been in it [...] And then Mom and Dad figured they were bringing my siblings to the pool all the time and I was going to watch, and so they just stuck me in it too. And I just continued to do it for a really long time.

For many young children who go on to become student athletes, their families often participate in their own sports; “Colleen”, a rower, characterized her family as “active” and described the different sports that her parents and siblings participated in. A few of the student athletes who were interviewed said that their fathers and/or siblings participated in American or Canadian university athletics, however it seems that the participants were the first people in their immediate families to go on athletic scholarship to the U.S.<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, participating in community sports programs is usual within the families of young athletes; sports, or an “active” lifestyle, are already part of their childhood experience.

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<sup>11</sup> I should note that it is not always the case that Canadian student athletes are the first in their families to attain American athletic scholarships. I know personally of families where two or more of their children have gone to the United States on athletic scholarship. In addition, athletic scholarships and their availability to Canadians have increased since the time that the parents of current student athletes attended university. Therefore, while some student athletes’ parents may have competed in intercollegiate sports in the United States, it is less likely that they had athletic scholarships.

## **The teenage years – High school**

As future student athletes move from elementary school to middle and high school (at around the age of 11 to 13 years old), their participation in sports becomes more focussed and the level of intensity increases. By this age, talented and highly skilled athletes are identified by their peers, parents, and coaches and often marked as potential future student athletes. From the interview participants' descriptions of their involvement in youth community athletics, they excelled at their sports; they were not simply "good" athletes, but often the best on their teams or in their leagues. The student athletes I spoke with were specializing in their particular sport by their second year of high school, although some still participated in other sports as well<sup>12</sup>. The best young athletes join regional and/or provincial teams, attend elite training camps, and travel, sometimes outside of Canada, for their sport. They will often move between teams and leagues, even as young children, in order to find the highest level of competition and an appropriate personality fit with teammates and coaches.

What this movement and specialization shows is how attaining an athletic scholarship and becoming a student athlete is rarely a completely coincidental or unpremeditated event, but rather a logical outcome and continuation – though not the only one – of young athletic careers. During childhood, student athletes participate in their sports at a level of commitment and intensity that reaches beyond merely playing for fun or exercise. While an athletic scholarship may not be a clear or immediate goal for these children (or their parents), athletic excellence and playing on the best teams are definite aspirations<sup>13</sup>. Some of the hockey players I interviewed even attended a special sports program at a public high school in Alberta where time for hockey

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<sup>12</sup> One exception is offered by "Jacob" whose athletic career is unusual compared to those of the other student athletes that were interviewed. At the age of 17, he quit ski racing, a sport he had been competing in at a national level. While he did not focus on golf until the end of high school, he did have experience as an elite, amateur athlete through skiing, and in this way his athletic career is similar to the other participants.

<sup>13</sup> One possibility for future research is to speak with parents and club coaches, especially at a late-elementary school or early-high school stage, to see if they are already envisioning athletic scholarships for their children and young athletes.

practice was scheduled into their day along with regular classes. They were also required to take special courses, such as a “life skills” class taught by the coaches in which students were required to do activities including creating hockey resumes to send to university coaches.

### **Considering future options**

An athletic scholarship to the United States is not the only option that can be imagined or chosen for young Canadian athletes. For the middle-class Canadian youth who become student athletes in the U.S., there are other alternatives that might be followed after graduation, such as not immediately pursuing a postsecondary education, taking “time off” to work or travel, enrolling at a Canadian college or university, or in the case of male hockey players, participating in major junior hockey. What is it about going to the U.S. on an athletic scholarship that is more appealing to some parents and their children than pursuing other possible future options, ones that might be taken by high school friends or family members? Are there opportunities to be had in the U.S. that are not available in Canada? How and when do young athletes find out about those supposed opportunities?

As I have already noted, American athletic scholarships are known and talked about by some coaches and parents as early as elementary school in Canadian community youth sport circles. Stories about local athletes whose outstanding abilities have won them athletic scholarships to an American college are circulated amongst adults at practices and events. Even at this early stage, some parents and coaches identify young athletes who may someday be capable of gaining a U.S. athletic scholarship.

For student athletes themselves, knowledge of the existence of athletic scholarships and the belief that one might be realistically achievable tends to come in high school. The desire and drive for some student athletes to obtain athletic scholarships to the U.S. can begin very early, during the later years of childhood. “Diana’s” Grade 8 teacher suggested that she look into



pursuing an athletic scholarship. Nathan could not recall specifically when he learned about athletic scholarships, but by his second year of high school, he had decided that he wanted to play American college baseball.

While student athletes might have heard of athletic scholarships at an earlier time, the interview participants claimed that it was not until high school – when all students begin to think about what they will do after graduation – that an athletic scholarship to the U.S. seemed a realistic possibility. Most of the student athletes I interviewed could not isolate a specific time when they learned about athletic scholarships, but remembered that the information about athletic scholarships came from coaches, parents, teachers, and family friends. I would argue, based on my observations from when I was involved in youth sports, that many of the student athletes had probably heard the athletic scholarship discourse as early as elementary school as it tends to permeate many levels of community sports programs in Canada. Choosing to pursue and outwardly declaring this dream likely comes much later, as the student athletes suggested.

### **The appeal of being a student athlete**

In order to understand why young Canadians want to play intercollegiate sports in the United States, two elements need to be considered: the appeal of being a student athlete in the U.S. and the attraction of American athletic scholarships. Additionally, these aspects – according to the popular discourse – are said to involve particular opportunities that are only available in the United States, suggesting that Canadian college sports lack the potential offered by American post secondary institutions<sup>14</sup>. What are the opportunities that make being a student athlete in the United States appealing and, taking this question further, why are athletic scholarships attractive?

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<sup>14</sup> There are actually massive discrepancies between American schools, including major differences in the quality of athletic and academic programs. However, these discrepancies are not identified by the Canadian discourse about athletic scholarships in the U.S.

Being a student athlete at an American school is appealing for a variety of reasons, ones that the American athletic scholarship discourse in Canada depicts as “obvious”. These reasons include a perceived higher calibre of sports competition than in Canada, greater funding for athletic programs in the U.S., having an education “paid for” by the university, getting away from home, and doing something different from peers at home. These “obvious” elements of being a student athlete are important because they are the reasons generally given for wanting to pursue and attain an athletic scholarship.

There are three primary aspects to being a student athlete in the United States that are appealing for young Canadians: playing varsity sports, being a university student, and living away from home in a different country. The first aspect, participating in American intercollegiate sports, is the biggest draw for many Canadians. The level of competition is perceived as being higher in the United States than in Canada, so young athletes believe that the quality of sports in the U.S. will be greater. A further assumption is made that athletic ability is more likely to improve in the U.S. in order to meet the expectations of coaches and officials and to perform at that higher level. This improved ability might also be achieved by having access to the substantial resources offered to athletes, which is another oft-cited reason for going to the U.S.

While conducting fieldwork, I was impressed by the level of competition I witnessed at hockey games, rowing regattas, and other sporting events. But whether this competition was greater than in Canada is impossible to determine, as I do not have any comparative data with which to make such a postulation. One observation that I can confidently make is that the seven campuses I conducted fieldwork at had athletic facilities unlike anything I have seen at a Canadian university or college. From ice hockey rinks and weight rooms to athletic offices, the sports-related facilities were relatively new (in some cases, only a year old) and always well equipped. Even the recreational amenities for the general student body were exceptional. These

high-quality facilities can be attributed to the importance that athletics are given at many U.S. colleges and the high amounts of money that are paid to build and operate such facilities.

The student athletes I interviewed often brought up how they were attracted to the U.S. because of the opportunity to play intercollegiate sport. For Colleen, competing in varsity athletics was the main draw:

I really wanted rowing to be my focus in university, whereas, in Canada I felt like it was sort of a part of it, but not the whole thing. Where I feel like here, it's really defined my university experience. Um, it's the athletic, like the athletics - most of my friends are rowers, um, and, I have friends outside of the sport as well, but it's been, um, a huge part of what defines me on campus.

Colleen also indicates how athletics are a part of her identity and the way that others perceive her. "Brad", a hockey player and captain of his team, felt that people on campus knew who he was because of his involvement in varsity athletics and that this recognition resulted in a lot of attention. While some of this attention could be negative (he described, for example, how sometimes people do not want hockey players at parties because they tend to go out as a group), it could also be positive and beneficial.

Part of the attention is also likely due to the perceived attractiveness of athletes. Because of the high physical demands of college sport, student athletes tend to be in excellent shape. Given that current understandings of beauty and sex appeal in North America are highly linked to muscled, toned, and lean athletic bodies and the desirability of youth, student athletes who are in top physical condition and tend to be in their late teens and early twenties are attractive to many of their peers. As a result, for some, one appealing aspect of being a student athlete is that it involves entering a world that views student athletes as attractive and can lead to sexual relationships.

Varsity athletes also experience other “perks” by virtue of being a student athlete that are not available to the general student body. The most obvious example is the opportunity to travel to other cities and states for games and training camps, all funded by the athletic department. However, “Lauren” even found that there were other unexpected benefits to being a student athlete: “freshman year, I go to the bookstore and there’s like huge line-ups and then there’s a thing that says ‘student athletes only’. So you don’t have to wait in line. And that was nice.” In general, student athletes at American colleges and universities are part of a privileged group. Varsity athletes are a highly legitimate type of student as they compete at a high athletic level for the honour of their school.

Another attractive aspect of being a student athlete, particularly for parents, is that it involves attaining an education<sup>15</sup>. While the quality of that education could be disputed (especially when varsity athletics require major time and energy commitments), student athletes who follow through with their academic duties will graduate with a diploma or degree. As in the case of the father who I introduced at the beginning of this thesis, some student athletes and parents believe that having an American education in particular will be beneficial when returning to Canada and applying for jobs because it will distinguish the student athlete from other job seekers who have Canadian degrees and mark her as “unique”. Achieving a post secondary education is a suitable and expected undertaking for the middle-class families whose children become student athletes; attending an American school meets that expectation and offers the added benefit of uniqueness.

The final desirable characteristic of being a Canadian student athlete in the United States is that it inherently involves living away from home in a foreign country. Simultaneously, living in the U.S. is not overly different from living in Canada; the language (for Anglophones), culture(s), institutions (such as universities), and basic customs are all quite similar. Therefore,

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<sup>15</sup> Education for student athletes is discussed further in chapters 3 and 4.

Canadian student athletes have the freedom of living away from their families and the excitement of an international experience, but without being too far from home or in too different of an environment<sup>16</sup>.

It is somewhat ironic that despite being very similar to Canada, part of the appeal of living in the United States is that it involves international travel and a “foreign” experience. Vered Amit and Noel Dyck (2003) question the accuracy of this assumption, pointing to the lack of evidence supporting such beliefs. Yet this assumption is very strong and held with much conviction by many Canadians.

An additional draw for (mostly male) athletes who participate in sports that have professional leagues is that American college athletic programs are thought to offer a type of “training ground” for a career as a professional athlete<sup>17</sup>. The hockey players I interviewed discussed how they saw two routes for getting into professional hockey: major juniors (such as the Western Hockey League) or American college hockey. The interview participants claimed that playing in the major juniors was a less desirable option because it made players ineligible for American athletic scholarships, there is a lower age cut-off for playing eligibility<sup>18</sup>, and players do not earn a degree while playing hockey.

According to the interview participants, going the American college route, in contrast, offers four years of coaching and competition, during which players can develop in strength, size, and ability. As all of the interview participants played minor junior league hockey – such as the British Columbia Hockey League (BCHL) – prior to starting college, they could potentially play until they were twenty-four. By the time they finished college, these players believed they would

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<sup>16</sup> The “foreign” experience of being a Canadian student athlete in the U.S. is discussed further in chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup> One slight exception to the gender divide that is seen here was for female basketball players who discuss the possibility of playing pro-ball in Europe. However, this is not an end goal for these athletes in the way that professional sports are for male athletes. These women explained that going to play European “professional” basketball is more for the experience of living in Europe and continuing to play basketball at a high level of competition than it is for a career.

<sup>18</sup> Major junior hockey players can participate until the year of their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

be in the best position, in terms of physical development, age, and exposure (to professional league coaches and scouts) to be recruited into professional hockey. College hockey, therefore, also provides an alternative for players who are not physically large or skilled enough to be recruited for the major juniors<sup>19</sup>. “Ryan” felt that going to play hockey in the U.S. was a stepping-stone to a professional career in his sport<sup>20</sup>:

In Canada, if you're not - this is my view anyways, 'cause I kind of got overlooked I guess I you could say - but if you're not like six-two when you're sixteen, you're not going to go into the WHL or OHL [Ontario Hockey League] or whatever. So that wasn't, that was never an option for me. And I still wanted to keep playing past junior and I still wanted to play competitively, so. I just looked at the scholarship as the way to go. And you get your school paid for, so.

A “free” education was sometimes offered as a reason for playing college hockey, although I suspect that this is more of a way to legitimize going to the U.S. than an actual reason because (as will be discussed in chapter 3) hockey – and sports in general – become the priority for student athletes while at university. I should make a distinction here between the appeal of athletic scholarships and American college athletics prior to beginning university and during university. When initially deciding to go to the U.S., an education might have been a major reason to choose the college route. However, once they were in university, it seems that for the interview participants, earning an education was not a priority, but rather a bonus. Therefore, when becoming a student athlete is still in the dream stage (such as during high school), the educational aspect is very attractive. The importance of education, however, often changes once they are living in the U.S. and are confronted with the realities of being a student athlete.

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<sup>19</sup> To my knowledge, the hockey players I interviewed were not drafted into the major juniors and none of them said if they had turned down offers to play major juniors. It would be very interesting to learn if the interview participants *would have* played major juniors, had they been given the opportunity.

<sup>20</sup> In the same way that hockey players approached college as a training ground, “Jonas”, a baseball player, saw his experience at university as an opportunity to improve as a player. His goal was to play professional baseball after college; he was even willing to leave school before finishing his program if he was offered a contract.

## **The appeal of athletic scholarships**

In order to become student athletes in the United States, young Canadians seek athletic scholarships to help fund this experience. According to the student athletes I spoke with, the appeal of athletic scholarships lies solely within the opportunity they afford to attend an American college. The comparatively high costs for U.S. colleges make some form of scholarship a requisite to attend an American school for all but the wealthiest of Canadians. Therefore, athletic scholarships were valued as a means of becoming a student athlete in the U.S. While at college, student athletes claim that athletic scholarships are not something that they spend time considering. I was surprised to learn that none of the student athletes I spoke with were ever concerned about losing their scholarships as they were confident that the conditions of their contracts ensured that only extreme circumstances (such as unlawful behaviour) would result in the scholarships being retracted.

The symbolic value of athletic scholarships for Canadians and the opportunities they are said to afford cannot be overrated. What is interesting is how the conviction that athletic scholarships are valuable and can help their holders to tremendous success is grounded not in the common experiences of student athletes, but rather the exceptional few. For example, the dream discourse in Canada often renders athletic scholarships as springboards to the Olympics or major professional sports leagues. They are also thought to possess the ability to land a scholarship holder an elite job after graduation or to receive a high-quality education from a world-famous university. While such outcomes do seem to happen to some Canadian student athletes who go to the U.S., these instances may be rather rare and are often not the direct result of possessing a scholarship but due to other factors (such as superior athletic ability or academic excellence on the part of the student athlete). Athletic scholarships also serve to keep the dream of future athletic achievements alive a little longer for students and parents, even though participating in

professional or elite sports after graduation might be unlikely. Yet as long as student athletes are engaged in college sports, the *possibility* of further athletic success remains.

In sum, athletic scholarships and being a student athlete in the United States are appealing to child athletes and their families in Canada for the litany of reasons described above. While some of these reasons are not acknowledged by the athletic scholarship discourse in Canada, they are all generally known and talked about. Also, an important issue that should be clarified here is that what I have described are the *perceived* opportunities that come with being a Canadian student athlete on athletic scholarship in the U.S. The lived experiences of student athletes may be, in fact, quite different from what athletic scholarships are thought to involve and offer, as will be discussed in later chapters.

### **Pursuing athletic scholarships**

According to the discourse about athletic scholarships in the U.S., the actual process of obtaining a scholarship is said to be “easy” and should involve relatively little effort on the part of the athlete if he is good enough to merit this “honour”. However, the real experiences of many student athletes would suggest that a lot of effort is put into pursuing athletic scholarships. Even for those student athletes who claim that they did not take part in activities with the intention of receiving a scholarship, the level of their participation in sports throughout high school and the events they attended certainly facilitated the attainment of an athletic scholarship. It is in these cases, where student athletes claimed not to have made any particular effort, that a dialectical relationship between the discourse of athletic scholarships and the lived experiences of student athletes is evident.

Young Canadian athletes vary in their approach to pursuing athletic scholarships and in how they move forward from wanting a scholarship to actually attaining one. I noticed a discrepancy when the interview participants spoke about thinking of obtaining an athletic



scholarship and actually taking action to obtain one, or “coming out” as a prospective student athlete. When young athletes (or their parents) tell others that they want to attain an athletic scholarship, they open themselves to the possibility of failing to achieve that scholarship. Also, in the highly observant and sometimes critical world of community youth sports in Canada, openly prospective student athletes face potential judgement from others that they are “not good enough” to get an athletic scholarship. One way of mitigating this vulnerability is not to verbalize a clear desire to attain an athletic scholarship or to suggest being receptive to the opportunity to become a student athlete without being seen to actively pursue a scholarship.

Lauren took for granted that she would receive an athletic scholarship to an American university:

Like I really didn't do anything [laughs]. Like I knew I wanted to go and like, if anybody asked me, like, “what are you doing next year?” I'm like, “oh, I'm going to the States. Like I'm gonna go play field hockey”. And that was about it. My dad's like, “well you've gotta do something about it”.

That “something” was attending the U.S. Nationals with a local elite field hockey team in her final year of high school where Lauren met American college coaches who recruited her. Attending high profile events that university coaches recruit at, such as the U.S. Nationals, is one strategy for obtaining an athletic scholarship. Most of the interview participants attended similar types of events, but not solely or even mainly for the exposure to American coaches and recruiters. For example, the student athletes I spoke with competed at elite levels that required participating in provincial and national championships. Some American coaches were likely to attend these events and therefore by default, the participants were exposed to U.S. college recruiters.

A distinction made by the student athletes I spoke with was how they tended to attain scholarships in one of two ways: either they pursued an athletic scholarship to the U.S. or they

were pursued by the American university. In the first instance, high school athletes actively pursue an athletic scholarship by using a number of different techniques to draw attention from the American universities. A very common practice is for athletes to create resumes that detail their sports careers and are sent to coaches at American universities. Often these resumes are accompanied by video footage of the athlete participating in her sport. Another strategy, as mentioned above, is attending events where American coaches and scouts are present. Some athletes will also apply to a number of different American schools and then use their acceptance into the school as leverage when approaching coaches about playing on their teams; by already being admitted into the school, the coaches do not have to be concerned with whether or not an athlete has the academic qualifications to meet that institution's university entrance requirements. In some instances, an intermediary or recruiter is hired to help find an athletic scholarship, although the efficacy and even necessity of this particular tactic is debatable. The participants also used existing relationships (between high school/club and university coaches, for example) to connect with American colleges<sup>21</sup>.

Other interview participants claimed to receive offers for athletic scholarships without having to actively search for them. They said they were "recruited" by universities and then chose what they thought was the best option out of the schools that approached them. When I asked "Connor" if he had to hunt for a scholarship, he replied "No, I didn't really have to, you know, go looking for a scholarship or a contact or anything like that, it just came to me, so. I guess that worked out well". Evan, one of Connor's teammates, had a similar response when I asked him that question:

... [The American coaches] do everything. They approach you. They try and sell their program, you know. I

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<sup>21</sup> A coach I spoke with at a university in the U.S. made use of this type of connection to bring Canadian athletes to his program. He explained how he has a relationship with a coach from the Canadian Junior National Team for his particular sport. For around fifteen years, this American coach has had a continuous link with the Canadian team that has essentially funnelled Canadian players from the junior national program to his university.

just played hockey and then tried to play well so that teams liked me. The better you play, the more teams that'll talk to you. So that's all I worried about was playing hockey and the teams really approach you.

Using the term "recruited" here could be misleading as it has slightly different meanings in a collegiate sports context. At the most basic level, if an athlete is "recruited", she is invited by a coach to join a team. The opposite of the recruit is the "walk-on", an individual who already attends a school and "tries out" for a team. According to this definition, all the student athletes interviewed were "recruited".

However, many of the student athletes (particularly those who made this type of distinction and claimed to be recruited) used the term more specifically to describe being approached by coaches and offered an athletic scholarship. To be recruited, as implied by the interview participants, suggests being found by a coach who persuades the athlete to join his team by offering an athletic scholarship. The effort is on the part of the coach, not the athlete. In contrast, the athlete who pursues the athletic scholarships takes on that effort. To be recruited, therefore, follows the normative ideals of the discourse of athletic scholarships, while pursuing a scholarship contradicts that discourse.

In practice, obtaining an athletic scholarship tends to involve a combination of these two approaches. In the American athletic scholarship discourse, more value is placed on being recruited, which was reflected in the way interview participants discussed obtaining their athletic scholarships. Among the "recruited" student athletes, there was a notion that if someone is good enough to have an athletic scholarship, the universities will find her. While I understand the logic behind this attitude, I wonder if the student athletes who pursued the athletic scholarships and then chose the university that suited them might in fact be in more appropriately matched situations than those who were recruited, simply because more choice might have been involved. By pursuing an athletic scholarship, one would assume that a student athlete would apply to

schools that were appropriate for her; the recruit, in comparison, chooses only between the schools that have approached him.

Regardless of the way that young athletes go about attaining an athletic scholarship, they are all affected by the rules of individual schools and larger associations that govern collegiate sport. In this particular research, all of the student athletes who were interviewed went to schools that were members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and were therefore constrained by the NCAA's regulations that govern how coaches can recruit student athletes. In general, NCAA rules stipulate that American universities can send letters of interest and information packages to student athletes in Grade 11, but they cannot speak with student athletes in person or over the phone until July 1 after Grade 11 (NCAA 2006). Interview participants expressed frustration with these rules, which are actually meant to protect student athletes by preventing them from being subjected to pressure from universities at too young an age.

While each case has its own particularities, most young athletes begin using these strategies (consciously or not) by Grade 11, or around the age of sixteen, to attain an athletic scholarship. Some young athletes claim to have waited until the "last minute" to begin the process of attaining an athletic scholarship, meaning that they take their Standardized Aptitude Tests (SATs), apply to schools, apply to the NCAA Clearinghouse and sign letters of intent in their last year of high school<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, it is in Grades 11 and, particularly, 12 when young athletes are the most involved and intent on getting a scholarship and being accepted to an American university.

A noticeable exception to this time frame is presented by male hockey players. While the majority of student athletes enter college directly after graduating from high school, the male hockey players who I spoke with spent time competing in junior hockey in Canada and in some

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<sup>22</sup> These are examples of some of the "structural logistics" that participants negotiated in order to become student athletes. This topic of structural logistics will be discussed further in chapter 4.

cases, the U.S. These interview participants were recruited and went through the process of attaining a scholarship as high school graduates as opposed to the others who did so while in high school. Because of their later entry into college, these student athletes were older than most of their peers from classes and other teams. Some of them had also lived away from home while playing junior hockey and had reached legal drinking age in Canada prior to beginning college in the U.S.

### **The costs of becoming a student athlete**

There are financial costs involved in obtaining an athletic scholarship and becoming a student athlete. Young athletes who dream of becoming student athletes spend years on their sports, playing in elite leagues, travelling with their teams, and attending development camps, all of which have a monetary cost that is usually shouldered by the parents. The application process for applying to universities and obtaining scholarships also involves a financial investment, as there are expenses with participating in sporting events that university scouts attend, applying to schools, visiting campuses (except for “official visits”), making long distance phone calls to coaches, creating athletic resumes and videos, and in some cases, hiring recruiting agencies. Far from being “free” or “easy”, attaining an athletic scholarship and moving towards being a student athlete can be a complicated, frustrating, and expensive process.

### **High school graduation and acceptance to university**

Usually, the desire to go to the United States arises long before the awarding of an athletic scholarship. By the time a young athlete who wants an athletic scholarship has received offers of one, he is usually past the point of considering turning down the scholarship. Other options, such as going to a Canadian school or taking time off no longer seem like valid possibilities when compared with being a student athlete in the U.S. High school and club

coaches, guidance counsellors, parents, and former teammates help young athletes make a decision about pursuing an athletic scholarship and then determining which institution to attend.

Along with the decision to go to the United States is the resultant choice not to attend a Canadian university. Some young athletes may consider attending a Canadian university and continue to contemplate it until (or sometimes even after) a U.S. athletic scholarship is accepted. For others, going to a Canadian university is a “back-up” plan to implement if they cannot get into an American school. Yet another attitude is to disregard the possibility of Canadian schools entirely. For some, the possibility of going to a Canadian university is not even considered because they are so intent on going to the U.S.

The decision of choosing an American school tends to be made by young athletes between schools that show an interest in having that athlete play for their team and may have already hinted at offering an athletic scholarship<sup>23</sup>. Future student athletes are aided in this decision by visiting one or more of the universities they are considering attending. There are two types of trips: the “official visit” and the “unofficial visit”. On official visits, American schools invite potential student athletes to see their campuses on an all-expenses paid trip. The purpose of this visit is to introduce the recruit to the university and to observe first-hand what life is like as a student athlete at that school. Official visits are offered by coaches to convince a student athlete to attend that institution. Each student athlete is allowed a total of five such visits<sup>24</sup>. Most of the interview participants went on at least one official visit; sometimes that was enough to allow them to make a decision about which institution to attend.

“Unofficial visits” occur when young athletes go to colleges with their parents on trips that they organize and pay for independently. These visits are akin to the types of trips that

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<sup>23</sup> Coaches are very careful about who they promise athletic scholarships to, as once they make even a verbal commitment, under NCAA rules (2006) they are supposed to follow through with that commitment.

<sup>24</sup> Potential student athlete recruits to NCAA Division I and Division II schools are allowed one official visit per college, to a maximum of five official visits (NCAA 2006).

Canadian children and parents take when visiting universities in Canada to decide on the appropriate institution to enrol at. Given that these unofficial visits can be costly, they tend to be more regionalized; for example, an unofficial visit to Boston for an athlete from Western Canada is unlikely as the travel expenses are quite high. Sometimes, young athletes choose not to visit the school they decide to attend prior to beginning classes.

Another factor that can influence the decision to go to the United States involves coaches and governing sports bodies that try to convince college-age athletes to stay in Canada and turn down American athletic scholarships. In some of the interviews, the participants suggested that there is sometimes pressure in Canada for athletes to stay in the country in order to build national programs and to enhance the number of skilled athletes in Canadian university athletic programs. “Tom” and “Charlotte” both commented on how some coaches tried to discourage them from going to the United States. An American ice hockey coach I spoke with also felt that Canadian sports organizations influenced some athletes’ decisions to stay in Canada, as he had noted when trying to recruit players. The following field note recounts this coach’s experiences:

In terms of recruiting athletes, [the coach] has found that Hockey Canada presents a type of barrier as the organization is trying to “keep” players. He didn’t go into too much detail, but said that from what he’s seen and heard from speaking with Canadian athletes and coaches, Hockey Canada wants to keep players in Canada where they could play minor pro and then attend Canadian schools where they could also play hockey. [The coach] didn’t express any hostility towards Hockey Canada, but just offered it as an example of a challenge he faces when recruiting Canadians.

## **Summary**

As this chapter has shown, Canadian student athletes’ involvement in sport extends back to their early childhoods with their introduction to sports, usually through community athletics programs. Then throughout elementary and high school, young athletes stream into particular sports in which they excel and join teams and leagues that will enable further growth and

opportunities as a player. Simultaneously, these young athletes and their families encounter the discourse of athletic scholarships and are introduced to the dream of becoming a student athlete in the United States, which are appealing due to the opportunities they are said to provide, both while in college and for future success. Rather than take up other possibilities, such as attending school in Canada, future student athletes decide that going to the U.S. is the most desirable option and look to athletic scholarships to help finance this experience. When young athletes make their intention to pursue an athletic scholarship known, they come out as prospective student athletes and utilise a number of different strategies to attain this goal. For athletes who are offered one or more scholarships, a decision regarding which institution to attend needs to be made, often aided in part by visiting campuses. These strategies – and the childhood athletic careers more broadly – that lead to the attainment of athletic scholarships all involve financial costs, which challenges the discourse in Canada that receiving athletic scholarships are “free” or “easy”. Now that young athletes have achieved athletic scholarships, they move from imagining to living the dream.



# **CHAPTER 3: THE DEMANDS OF BEING AN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETE**

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, I describe the demands, experiences, and relationships that are common to being a student athlete in the United States – irrespective of nationality – and establish them by following the educational chronology of the American university system. The first “freshman” and following “sophomore” years are characterized by excitement coupled with an often jarring adjustment to the life of a student athlete. This initial shock gives way to routine by the third, or “junior”, year. By this stage, student athletes develop a type of pragmatism that allows them to navigate and balance their responsibilities while making time for socialising and participating in “typical” college activities. Finally, in “senior” year, student athletes face their impending graduation and the uncertainty that comes with the completion of “the dream”.

## **Beginning university – Freshman to sophomore years**

### **Adjusting to the life of a student athlete**

Upon entering university, usually around the ages of 17 or 18, the “student athlete” role is adopted along with all the time and energy demands, academic and athletic obligations, and the necessary time management skills that balancing this role requires. Being a student athlete in the U.S. requires a major commitment of time and energy. Student athletes attend classes full-time and also spend up to twenty-five hours per week training and competing in their sports. Factor in travel time to away games and that weekly time commitment – just for academic and athletic duties – grows even greater.

As a result of the substantial amounts of time spent on sports (and to some extent, classes) and the level of competition that is expected, physical and mental exhaustion is common, especially for the freshmen and sophomores who are still adjusting to their university lifestyles and schedules. During her interview, Diana, a basketball player in her freshman year, raised this issue:

[I'm] just exhausted from everything. Like, getting up in the mornings, and then by the time you go to bed at night, you're exhausted. Um, like, we have to do early morning things now. Like 6 am's [practices], and by the end of the day, like, midday, you're just beat. So it's really really exhausting.

Diana went on to explain how even at practices, her coaches expect her to try as hard as she would if she were playing a game. Charlotte, a field hockey player at an American college, similarly described the importance of practice:

**C:** Like here [in Canada], like you'd know that every game you play, you're going to start. But there you have to prove yourself, like during every single practice.

**M:** So practice really counts. It's not just to kind of train; like it really matters.

**C:** Yeah! Like if you have a bad practice, you're not going to start. Like even if you're the best player on the team, it doesn't matter. Like you have to prove yourself every practice. And like, they don't tell you the starting line-up until an hour and a half before the game. So like all week - and it gets really catty and competitive on the field. 'Cause even though you're a team, you're trying to be better than your teammates 'cause you wanna start.

I could see the weariness in some of the participants, especially the freshmen, when they met for their interviews. They yawned frequently, rubbed their eyes, and sometimes apologized for being unable to concentrate on the questions I asked them. The schedules and exhaustion

levels of the participants also made it difficult to organize interviews because they had so little free time during which they could meet with me.

Natalie, who was in her third year of completing two joint degrees when I interviewed her, felt that she was always pressed for time and missed out on many other activities that non-athletes enjoyed on campus. Yet the need for time management was not new to her. Since early high school, when she began rowing, Natalie had learned how to accommodate her sport, education, and social life, so that by university, she was accustomed to a busy schedule and being incredibly productive with her time. Not all student athletes, however, are as organized as Natalie, especially when entering university where they face new and strenuous athletic demands that are far greater than what they experienced during their childhood careers.

### **The athletic demands of being a student athlete**

The role of the athlete often takes precedence in the daily lives of student athletes as their involvement in college sports necessitates an enormous sense of duty to their athletic responsibilities. New student athletes are generally aware that the athletic demands in college will be great, although the actual level of commitment is usually unlike anything they have encountered before. The student athletes I interviewed reported spending up to twenty-five hours a week on practice, games, “lifting” (training in a weight room), cardio workouts (such as running or spinning), and treatment (such as physiotherapy). During the playing season, student athletes had to travel to “away” games on planes or team buses, sometimes to schools in other states. Student athletes usually only had one evening each week free for “going out” with friends.

Unlike a common but inaccurate assumption that one is only really an athlete while her sport is “in-season”, American college athletics involves, as “Leah” described it, “a full year commitment”. In-season is the most challenging time for student athletes because this is when they compete against teams from other schools. During the off-season, there are no formal games

or intercollegiate competitions, but training (and in some cases, practices), is still held in order to ensure that student athletes maintain their level of fitness. While student athletes suggest that the off-season is less intense, they are still committed to their sport and team and are monitored by their coaches during this time. Even during the summer, participants are given “training packages” by their coaches to follow at home, although how seriously these packages are taken varies. Some student athletes choose to stay on campus during the summer to use training facilities and take a few courses.

These physical demands of being a varsity athlete are taken by student athletes as “part of the territory”. They want to be varsity athletes in order to participate in the elite level of competition that American college sports are thought to offer. In general, the student athletes I interviewed found that their teams did compete at a very high level of play, higher than they believed they would have experienced had they stayed in Canada. In order to contend with other schools, student athletes were expected by their coaches to give “110%” at every training session, game, and practice.

Meeting the demands of varsity athletics also figures largely in the mental and emotional states of student athletes. Trying to meet the expectations of coaches and teammates can take a psychological toll, so that student athletes feel stressed and sometimes experience lowered self-esteem. Lauren spoke about the mental strain that she experienced as a varsity athlete. As her teammates were made to compete against each other for the reward of playing on the starting line-up, she found that there was “cattiness” within her team. Lauren also felt that her coaches were extremely tough to the point of being mean, which she claims is common with most NCAA coaches whose jobs depend upon producing winning teams. Even though Lauren felt a lot of frustration and sadness, she said that she had to project a positive image for the morale of the team, especially the freshmen:

You don't let it affect you. And then, like the older you are, then you're responsible for the freshmen. So like you, even if you're unhappy, you have to pretend to be happy and to agree with the coaches, 'cause you can't give a bad impression to the freshmen. So... [whispers] it's very psychological. [...] Like it's a, it's a head game. Like everything is mental. And that's like what, yeah, that's what I hated. 'Cause they screw around with your head. And even if you think you have a good practice, they'll bench you on purpose just to see how you're gonna react and if you're gonna let it bring you down or if you're gonna fight and, you know, try and be better. They just, yeah, they play with your head. [...] Like I don't know if that's just my school. I don't know what other people say, but it was like psychotic. I don't think it's just my school. Like I've heard that from other teams too. But it was like a huge shock because coming from here, the coaches are so nice and like positive. You get there and you feel like shit. And then yeah, you're usually the best player and then all of a sudden - especially being a freshman. Even if you're on full scholarship, it doesn't mean shit to them. Like who cares if you're on scholarship. Like... you have to prove yourself.

### **The “student” in “student athlete”**

In addition to athletic responsibilities, varsity athletes are full-time students and complete the same basic educational requirements as other non-athlete college students. They must earn a diploma or degree by attending classes and completing the academic demands of those classes. The basic, shared premise is that student athletes have the same academic obligations as the rest of the student body; the only difference is that student athletes have an additional responsibility to their varsity teams.

What those obligations actually consist of and how strictly they are enforced vary with each institution, program, and instructor. Also, the extent to which a student athlete decides to invest himself in classes and other academic tasks (such as completing readings and homework, studying for exams, and seeking extra help) depends on the individual. But at a bare minimum,

student athletes must attend classes when they do not conflict with games and are generally expected to do the same work as their non-athlete peers.

While speaking with Canadian student athletes, I repeatedly heard the refrain that academics are important, even the main concern. After all, student athletes would say, “we’re here for an education”. Yet in the same breath, they would emphasize that you had to receive “good” grades in order to maintain eligibility for playing. I came to understand that for the majority of student athletes I spoke with, academic marks mattered to the extent that they allowed the student athletes to compete in their sports. They had to put enough time and energy into schoolwork to be able to play. Getting slightly higher grades than required meant that they did not have to attend study hall and the coaches would stay off their backs. Academics were significant because of the athletic opportunities they afforded. Here again, the dialectical relationship between discourse and experience is evident. While the discourse of athletic scholarships suggests that a young athlete goes to the U.S. to get an education, the experiences of student athletes show that they also get an “education” so that they can play sports. Also, student athletes are clearly aware of this discourse when they *say* that they are “here for an education”, even though their daily lives and practices might not support this statement.

There are exceptions to this observation, as some student athletes do strive for academic success, particularly those who enrol in programs that are academically challenging, such as Business or Engineering. These atypical student athletes indicate that it is possible to seek academic and athletic success concurrently. For some, athletic sacrifices (such as not trying to make the starting line on one’s team) might even be made in order to do better academically and meet the demands of difficult programs.

Nevertheless, the true priority of athletics before academics for most student athletes is reinforced by the importance that competing in games receives over attending classes. It is very common for classes to be missed, assignments handed in late, and exams rescheduled if any of

these events conflict with a game, especially if it is held “away”. Never did any of the student athletes mention skipping a game to attend class.

Similarly, class schedules are organized around practices. Rowers avoid scheduling classes in the early morning while basketball players try to keep their afternoons free in order to circumvent any conflicts with practice. Many student athletes do not schedule classes on Fridays, as they often have to travel out of town for away games on the weekends, sometimes leaving Thursday evenings. Choosing to take easier classes during the sport season is also common, as is attending classes in the summer to make the course load for the coming year less intense and to raise Grade Point Averages (GPAs). Scheduling classes to accommodate practices and games also places a restriction on the courses that student athletes can take. “Paula” found that she could not complete the minor that she wanted to because all the classes were at 8 am, the time that her rowing practices were held.

For the most part, teachers are accommodating of the particular needs of student athletes; for example, they are usually excused without penalty from classes for games. In addition, it is common for teachers to reschedule exams for student athletes, often to a time before the regular exam date if there is a conflict with a game. Sometimes teachers allow exams to be written early, prior to the end of the semester, so that student athletes can leave campus early and go home to Canada, particularly when exams are before the Christmas break. Most of the student athletes I interviewed had shorter Christmas breaks than other students as they had team commitments that called them back to campus earlier, so they greatly appreciated the extra time an earlier exam date afforded.

However, the participants were quick to point out that not all teachers were eager to assist athletes, nor did athletes receive an easier ride than the other students. They assured me that they still had to do a lot of work and put a legitimate amount of effort into their classes, although sometimes this effort only involves meeting the most basic course and athletic department

expectations. This distinction reflects a sensitivity and concern on the part of the student athletes to subvert a stereotype from a very different discourse – that athletes take “basket-weaving” courses that are easy, un-challenging, and ultimately meaningless.

At any university, regardless of whether it is Canadian or American, the amount of time spent in class, on homework, and the energy that each require differ according to the program and department. A few of the interview participants were working towards “difficult” degrees in disciplines such as Engineering, Biology/pre-Medicine, Business Management and Communications. From my conversations with these student athletes, it seemed that they had clearly decided on the degrees they wanted to pursue before entering university. For some of these participants, athletics still came before academics, but there was more balance between the two domains.

In comparison, most of the student athletes were in Arts programs, including Economics, History, English, Criminology, and Sociology. A number of these student athletes, particularly the hockey players, commented on how they had chosen their degrees because they were easier. Brad decided to major in History because it is widely perceived to be a less-demanding subject at his school and he believed it would not interfere with his hockey responsibilities. How he and other varsity athletes learned that these were “easier” disciplines was never explained in interviews, although I would suspect that other teammates or even perhaps coaches circulate ideas about which programs are easier and will not keep student athletes from staying focussed on their sports. It was also quite common for student athletes to drop out of the program that they originally enrolled in because it was too difficult to complete the courses while competing in their sports. Graham, a hockey player, had that experience: “I ended up having to drop out of Business, it was too tough [laughs]. I was like, I can’t play hockey and do schooling at the same time. [...] So I changed to English and History, and it’s a lot easier”.



I rarely spoke explicitly about grades with the student athletes during interviews out of concern that doing so might make them feel uncomfortable. On occasion, they raised the topic themselves, talking about getting “good grades” or being on the Dean’s List and other markers of academic achievement. In general, I found the student athletes to be quite modest in regards to their grades. Even if it was suggested that they were successful students, they never overtly claimed to be. Yet I never got a true sense of what “good grades” actually were in numerical terms or how many of the participants achieved them. I can be relatively certain that student athletes’ grades were at least good enough to allow them to meet institutional requirements as they were all allowed to continue to compete in their sports when I spoke with them.

One American coach I spoke with told me that a few “exceptional” Canadians had recently entered his program. He suspected that most of them had GPAs of 2.7 (B-) to 3.0 (B). I hid my surprise that those GPA scores would be considered exceptional, when I would reserve such an adjective for GPAs of 3.7 (A-) to 4.0 (A/A+). This one example can hardly define what qualifies as “good grades”, but it is an interesting starting point for examining the issue. Is my surprise that our standards for grades are so different a result of geography: the coach is at an American university and my experiences have all been with Canadian ones? Might it be due to a discrepancy between athlete and non-athlete expectations, so that what counts as good grades for student athletes is only average for regular students such as myself? These questions deserve to be addressed in further research.

My research findings indicate that athletics are a priority for the Canadian student athletes I interviewed. However, it would be incorrect to assume that this ranking of athletics before academics is always as simple or automatic as may be implied here. For example, some of the student athletes said that they had chosen their universities because of their excellent

academic reputations<sup>25</sup>. There were also student athletes who seemed to be able to balance their athletic and academic demands quite well, demonstrated by academic awards they had received. Alternatively, putting more effort into academics could be reflective of less success as an athlete; perhaps some make up for this athletic shortcoming by being a good student.

While I do not analyze the role of gender in regards to the topics discussed in this thesis, a type of “gender divide” is evident in the amount of attention that student athletes give to academics<sup>26</sup>. For the women I interviewed, classes and education in general were invested with more importance and energy. Part of this difference might be attributable to the lack of professional sports careers for female athletes. Being an athlete was important because they loved their sports and they knew that this was likely the highest level of competition they would ever be involved in. However, the female student athletes also recognised that they would not likely be able to rely on their athletic ability for careers after graduation, so being a student and getting an education were very important.

Male student athletes who participate in sports that do not have professional leagues might also show similar concern for their non-athlete future and hence exhibit an interest to do well in their academic present. Tom, for example, is a swimmer who chose to attend his school based on its high academic reputation over receiving a full-ride scholarship to another institution that is known for its swim team. Tom felt that spending four years on swimming would have been fun, but he believed the degree and education he would have earned at that other institution

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<sup>25</sup> This is an interesting claim in itself, that student athletes chose to attend their schools because of their “reputations”. How did student athletes from Canada learn about these reputations and would their personal career objectives (beyond professional or amateur sports careers) realistically be aided by the particular academic choices that they made? This is a fascinating question that deserves further research.

<sup>26</sup> Throughout my research, analysis, and writing, I have very much been attuned to gender and the multitude of ways that it is implicated in athletic scholarships and the lives of student athletes. In fact, I could likely write a whole other thesis that takes a feminist perspective and more explicitly focuses on gender issues, especially as they relate to women who are a part of this field. Why I have chosen to not write that thesis is because I also see other issues and themes at work – notably discourse and dialectics and the need for an ethnographic introduction to the world of Canadian student athletes who hold American athletic scholarships – that I felt unable to adequately address in conjunction with gender analysis, considering the length limits of a Master’s thesis.

would have been less valuable than the school he was currently enrolled at. Also, if he had attended the other school, he would have been expected to put far more effort into swimming than was demanded by his current team.

### **Education as justification**

The statement I introduced earlier – “we’re here for an education” – becomes more problematic and even less convincing when considering how student athletes conceive of that education. There seems to be a distinction between a “degree” and “learning”, in that what is important about an education is receiving a piece of paper, not learning a discipline. This emphasis on attaining a degree is reminiscent of Jane Jacobs’ (2004) cogent discussion of credentialing in which she attributes this changing attitude towards postsecondary education to both students and university administrations. Jacobs argues that universities and colleges in Canada and the United States are now in the business of providing students with the “credentials” of a degree or diploma rather than an education. Her analysis appears to resonate with the situations of many student athletes who fulfill their academic responsibilities primarily because they allow them to play intercollegiate sports and lead to a degree. Those responsibilities are not (or are rarely) fulfilled principally for learning and self-betterment<sup>27</sup>. Consider how all of the hockey players I interviewed (except one) were taking general studies or liberal arts courses, which they *chose because* they claimed they were easier and more manageable subjects.

“Scott” and Graham illustrate this point, as for them, hockey is the primary appeal of going to college in the U.S.:

**M:** So it was, it was the hockey that drew you. It wasn’t necessarily the degree?

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<sup>27</sup> The business of athletic scholarships and being a student athlete could use this concept of “credentialism” in other ways. For example, as Canadian student athletes live in the United States and travel across an international border, they might be said to possess a type of “foreign experience” credential. What is valued here is not so much the learning that happens in the process of travelling or school, but rather that the process simply happens at all.

**G:** [laughs] Yeah.

**S:** Yeah. [Everyone laughs]

**M:** No question.

**G:** Yeah. I mean, I'm not big on, you know... I mean my mom always forced me to, pushes me to do well in school, but you know, hockey's number one in my life. So I definitely played that factor in picking a school.

**M:** You too, Scott?

**S:** Yeah, it's kinda... my intention was, you know, to get an education, a degree, but uh, the point of playing hockey beyond juniors is because I wanted to play pro after. I wanna take that next step. So yeah, definitely the hockey is number one.

The value of education argument has even less weight when considering that hockey players in the major juniors are sometimes eligible for scholarships to Canadian universities, as in the case of the Western Hockey League (WHL). A press release on the WHL website offered the following information:

Upon completion of their eligibility in major junior hockey, WHL players are entitled to receive a full scholarship to the post secondary institution of their choice. The fully indexed WHL scholarship consists of tuition fees, textbooks and compulsory fees for each season played in the WHL. In addition to the fully guaranteed WHL Scholarship, each Canada West University program offers further financial assistance from a variety of third party contributors resulting in an overall scholarship offer which is considered to be one of the most attractive in North America today.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to the hockey players who described their degrees as bonuses, "Jonas" still put a lot of effort into his classes and even made the Dean's List, despite his assertion that baseball was his top priority. Similarly, Nathan (another baseball player) treated his academics,

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<sup>28</sup> WHL press release: [http://whl.ca/education/?id=3481&showToc=1&game\\_id=](http://whl.ca/education/?id=3481&showToc=1&game_id=), accessed February 3, 2007.

particularly his participation in a work-study program at his school, as an integral part of his university experience. Nathan said that his work-study program would be useful for the skills he would learn and relationships he would make, which could be utilised when he stops playing baseball or to fall back on in case he is not recruited by a professional team.

## **Balance**

The term “student athlete” implies parity between two roles, suggesting that one is equally a student and an athlete. This idea of balance is furthered by the athletic scholarship discourse in Canada, which contends that student athletes do in fact spend equal amounts of time and energy on both their academic and athletic responsibilities. According to this discourse, the experience of being a student athlete is esteemed because it entails receiving both an education and competing in sport at an elite level.

In practice, it is not easy for student athletes to attain such parity; they find it near impossible to invest themselves to the same extent in each of their academic and athletic responsibilities. When not only games but also practices require such intensity, it is clear that for most, a commitment of time and energy to one’s team would be greater than to one’s classes. If a student athlete is on the starting line of her basketball team, it is hard to justify missing a game in order to attend a class where she might be one anonymous face amongst hundreds; her presence in class simply does not matter in the same way that it does on the court.

A conversation I had with Jonas after his interview helps to elucidate why sports come first for student athletes. We spoke about how different the attitude towards athletics seems to be at Canadian universities. Jonas felt that if Canadian universities began offering athletic scholarships, it would raise the calibre of their sports programs and make athletics more important on campuses. He argued that when on athletic scholarship, your priorities are different.

If you are at a university because of your athletic ability, you work hard to become a better player and therefore the quality of sport improves.

While Jonas was using this discussion to argue why Canadian universities should offer athletic scholarships, I saw it as a reminder of the economic role of athletic scholarships: a way of enticing talented athletes to American universities where they are expected to help the team and school win. If student athletes are brought to universities because of their athleticism, it only makes sense that their sports are their priorities. This fundamental issue of what athletic scholarships are meant to accomplish is often forgotten or even intentionally downplayed in the American athletic scholarship discourse.

The role of academics, therefore, is still important and could never be completely divested, given that we are discussing “college sports”. There are also student athletes who place a great deal of importance on their academic endeavours and pursue them with a seriousness that parallels (or even surpasses) that of non-athlete students. Nevertheless, for those student athletes who grasp that their enrolment at a university is primarily due to their athleticism, academics will come second.

### **The routine of university – Sophomore to junior years**

As student athletes move into sophomore and junior years of university, they settle into the routine of university. By this time, they have adjusted to the academic and athletic demands of being a student athlete and have learned how to achieve some semblance of “balance” in their lives. The ability to manage these demands and do what is required might be termed “student athlete pragmatism”. In the classroom, for example, student athletes might not push or challenge themselves, not simply because they only want to “do the minimum”, but rather because this is practical and “how it works” when one is a varsity athlete. Student athletes, then, learn what they need to do in order to succeed in the organizational and performative environment of American

universities and colleges, both in the classroom and on the playing field. Additionally, this pragmatism involves relying on the quality of one's school and course instructors to ensure the acquisition of a decent education, instead of simply "credentialing".

This student athlete pragmatism is also used in order to have a social life, although it is often quite different from that of non-athlete peers. It is not simply an issue of "making time" for socializing. Rather, student athletes develop close relationships with teammates and participate in social activities that are expected of student athletes (such as partying on weekends); their relationships and activities reflect this pragmatism and they tend not to seek out new or different experiences from their varsity athletic colleagues.

### **The team**

The team is the most important unit – for both structure and relationships – that student athletes are a part of while at university. More than simply friends, teammates are the people with whom student athletes spend most of their time in school. The team, which is often likened to a family, is the first group that student athletes have contact with and are immediately accepted into. As "Travis", a hockey player, said:

... You come here and you automatically have about 26 friends, so. We'll all go out together, like to hang out together, you know. You always have someone to play video games with if you want or someone, you know, who will go out, eat lunch with you, or stuff like that, you know.

The immediate friendship that Travis mentions was echoed by all of the student athletes I interviewed. As "Christine" said, she had an "instant bond" with her teammates. Not only did they spend a lot of time with one another, they experienced very similar lifestyles, demands (such as from the coaches), and exhaustion levels. When I asked "Fiona" if she mostly hangs out with her teammates, she replied:

Oh yeah. Oh yeah, definitely. Uh, I mean, we see each other every day. But we still hang out after practice. Or on the weekends, we always hang out with each other. Um, I mean, it's kind of hard to make friends outside of the team. Like obviously, you know people on campus, you know people in classes. But they really don't do the same kind of thing. You know, they don't go through the same experience. And we have different schedules. So we definitely, like all the teammates, we go to like activities, we watch movies, we go out together, we go out to eat together. Like we're always working on activities together 'cause it's just easier. We just get along so well, that it's just easier.

The team is also an extremely important entity for providing structure and meaning in the lives of student athletes. After her interview, "Andrea" explained what the team meant for her, which is summarised in the following field note:

Andrea continued to speak about the value of the team and how it makes her feel like she's part of something. She thinks that other students miss out on this feeling of inclusiveness. She said that it gives her a sense of "belonging" to something that is bigger than just her.

But in addition to being friends, teammates are also in some senses opponents or competition. As I discussed earlier, student athletes are required to perform as intensely during practices as they would in a game. Therefore, they are directly competing against their teammates in order to be able to play in real competition against other schools. Interestingly, student athletes invoke a sibling idiom when describing their friendships – they are "so close" that they are like brothers or sisters – that could be carried into understanding the competitive aspect of their relationships. As with siblings competing for the favour of their parents, so too do student athletes compete against each other for the favour of their coaches.

Part of the importance of the team for student athletes might also be due to coaching style and a distinctly American attitude in intercollegiate sport towards the individual athlete and her relationship with her team. According to a rowing coach who was also a former Canadian



student athlete, the approach that varsity coaches take to coaching is very different in the U.S.

The following field note excerpt explains his point of view:

[According to this coach] there are also differences in the ethos behind coaching. In Canada, there is a greater focus on science, physiology, and excellence in individual performance. In comparison, U.S. college athletics focus on the team. [This coach] commented "I don't know what it is... national psyche". Good rowers are used to bring up the rest of the team. He also believes that competition and results, rather than developing a skill set, are the focus of college athletics in the U.S.

Admittedly, this is only one coach's perspective, but it would be very interesting to examine further through anthropological research. If coaches do focus on the team as opposed to the individual athlete, then maybe the close relationships that student athletes develop with their teammates are not simply due to shared experiences and spending a great deal of time together, but also reflect an athletic ethos that underlies American college sport.

### **Other friendships and socializing**

Student athletes do become friends with people outside of their teams, such as other athletes, first-year dorm-mates, and classmates. Diana discussed how she and her teammates had become friends with athletes from other teams.

... At the beginning it was like, we only, like, we hung out with our team, and now it's just pretty much all the athletes hang out. It was like, our team and you know, a couple people from other teams, but now like, most of the teams like, really bond and stick together. We don't usually like, go out with non-athletes, it's usually the athletes that stick together.

Again, part of the attraction of becoming friends with other athletes is that they share experiences and similar schedules. They tend to encounter each other in recreational facilities, such as weight rooms and physiotherapy offices. In addition, athletes can be identified by the

clothes that they wear, such as sweatsuits and other “logo-wear” that display varsity sports symbols. Student athletes recognize one another visually and know immediately that they have something – in this case, varsity sports – in common.

Friendships also develop with first-year dorm-mates and classmates. While relationships with first-year dorm-mates can become quite close, there is often less of a connection to classmates, which is due to a variety of reasons. The student athletes I interviewed believed that their university experiences were very different from their non-athletic classmates and that they had little in common. Many student athletes also often miss classes and therefore might not have enough opportunities or time to become friends with their classmates.

“Danielle”, a field hockey player, discussed how her friendships beyond the team included classmates who became dorm-mates:

I ended up living with someone that I'd met in, like one of my science classes. And then, um, now I'm living with like, like ten people I didn't even know freshman year. So, I don't know, there's definitely a lot of avenues to meet people beyond sports teams.

Danielle also notes that there are ways of meeting non-athlete students. She might be said to have moved beyond the student athlete pragmatism exhibited by other varsity athletes as she made friendships outside of the team, which she suggests is easy enough to do if people make an effort.

Considering the amount of time and the resulting exhaustion that managing sports and school involves, it is probably unsurprising that the social side of being a student athlete is quite different from that of non-athlete peers. While some of the student athletes I spoke with seemed hesitant to suggest they were “missing out” on anything due to their commitment to their sport, most were willing to admit that their college experiences did not involve the same types of events and relationships common to non-varsity athlete students. Unlike many students who will “go

out” during the week and weekend to spend time with friends and party, student athletes do not have enough time and are usually too tired to go out more than once a week. Also, as the legal drinking age is 21 in the United States and many student athletes are below this age, those who decide to engage in under-age drinking (a very common practice among student athletes and non-athletes alike) risk the possibility of losing their athletic scholarship if caught by police or university officials<sup>29</sup>.

## **Approaching graduation – Senior year**

### **Reflections on being a student athlete**

The student athletes I interviewed who were in their final, “senior” year of university found that in their day-to-day lives, they were reflecting on their experiences over their university careers. As introduced above, a common sentiment that student athletes often expressed was how, despite their major athletic (and to a lesser extent, academic) obligations, they did not “miss out”. Yet there are a number of “typical” college activities, relationships, and experiences that student athletes rarely participated in by virtue of the little “free” time and flexibility that varsity athletics allow. University exchanges, school clubs, and campus events were just a few of the types of activities that interview participants said they had not partaken in. Brad discussed how he had made few friendships outside of the team and could not take full advantage of the university experience because of the priority he had to place on being an athlete:

We’re really limited to going out, meeting people. So yeah, I don’t think people really realise or understand what kind of sacrifices we make, but... I’m not trying to get any praise or anything for it. I mean obviously, you know, it’s a choice and obviously it’s worth it, so. But it is, like, um, I definitely had a lot of fun but, you know, you don’t really - I kind of, not regret, but, like I, being on the hockey team, I never really got out and experienced all of

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<sup>29</sup> “Partying” and consuming alcohol are discussed further in chapter 4.

what the university has to offer and all that kind of stuff.

The student athletes who I interviewed reported that they enjoyed their experiences at college in the United States and were largely content with their careers as student athletes. They all brought up different challenges that they faced, from feelings of homesickness to personality differences with coaches. However, the participants offered an overwhelmingly positive perspective on their experience<sup>30</sup>.

### **Leaving a program early – “No regrets”**

Not all student athletes complete their education and graduate from their school. Some leave early if they are offered an opportunity to play professional sports. The baseball and hockey players I spoke with imagined that if they were presented with an opportunity to play professionally, they would take that opportunity and “drop out” of university, with the intention of completing their degrees in the off-season. A few of the student athletes I interviewed had teammates who had left school early for professional sports careers.

Student athletes also leave their programs early when their experiences at college no longer seem worthwhile. Returning to the “dream” discourse, it might be said that their

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<sup>30</sup> Here I feel it is necessary to interject with a comment on the limitations of the research that has been used for this thesis. As I contacted student athletes through their athletic department staff and coaches, I might have been guided to speak with the more successful student athletes. I do not mean to suggest any sort of conspiratorial behaviour on the part of staff and coaches to let me speak only with the model student athletes, but rather it might simply be the case that only the student athletes who had good, beneficial experiences wanted to speak about them. Also, Boston and the East Coast in general are areas that many Canadian student athletes seek to live in, due to the political and cultural similarities with Canada, density of well-recognised schools, proximity to the Canadian border, and overall high-quality of life that the region is thought to have. Therefore, it is possible that student athletes living in other regions of the United States have different experiences from the ones I have described here and perhaps, have less positive attitudes about being a varsity athlete. I do think this last point is somewhat mitigated by the fact that I spoke with three student athletes who had attended schools in other parts of the U.S., including the Midwest and South, and their general comments and attitudes were strikingly similar to those of the people I spoke with in and around Boston. Another limitation is that I was only able to access student athletes from NCAA Division I programs who attended highly reputable universities and colleges. Future research should be conducted that examines the experiences of student athletes in other athletic associations and perhaps, less well-regarded schools to see how their experiences compare and contrast with the ones I present in this thesis.

experiences no longer meet (or maybe even oppose) the depiction that initially attracted them to being a student athlete. “Emily”, who was a junior when I interviewed her, had spent the previous two years on athletic scholarship at a different university. She was not happy with the situation she found herself in at her former school and decided that she was going to leave after her sophomore year. Emily was able to attain an athletic scholarship at her new university, which she described as “a good fit”.

Ryan was facing the decision of whether or not to stay at his school when I interviewed him. Unlike Emily, who claimed that she chose to leave her team and school of her own free will, Ryan’s decision involved more limited choices. He had very recently been told that he was not going to be invited back onto the team for the following season and would have to decide if it was desirable to stay at his school if he was not going to be able to play his sport.

When I met with Ryan, I began by saying that we did not have to do the interview if he was not comfortable with it, given that his situation had changed in the time between setting up the interview and actually meeting. He said that he was fine with being interviewed, although I could see that he was very upset about the recent news. Ryan now had to decide if he was going to stay at his university and if it was worth doing so given that he was no longer on his team. As with so many other student athletes, his whole reason for being in the U.S. was to play intercollegiate sport. Additionally, as he saw college sport as a way of moving towards a professional athletic career, his future plans were now put into question. Ryan would not lose his scholarship; it would be converted from an athletic to an academic scholarship as it is very difficult to withdraw a student’s scholarship for poor athletic performance. However, as Ryan had come to this university to play sports, there was no longer a reason for him to be there.

In contrast to Ryan who was going through this experience when I met with him, “Jacob” and “Lucas” are former student athletes who had each left their respective schools a few years

before I met with them. Both chose to leave their universities and quit their teams after two years. I asked Lucas what had made him decide to leave and he gave the following response:

Um, I didn't feel as if my game was progressing anymore down there. I don't know whether it was a lack of coaching, the structure, or what. But um, I didn't feel as if the investment that my parents were making was paying off. Yeah, I was getting an education, which was my number one goal going down there. But, I didn't want to sink anymore time of my life down there, when I could be finishing an education at home. If that's all it was going to be, if I knew that I wasn't going to pursue the sports anymore, then that was sort of the decision I had to make. And then along with that, my coach left and he was replaced by another coach who I didn't get along with. And he wanted to make some changes on the team and there was going to be some changes in the scholarship, some jockeying there. At that point, I just, I made a decision and I think the coach made a decision that it wasn't an ideal situation for me to come back. They invited me back, but, I mean, I didn't feel like... I felt like my time there was done.

Jacob offered similar reasoning:

... I'd had enough after a few years and I'd got all that I wanted out of it and I wanted to come home. But I wasn't bitter at all. I was totally glad that I did it and when I left, like the athletic department and the coach were really sad to see me go. And I was too, at the same time. But, uh, it was a good experience. Two years was enough.

Jacob's comment alludes to a theme that I noticed throughout the interviews: the notion of having "no regrets". Few of the participants verbalized "regrets". They would say that some parts of their experiences were not what they expected, or that they would have done some things slightly differently, but in general, they claimed no regrets.

## **Summary**

The sentiment – having “no regrets” – is conducive to the discourse about athletic scholarships. As this and other chapters show, massive investments of time, energy, money, and

emotion go into attaining the dream of an athletic scholarship and being a student athlete. By admitting that one feels “regret” puts into question all since childhood that has gone into achieving this goal. Therefore, it is unsurprising that despite the athletic challenges and academic obligations that come with being a varsity athlete and the resultant inability to partake in “typical” college experiences, student athletes claim that they have not “missed out”. And perhaps they are not “missing out”, considering the other experiences, which are unique to varsity athletes, that these young adults gain.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE DEMANDS OF BEING A CANADIAN STUDENT ATHLETE**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter outlined some of the experiences that are common to student athletes in the United States, regardless of whether they are American or Canadian. In this chapter, I examine the particularities of being a Canadian student athlete living in the United States. The topics addressed in this chapter – including travel and living “away”, education, nationality, and personal and financial costs – further illustrate the dialectical relationship between the lives of Canadian student athletes in the U.S. and the discourse that portrays those lives and related scholarships. What is involved in being a *Canadian* student athlete in the U.S.?

### **Travel, movement, mobility**

#### **Going “away”**

Unlike their American peers who may or may not attend school in their hometowns, a fundamental part of being a Canadian student athlete is that it always involves living away from home, in a foreign place. The experience of “going away” has become an important rite of passage for many middle-class Canadian young adults. The value seen in going away is that it will allow one to “grow” as an individual and gain independence by being in a new environment.

But “going away” also involves “coming back”. It is assumed by the athletic scholarship discourse that Canadian student athletes are only temporary residents in the United States. Throughout their university careers, student athletes move continuously, going away to school in the United States and then coming back home to Canada during holidays, and returning for good



after graduation (although some student athletes do decide to stay on in the United States after completing school). They lead what Karen Fog Olwig and Ninna Nyberg Sorensen (2002) have termed “mobile livelihoods”. They also travel on their teams within the United States to different schools, often across state borders, and sometimes to training camps in other parts of the country. Some of the student athletes I interviewed even travelled internationally with their teams, participating in competitions in different countries.

Leading a “mobile livelihood” and having “foreign experience” are respected and valued practices for many Canadians. Young Canadians often take up athletic scholarships because these enable the experience of living abroad, which the athletic scholarship discourse suggests leads to future successes. Therefore, it is somewhat ironic to consider how student athletes do not necessarily see their time in the U.S. as being an “international” or “foreign” experience.

## **Living in the United States**

### **(Not too) different and (not too) far from home**

Canada and the United States share many similar political, social, cultural, educational, and demographic traits. For many Canadians, crossing the border and travelling to the United States is given little consideration as an “international” trip. As a result, the experience of living in a different country is not especially prominent in the daily lives of Canadian student athletes.

For the student athletes I interviewed, the specific city they lived in was more significant than merely being in the United States in general; that is to say, they saw benefits to living in Boston as opposed to being simply anywhere in the U.S. They often commented on how much they enjoyed living in Boston. During my fieldwork, I found the city to be very student-friendly, given the high number of postsecondary institutions and related establishments (such as stores, pubs, dance clubs, and cafes that cater to young adults) within a small area. But to what extent are student athletes actually able to enjoy living in Boston – or the U.S. more generally – given

their very busy schedules? I would suspect that as an ethnographer, I actually saw more of the city during my four-month stay than some of the participants had during their entire college careers. In some respects, the value that living in a foreign country is believed to offer might be largely lost on student athletes as the overwhelming majority of their time in college is spent on campuses.

The interview participants who lived in Boston generally felt that they did not really have to adjust to living in the United States. The adjustments tended to involve moving from a small town to a big city or living away from home for the first time. “Foreignness”, then, for these student athletes is contextual; what was new, foreign, or different to them largely depended on where they had come from and was not simply about the country they were now living in.

In contrast, the athletic scholarship discourse in Canada emphasizes going away to the United States and does not distinguish between places (although some areas and schools, such as those in the North-Eastern United States and Southern California, are held in particularly high regard). In reality, the particular places that Canadian student athletes are located within the U.S. can have massive impacts on their experiences and contribute to a greater or lesser sense of “foreignness”. Also, the city and region may in fact be more important geographical entities in the lived experiences of student athletes than the country.

### **Different laws and social norms**

When I asked student athletes about differences between living in the United States and Canada, they claimed there are few, but that sometimes, those differences can be quite conspicuous. Common themes that student athletes brought up regarding differences between the U.S. and Canada included language discrepancies, such as different words used in each country; accents; different “cultures” (especially for the former student athletes who attended universities in the South and the Midwest); and driving habits of people in Boston.

One major difference that was raised by nearly all the student athletes was how the legal drinking age in the United States is 21. Most of the interview participants expressed frustration with having a higher drinking age than at home. However, they pointed out that this did not discourage them from drinking; they just had to find other strategies to use to keep from getting caught. Some of these strategies included drinking in dorms and at house parties, sneaking into clubs where someone knew a bouncer, and using fake IDs.

A few of the interview participants thought that having a higher legal drinking age contributed to very different attitudes towards and practices around drinking between themselves and their American peers. "Nicole" spoke about this difference:

Um, going out's been weird too because, like, in Ontario, in Canada, you know nineteen<sup>31</sup> is drinking age, right. So turning nineteen here was weird and like I feel like at home drinking's a lot more accepted, like parents are a lot more accepting of it. They, you know, they know what's going on. So like, it was weird coming here, like everybody just gets trashed all the time and they're just stupid about it. It's just like them being in their rebellious stage or whatever but I've already gone, you know, been there done that kind of thing and like needed to, um, I don't know, I feel like too is like my friends and I were more casual. We'll go out and like drink at a bar, you know. Like that's fun, that's what we like to do, that's what a lot of us like to do. So um, it's weird to be here and like they don't want to do that. They wanna go party and get bombed here and there and I'm like, you know, that's just not, like we're chill, like we're laid back. Like I don't need to do that all the time. Like yeah it's fun, but like sometimes we just wanna go have a beer somewhere, you know, but like that's just not what they do.

Colleen also recounted a story about the excessive drinking that her dorm-mates engaged in during freshman year that she felt exemplified this different attitude towards drinking:

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<sup>31</sup> Legal drinking age is nineteen in Canada, except for the provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec, where it is eighteen.

In [my] university, the binge drinking that goes on, because people haven't experienced that when they were younger, is, is awful. I had, freshman year, there was three girls on my floor who got sent to the hospital, in the first semester. I was like, how can you not control yourself? Did you not learn that, when you're fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, that you have, you have too much to drink, that you'll get sick? And um, sort of that inability to check themselves, or have, um, self-control, I was blown away with.

I did not observe first-hand the behaviour that student athletes described, as I think that the excessive drinking that Nicole, Colleen and some of the other participants discussed often happens at dorm and house parties, which unfortunately are sites that I was not able to access. When I went out to dance clubs or pubs in Boston, there were extremely intoxicated people, particularly in the "party" areas like Faniel Hall and Kenmore Square that are popular with college students. However, the behaviour I witnessed was not any more common or pronounced than what I have seen at many other drinking establishments in Canada or other parts of the world.

### **Educational differences**

Another issue that student athletes raised during interviews was how they found their classes were easier than they had expected prior to entering university, which some believed would not have been the case had they stayed in Canada. The academic demands that I discussed in the previous chapter were challenging for some student athletes largely because of time and scheduling issues, not necessarily because of difficult academic content. Many felt their high school educations in Canada had prepared them well for American college. This attitude was supported by a coach I spoke with and is summarized in the following field note:

[The coach] commented that Canadians are always some of the best students in the [university sport] program. When I asked him why he thought this, he responded that he has a few theories based on his observations, but no evidence to back them up. Coming into the program, Canadians tend to be very good

students. The education they receive in Canada is of a high standard and the recently cancelled Grade 13 requirement in Ontario (where most of the players are from) meant that they were often more prepared entering university than some of their American counterparts. While Canadians often performed poorly on their SATs, they had high grades on their high school transcripts. According to [the coach], the Canadian players are good students who could make it anywhere (due to their good work ethic, scheduling, etc).

Jacob also believed that he was well prepared for university by his high school education.

However, he also attributed his academic success to unchallenging classes and low standards at his American university:

Uh, definitely didn't really learn anything in school. School was a complete joke down there. I mean, they let kids in with high school 2.0 GPAs. They'd give them full scholarships from [their state]. Yeah, that's how lacking they are in the old intelligence department in the South [laughs]. So needless to say, I never really had to study or go to class and still I walked away with a 3.96 GPA.

If most of the Canadian student athletes whom I interviewed suggested that their classes were easier than anticipated, is this a result of their high school educations or might it be due to low academic demands in their American university classes? What might this suggest about the value of the education they are obtaining? Is what Canadian student athletes learn in American classes useful, particularly when they return to Canada?

Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, the issue of academic quality needs to be investigated further. I can only raise these questions here as I do not have any data on this topic and it would be difficult – if not impossible – to determine educational “quality”. In addition, I would expect that there are substantial differences between schools and programs, not to mention differences in academic ability among student athletes, which make it impossible to draw any hard and fast conclusions about the education offered at U.S. universities.

Interestingly, the athletic scholarship discourse in Canada is founded on the notion that student athletes receive an education while participating in their sports. It is this duality that is so appealing for middle-class youth and parents who pursue athletic scholarships. If the quality of that education were shown to be less than what a student would attain at a Canadian university, then it would be very interesting to see whether and how this discourse might change and if athletic scholarships and the student athlete experience might become less valued. As it stands now, academic quality is neither known nor questioned by this discourse, and yet this omission does not seem to matter to the Canadians who become student athletes in the United States.

### **“Structural logistics” of living in the United States**

The logistical aspect of living in the United States and being a student athlete was rarely raised by interview participants. This lack of attention to the “structural logistics” of living in the U.S. might have been due to athletic departments taking care of many of the arrangements. The student athletes I spoke with did not use this term, but it does seem appropriate for describing the kind of institutional (such as university or government) processes and issues that all Canadian student athletes must negotiate.

An example of “structural logistics” includes housing and food arrangements. Most of the student athletes I interviewed lived on campus in dorms or apartments and had meal plans that allowed them to eat in the dining halls. They simply had to apply for housing and then they were assigned to particular rooms or buildings, sometimes through a lottery system (the method for determining housing varied according to each school). Some of the participants noted that they thought their coaches or athletic departments had a hand in securing the better housing options for the student athletes. After his interview, Nathan took me on an informal tour of his campus. He pointed out new apartment buildings and said that he had already “heard” that he was going to be living in one the following school year and he thought his coach played a role in getting him into that apartment building.

Andrea was one of the few student athletes who brought up some of the structural logistics that she had experienced. She spoke about how being an international student athlete required her to go through a lot of “red tape” that domestic students did not have to deal with. I asked Andrea to describe some of the red tape issues that she faced:

My passport was going to expire sophomore year and I had to get it renewed before it expired, but I was in this country and I wasn't coming home and you have to be there in person and it takes, like, three weeks and when am I ever going to be home for three weeks, except for the summer? [...] And then there's the [International Student Office] and every six months I have to go check-in there, just to check that I live here and I'm not trying to become an illegal resident and, um, I have to get a travel signature in order to leave the U.S. if I want to get back in the U.S. [...] I have to at all times have my passport and I-20<sup>32</sup> on me when I leave, like, say I was going on a trip, we're going to Yale this weekend, I have to have it with me. That way if I do have to go home for an emergency, I can get back in.

During their interviews, student athletes also gave very little attention to the issue of medical insurance. Some athletic scholarships cover the cost of medical insurance, which could account for student athletes' lack of attention to this issue; they do not have to pay for it, so it is not something that they think about. Evan did mention that he had gone through several surgeries that were all covered by his medical insurance, surgeries for conditions that affected his athletic performance<sup>33</sup>.

I discussed the issue of medical insurance with my American roommates who I lived with during fieldwork. They either had been or were currently students at schools in Boston. They said that medical insurance was calculated into their total tuition fees; all students were required

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<sup>32</sup> Most non-U.S. citizens are required to have an F-1 (non-immigrant) student visa while studying in the United States. The student athletes I interviewed referred to the student visa as an “I-20”, which is actually a document that students need in order to qualify for the F-1 visa.

<sup>33</sup> While Evan was impressed that his medical insurance covered these surgeries and he was generally positive about the results, he never acknowledged how if he was not playing hockey, he likely would not have had to go through those surgeries at all.

to be on medical insurance while enrolled at university and if they did not have their own insurance, they had to purchase it from the school. Canadian student athletes might have been subject to the same regulations regarding medical insurance that my roommates described, although I was unable to verify this with student athletes or coaches.

## **Nationality – Being a Canadian student athlete**

### **Relationships**

Prior to beginning fieldwork in Boston, I had assumed that finding Canadian student athletes would not be particularly difficult once I had made my research presence known to athletic department staff. I naively thought that the Canadian student athletes would be friends, or at the very least acquaintances, and that once I met one Canadian, I could easily meet many others through her. I assumed that a shared nationality would be a vital link for student athletes in Boston, that the Canadians would “stick together”. I also thought that my own nationality would be a draw for student athletes and that they might be more willing to help a fellow Canadian with her research.

I believe that my nationality did help in getting student athletes to agree to be interviewed; when I thanked student athletes for participating, a few of them mentioned that it was fun to talk with someone from “home”. After I interviewed Connor, who is from Western Canada, we spoke casually about our shared passion for snow sports and we reminisced about skiing and snowboarding in Whistler. Similarly, Graham, another student athlete from Western Canada, included references to places in Vancouver during his interview that inevitably segued into side discussions on pubs, local colleges, and other venues that we, but not his teammates, were each familiar with.

However, I overestimated the role of shared nationality in forming and maintaining relationships between Canadian student athletes. At the end of the first few interviews that I



conducted, I asked the participants if they had any Canadian friends or teammates who might be willing to be interviewed. I was surprised by how the participants really had to think about my question, that names of fellow Canadians did not immediately spring to mind. What I came to realise in later interviews is that nationality is important for Canadians as it forms a part of their identity, however it is less relevant in regards to social relationships. The most important bond for student athletes is not based on a shared nationality, but on their team. For many different reasons, a student athlete's team forms the nucleus of his or her social world<sup>34</sup>.

### **Being *Canadian***

Anglophone Canadians are in a unique situation compared to most other nationalities in the United States because there are no physical or linguistic markers that considerably set them apart from Americans<sup>35</sup>. They are assumed to be American until they (or someone else) verbally refer to their nationality. Another way that student athletes can indicate nationality is by using visual cues, including wearing internationally recognised symbols like maple-leaf insignias on their clothing, backpacks, and hats.

In general, Canadian student athletes are usually positively, or at the very least neutrally, received by Americans. Travis discussed this issue when I asked him about his nationality:

It's funny, most of the guys who are Canadian here are pretty proud. Like I remember the first two years I was here, I was amazed by how many clothes [my teammate] had with a maple leaf on it - You know, he had like every shirt or every hat, even his backpack I think had a maple leaf on it. I wasn't really that extreme; I kinda wanted to blend in a little bit. But I got a flag in my room and uh, you know, a Calgary Flames jersey. So it's definitely something that you

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<sup>34</sup> The role of the team is discussed further in chapter 3.

<sup>35</sup> In comparison, French-Canadians who visually look like their Canadian and American peers sound different because of their accents. I was able to only interview two French-Canadians. While many of their experiences were similar to Anglophone Canadians, there were some particularities, including their sense of Canadian nationality (as one participant noted, she was French-Canadian, not simply Canadian) and linguistic challenges they faced as Francophones entering an English school system.

think kinda sets you apart, but, I don't know, it wasn't really a negative.

Travis' final comment that being Canadian "wasn't really a negative" shows how Canadians can express and be proud of their nationality without any real concern of negative repercussions. They show that they are foreigners, but perhaps because they are not so different, they are spared any possible xenophobic reactions from Americans. Many of the other student athletes offered similar descriptions of what being Canadian means to them and how they are proud of their nationality, although they do not necessarily experience it in their daily lives.

### **The personal and financial costs of being a student athlete**

The costs – both financial and personal – of being a student athlete can be substantial, yet they are not a part of the discourse of American athletic scholarships. Instead, the "full-ride" scholarship and "free" education that will unburden parents from the responsibility of paying for their children's postsecondary education are focussed on. Contrary to this belief, the actual expenditure required for Canadian student athletes to attend four years of college in the U.S. is often immense.

The one set of costs that athletic departments (at least those at NCAA programs) do cover are those associated with being a varsity athlete. For the student athletes I interviewed, everything related to their sport, such as uniforms, travel to away games, training camp, physiotherapy, and tutors (which universities are required to offer student athletes due to an NCAA regulation) were taken care of by the school.

Beyond these costs, the expenses that athletic departments will cover depend on the type of scholarship that one receives. A "full-ride" scholarship generally covers all costs associated with tuition, housing, and food, although the specifics of the scholarship vary according to each institution. However, even for the fortunate minority who are on full-ride scholarships, there are other expenses that they are responsible for paying out of their own (or more likely, their parents)

pockets, including health insurance, clothing, school books, money for entertainment, taxes on scholarships, and flights home to Canada.

In conversation after her interview, Charlotte said that despite being on a full-ride scholarship, her parents figured that they had spent just as much on her university education as they would have if she had stayed in Canada. Her parents believed that the spending money they gave her and the flights home they paid for totalled the same amount that they would have paid for her to attend school in Vancouver and live at home. However, she said that her parents understood how much she wanted to go to her American school, so they were willing to spend the money to ensure that she could have that experience.

For the student athletes who are on partial scholarships, only a portion of tuition and housing fees are covered. Partial scholarships can range from a few thousand dollars each year up to what are nearly full-ride scholarships (for example, 95% of the tuition, housing, and food might be covered). As the cost to attend university in the United States can be up to US\$45,000 per year, athletic scholarship holders might still be required to pay a considerable amount of money to attend an American school, depending on their scholarship. Therefore, regardless of whether a Canadian student athlete has a full-ride or partial scholarship, it is quite possible that she will end up spending more on that “free” American education than if she had attended university in Canada without any type of scholarship or financial assistance.

I discussed athletic scholarships with “Eric”, a coach in the U.S., who emphasized that full-ride scholarships are not very common:

**M:** Do you have to offer them full-ride scholarships in order to get [the Canadians] here?

**E:** Nope, not all of them. We’ll offer Canadians, um, any range of different things. Yeah, we’ve done scholarships where it’s 25%, 50%, 75%, full-ride.

**M:** Wow, so some of them are willing to pay to be here?

**E:** Yeah. Yeah, and I mean, you know what? I'll tell you, to be the truth, to be honest with you, finances have a lot - not a lot, but some to do with it. You know, a player from [an affluent area] can afford a little more to come here. Uh, you know [a teammate], he's nearly on a full, most of the time he's here. We've upgraded him this last year to a full. Kids pay. And that's another myth, another myth that Canadians think it's all full scholarships the whole time, and it's not even close.

Scott, a hockey player, echoed Eric's comments:

A lot of guys that I know of that aren't getting full scholarships just go home and say that they're getting full scholarships anyway. Just lie to everyone. 'Yeah, I'm on a full scholarship'. And you know they're really not, so. It's not the case, usually<sup>36</sup>.

### **Ivy League schools and athletic scholarships**

As Ivy League schools do not offer "merit-based" scholarships, their official policy is not to grant athletic scholarships. However, Ivy League student athletes have many similar experiences to other student athletes and the funding that they receive can appear very similar to traditional athletic scholarships in all but name.

All students applying to Ivy League schools are required to fill out forms that indicate their parents' financial situation, including income and assets. The forms are used by the school to determine how much the student, with the help of her parents, is capable of paying for her education. The premise behind this concept is that Ivy League schools want the best students, regardless of their ability to pay for an education. So while the "sticker price" for Ivy League

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<sup>36</sup> I found it very difficult to determine how much funding the student athletes who I interviewed received from their athletic scholarships. Except for Ivy League students, almost all of the participants claimed to be receiving full-ride scholarships. Yet as Scott suggests, some student athletes say they are on full-rides when they are not. I have no reason to believe that the student athletes who told me they were full-rides were not being truthful, but it is interesting that some student athletes apparently claim to be on full-ride when they are not. Perhaps this is reflective of a middle-class sensitivity about discussing one's financial situation. It could also have to do with the student athletes' recognition that a partial scholarship is not as valuable - both financially and symbolically - as a full-ride scholarship. This recognition might also relate to the dream discourse of athletic scholarships that posits receiving a full-ride as the ultimate achievement.

tuition may be US\$38,000 to US\$45,000 per year, the actual cost that a student ends up paying might be less, if her school has determined that her parents cannot afford to spend a lot of their money on her education.

Where this equation becomes controversial is in how the school determines how much the parents can pay. A few of the interview participants noted that this process is not transparent. Andrea was considering attending an Ivy League university, but decided against it because she could not find conclusive information on how the financial aid worked and what she would be responsible to pay each year if she was to attend an Ivy League school. Some student athletes who attend Ivy League schools believe that their status as an athlete influences the financial aid process so that their costs are calculated to be less than they would be as regular students. Hannah felt that her status as an athlete lowered the amount that she had to pay to attend her Ivy League school:

I mean, at [my university] they don't technically call it athletic scholarships, but there's financial aid. And I think once you get accepted, they look at - well, I'm not really sure how it works, but I think because I'm an athlete, I did get some... like... even if... if I hadn't been an athlete, I don't think I, one, would have gotten into [my university], and two, would've gotten as much financial aid as I did. So I think, you know, it is like an athletic scholarship.

The issue of athletic scholarships came up in conversation with a coach at a non-Ivy League school. He suggested that by not offering official "athletic scholarships", Ivy League schools might be able to give their athletes even more funding, but in less obvious ways. According to this coach, as Ivy Leagues do not technically offer "athletic scholarships", they are not constrained by NCAA rules governing how much athletic aid can be doled out. He witnessed this technicality first-hand when he attended an Ivy League university as a student athlete. This coach suggested that Ivy League schools can even give more than the equivalent of a full-ride scholarship.

## **Time and personal costs**

There are also other types of costs, including time and energy investments, that go into being a student athlete. While at university, student athletes might be said to be “paying” for their experience, considering the demands they face (as outlined in the previous chapter); the “costs” include living with exhaustion, stress, and making sacrifices, such as having the “typical” college life. The interview participants often avoided saying explicitly that they were “missing out” by being student athletes. However, they did admit that their lives were very different in various respects from the majority of students who are not athletes and that, in many ways, they were not experiencing the typical college life. Also, “free” time and flexibility in schedules are given up by student athletes; in many respects, student athletes actually have to forfeit a lot of control over their own lives to coaches, athletic department staff, and teachers.

Fiona felt that many people at home did not understand these personal costs that come with being a student athlete; she had to explain to her friends that her athletic scholarship was not simply “free”, that she has had to work for it:

Well, they all think it's like great, but they have no idea, like how it is hard to - like how it is like a hard process, what it's like, like what does it mean to have a scholarship here. They're not aware of everything, like what it implies. It's just like, they're like "oh, you go to school for free. That's great!" And I'm like "yeah. But I've gotta work for it", you know?

## **Summary**

Athletic scholarships are valuable because, according to the popular discourse, they facilitate for Canadians the experience of being a student athlete in the U.S., including playing American intercollegiate sports, travelling and the opportunity to live abroad as a foreigner, and the attainment of a unique education. The financial costs of these experiences are said to be covered by full-ride scholarships. But the lived reality of being a Canadian varsity athlete in the

United States as presented in this chapter is not always neatly compatible with this discourse and, at times, a tension between discourse and practice is evident.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS – “OBVIOUSLY, IT’S WORTH IT”**

During their interviews, Canadian student athletes described the difficulty in meeting the high demands associated with playing intercollegiate sports in the United States and of all the different costs that are implicated in this experience. They also recounted stories of their childhood athletic careers and the high level of involvement that participation in sport had required since an early age. Yet almost always, the student athletes qualified their accounts with the exhortation that “obviously, it’s worth it”. The student athletes I spoke with state their belief that the benefits of being a student athlete and “living the dream” – that is, playing varsity sports, earning an education, and living away from home, in the United States – are worth the costs. This experience and the athletic scholarships that help fund it are valued because they are thought to confer distinction and contribute to future success. As these are the same benefits that are extolled by the Canadian discourse about American athletic scholarships, the relationship between discourse and experience (or at least the way the experience is described) appear in this instance to be complementary.

The benefits – immediate and future, more concrete and less tangible – seem “obvious” according to the discourse. Part of what I found so interesting in the phrase “obviously, it’s worth it”, is this assumption on the part of the student athletes that I share their belief. To state that this equation is “obvious” assumes a shared understanding of the value of being a student athlete. This taken for granted belief might be attributable to the entrenchedness of the athletic scholarship discourse, but deserves further research and analytical consideration.

Other catchphrases I came across, such as having “no regrets”, being “here for an education”, “not missing out”, and getting a “free education”, also seem to align with the



discourse of American athletic scholarships. And yet, simultaneously, the actual lived experiences of student athletes as they described them often did not reflect those adages. This discourse is so pervasive that Canadian student athletes repeat and reinforce Miller's (2001) *normative ideals and sentiments* of the popular discourse even when their own experiences challenge or contradict them.

Perhaps part of the reason why student athletes continue to perpetuate this particular discourse is because of the privilege that is associated with it. The athletic scholarship and student athlete experience are a type of symbolic capital that through possession (using Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical perspective) sets scholarship holders and their families as distinct from other members of the middle-class. Therefore, the discourse of athletic scholarships indicates and reproduces a hegemonic, normative morality and value system that student athletes – who have been exposed to the discourse since childhood – may not wish to oppose when describing their experiences.

While the language used by the Canadian student athletes with whom I spoke reflected, at times, the conventional athletic scholarship discourse that circulates in Canada, it also moved beyond this discourse in certain significant respects. During the interviews, I was struck by the many common elements that student athletes identified, from the challenges of intercollegiate athletics to their social experiences (such as underage drinking or the importance of the team) that are not acknowledged by the popular discourse. Additionally, theirs were nuanced personal accounts, with the expectant particularities that come with the stories of individuals. According to Miller, “In some cases, the said and the done are entirely consistent and, in effect, continuous expressions of the same set of values, while in another arena they are entirely contradictory” (2001:15). Miller's remark is highly relevant in the context of this thesis and the dialectics of being a Canadian student athlete in the United States.

All of what might appear to comprise bald contradictions here can, I would suggest, be viewed no less legitimately as indicators of the complexity of athletic scholarships and of being a Canadian student athlete. As the ethnographic material and analysis in these chapters have shown, the relationship between life and discourse in the case of Canadian student athletes is dialectical. Examining the childhood athletic careers of student athletes illustrates what goes into the attainment of an athletic scholarship and how the process for most is certainly neither easy nor spontaneous. It also begins to account for the appeal of athletic scholarships and prestige of being a student athlete in the United States. Then, by considering the demands of being an intercollegiate athlete and creating a picture of what that experience entails, the disjuncture between discourse and experience widens. Finally, exploring the particular conditions of being a *Canadian* student athlete reinforces the perceived benefits and costs that are involved in this experience and further accounts for the appeal of going to the United States to play intercollegiate sports.

The particular methodological and analytical approaches that I have employed have allowed me to realise that discourse and experience are related, but they are not the same. The particular discourse of athletic scholarships that I have discussed throughout this thesis would encourage one to comprehend and view athletic scholarships and the status of being a student athlete in particular ways. However, what I have learned through my research is that this discourse deserves interrogation in order to show how it is just one, albeit admittedly powerful, way of talking about and understanding athletic scholarships and being a student athlete. Examining the lived experiences of student athletes shows that there are multiple and complicated ways of *being* a Canadian student athlete in the United States that the athletic scholarship discourse does not account for nor acknowledge. At the same time, this discourse does influence the way Canadian student athletes talk about and understand their own experiences, which offers further evidence of the influence and embeddedness of this discourse.

Often, only the successful stories of student athletes are related, which furthers the “dream” of athletic scholarships and reinforces the idea that being a student athlete is an unambiguously good and beneficial experience. For the most part, my research has also relied on these stories; the student athletes I spoke with had overwhelmingly positive experiences. Future research is necessary to learn more about the perspectives of Canadian student athletes who leave their programs early or have less-positive experiences than the people I interviewed.

Throughout this thesis, I have pointed to areas that deserve more investigation. Another related topic that requires further research concerns the “post-college sport” lives of former student athletes. Given that a fundamental tenet of the athletic scholarship discourse is that being a student athlete in the United States will help lead award winners to future success (particularly in regards to the concept of having “foreign experience”), it would be fascinating to speak with former student athletes to learn more about how they now see and assess their earlier university experience in relation to their current lives.

As noted at the outset of this thesis, this is preliminary and exploratory work on a previously ignored topic that certainly deserves and requires further research. What I have attempted to do here is to provide an initial ethnographic glimpse into what being a Canadian student athlete in the United States involves. I have asked and begun to describe what it has actually meant to some Canadian student athletes to “live the dream” of winning an athletic scholarship that took them to the United States and all that that does (or does not) entail.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Literature on transnationalism and movement**

As Canadians can only participate in intercollegiate sport while on athletic scholarship by attending American postsecondary institutions, transnationalism is an inherent component of the student athlete experience. Karen Fog Olwig (2003) describes transnationalism at its most basic level as a connection to two or more nations. This connection may be between people, institutions, governments or companies, amongst other possibilities.

With the perceived rise in transnationalism over the past few decades, some academics have noted that the fate and continuing relevance of the nation-state may be challenged (Eriksen 2003). Yet the nation-state is still important for political and administrative reasons and for a sense of community (Olwig 2003). The governments of nation-states control immigration and migration, so that physical mobility is limited or facilitated (Olwig and Sorensen 2002). Depending on the requirements and ideals of the nation-state, certain people may be barred access while others are welcomed.

Canadian student athletes are highly subject to the authority of the nation-state, particularly since 9-11 and the ensuing tightening of the American borders. Fortunately for student athletes, the perceived purpose of their travel (to play sports and attend school) is largely acceptable to the U.S. government (Bale 1991). Therefore, Canadian student athletes are likely to be allowed into the U.S. and to attain a transnational status. The point remains, however, that their mobility is still restricted and controlled by the state, even in an era of globalization and transnationalism.

Travel is a particularly significant issue to consider as it is a necessary component of athletic scholarships and because of the high value this activity is granted by many Canadians (which is discussed further in Chapter 1 in regards to capital and distinction). Travel, as a particular type of transnational movement, has been conceptualized in relation to both sport (Maguire 1999) and education (Murphy-Lejeune 2002). However, the idea of travel is limiting when analyzing the experiences of student athletes because they also live in the United States while attending university, which can start to feel and resemble “home”; instead, theories regarding “migration” and “mobility” might be more insightful for understanding the *movement* of Canadian student athletes.

The mobility that people exercise when they move across political or geographical borders for long periods of time has traditionally been labelled as “migration” by anthropologists (Olwig and Sorensen 2002). In today’s transnational and “global” world, such a narrow definition is now seen as inadequate in understanding the varieties of migration that exist (Duany 2002), including the type of movement that Canadian student athletes are involved in. “Circular migrants”, for example may move almost continuously between two or more places (Duany 2002:161-183). “Mobile professionals”, such as consultants who base themselves out of one country but travel constantly to other locations, do not fit neatly into old understandings of migration (Amit 2002:145). Migration may involve “multi-placement” as opposed to “displacement” (Olwig and Sorensen 2002:5), emphasizing a more transnational than national attitude.

Canadian student athletes might be conceptualised as “transmigrants” (Matthei and Smith 1998). By physically moving between places (and the relationships, employment, and cultural influences that each place possess), transmigrants form an identity based on elements of each place. In their work on how Belizean migrants adopt aspects of American culture, Linda Miller Matthei and David A. Smith (1998) point out that transmigrants are not simply pawns of



diffusionism. Rather, transmigrants incorporate aspects of each place into their sense of identity and belonging through contact with “internal-personal networks of real people” and their cultural responses to these places (272). Student athletes, as transmigrants, move repeatedly between their familial “home” in Canada and their school in the United States and the personal networks that exist within and between these spaces.

## **Appendix B: The larger project**

My involvement in studying athletic scholarships and the individuals who hold them began as a research assistant for Dr. Noel Dyck of Simon Fraser University in a SSHRC-funded project that he has conducted as co-investigator with Dr. Vered Amit from Concordia University. The objective of this larger project, titled “Coming of Age in an Era of Globalization: Achieving Cultural Distinction through Student Travel Abroad”, is to examine how the experience of travelling internationally has increasingly become an integral rite of passage for many middle-class Canadian youth. This phenomenon implicates academic, economic, and governmental institutions and programs as they facilitate and perpetuate Canadian youth mobility. In addition to athletic scholarships, Amit and Dyck have also identified working holiday programs and international university exchanges as examples of the types of programs that engender international travel for Canadian youth.

My role in this project over the past two years has been to research athletic scholarships and the experiences of Canadian student athletes. Therefore, this thesis utilizes the research that I generated for the larger project and has been undertaken with the objectives and orientations of that project in mind. In particular, the concerns with mobility, programmatic travel, transnationalism, and the transition to adulthood that “Coming of Age” has examined have unquestionably informed my perspective and influenced how I have chosen to study athletic scholarships. My analytical attention to the discourses and narratives on international travel among Canadians is also a focus of my co-researchers.

Despite the similarities that my research shares with the other areas of investigation, the topic I have been studying has particularities that are unique to it. For example, being a student athlete involves not only travelling to the United States, but also living there for an extended period of time (two to four years, depending on the academic program). In comparison, young Canadians who partake in work or university exchanges generally do so for no more than a year.

Therefore, the relationships that develop and experiences that student athletes have while “abroad” may be different from their other more transitory counterparts because student athletes have a more permanent connection to the place they “visit”.

## **Appendix C: Interview guide**

*In accordance with the basis of ethnographic interviewing, this interview guide was followed generally when interviewing student athletes. My aim was to create a situation that more closely resembled a conversation than a structured, formal interview.*

### **Interview Questions**

#### *Pre-University*

- where are you from; family; age; education...
- how did you come to be a student-athlete at [school]?
- how did you become involved in sports?
- how did you become interested in/informed about athletic scholarships?
- who helped you and/or encouraged you with attaining a scholarship and deciding on a school to attend?
- was there a recruitment process that you went through? explain...
- how did you end up at this school as opposed to another one?

#### *University*

- what do you hope to accomplish through an athletic scholarship?
- what does an athletic scholarship represent for you?
- what were your expectations before coming here?
- how has the actual experience (to date) compared to your expectations?
- what has it been like to live outside of Canada?
- in what ways does living in the U.S. differ from living in Canada?
- what does being Canadian mean to you, particularly in this context?
- what challenges do you face trying to balance being a student and an athlete?
- do you feel any expectations? If so, what are the sources of these expectations?
- what have you hoped to gain by coming to school here? coming to the U.S.?

#### *Future*

- what are your plans for when you finish your degree?
- how do you think that your experience here will help you in the future?
- what advice would you offer to younger Canadian athletes who might be interested in or eligible for athletic scholarships?
- if you had to do any of this over again, would you change anything?
- do you have any regrets?

#### **After the interview**

- thank for their time – give out business card
- mention participant-observation – social side and events, practices, etc.
- looking for more participants, even people at other schools
- *pay attention to what is said once the tape recorder is turned off, how their demeanour changes*