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Exploring Employee Experiences in a Sport Industry Workplace Through Tournament Theory

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The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of sport employees to assess tournament conditions and resulting employee outcomes as well as suggestions to overcome detrimental tournament conditions. Securing a job within the sport industry is fiercely competitive, and the work environment is often harsh. Examining employee experiences within these competitive conditions can help organizations identify necessary tournament adjustments in order to maximize employee output and performance. We collected data from employees working within intercollegiate athletic departments (n = 1724). We utilized an imposed interpretive approach to learn about their working experiences in intercollegiate athletics and interpreted the data through a tournament theory lens. Due to a combination of industry passion and pressure of aspiring applicants willing to take their position, they embraced the opportunity to compete in the tournament. Participants expressed limited motivation beyond reaching middle management, creating concerns about tournament conditions. This study extends literature in organizational behavior and tournament theory by providing insight into the intended/unintended consequences of work and life within a “tournament” setting. Our findings reveal tournament condition concerns raised by the participants, increasing the possibility of employees’ willingness to trade off pay benefits in order to secure other, desirable benefits.

Keywords: tournament theory, work experiences, reward systems, competition, college sport

In sport, the goal of competitive tournament play is simple: outskill, outplay, and outlast one's opponent in order to win. In organizations, tournament theory has been utilized to explain motivations for employee advancement, particularly through competitive reward structures for employee performance, such as raises or promotion (Modovanu et al., 2007). Those employees who rise to the top or "win" the tournament earn substantial economic rewards. While reward structures based on tournament models are effective in eliciting high performance, those same structures also have negative effects. First, tournament structures can diminish motivation for employees who perceive their chances of advancement as small (Chen et al., 2011). Second, these structures can create hyper-competitive environments whereby employees experience high or even extreme levels of stress, anxiety, workaholism, and/or burnout in their pursuit of "the win." This tension between outcomes creates an opportunity to examine the experiences of employees working within a tournament context.

While many industries are ripe for inquiry in this area, the sport industry provides an excellent context for examination of tournament structures. In this industry, employees commit many years towards education and internships in order to secure an entry-level, full-time position (Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Weight et al., 2021). Even after full-time employment is secured, a glut of lower-level employees compete for more secure middle-level positions and a very few, but very attractive senior-level positions, much like a tournament. This competitive structure is coupled with a work environment characterized by excessive workloads, low pay, and perilous job security based on winning (Taylor et al., 2019). In this environment, nascent employees assume an entry-level position they have been seeking for years but also aspire to the more secure and lucrative positions (Connelly et al., 2014). Employees in this context seem willing to accept the demands of the competitive environment. Over time, however, the competitive conditions can create difficulties. As demands persist, employees must consider the reality of their experience against their opportunities for advancement both in and outside this structure.

The study of work motivations is certainly not new, as foundational work in industrial and organizational psychology continues to explore ways that employees and organizations navigate maximum work motivation. The bulk of this work is generally either at the individual or dyadic levels. That is, individuals negotiate work investment with themselves, their employers, and those to whom their lives are linked. Organizations negotiate pay and other work conditions in ways that maximize work investment for the compensation provided. The vast majority of scholarly investigation in sport management with regard to employee motivation is consistent with this perspective (e.g., Dixon & Warner, 2010; Todd & Kent, 2009).

Tournament theory provides an opportunity to examine worker motivations and outcomes in relation to the entire work context, including other employees. In other words, absent other employees, employers and employees engage in social and financial contracts that are relatively clear-cut—the employee does X, the employer pays Y (Turner & Chelladurai, 2005). If the employee is unwilling to perform the work for that level of pay, or if the work conditions are not suitable, the employee either seeks more compensation or leaves the organization.

However, tournament theory suggests that in highly sought-after industries and organizations (like college sport), there is the introduction of a competitive element such that the behavior of other employees may also impact both employee and organizational behavior (Boudreau et al., 2011; Moldovanu & Sela, 2001). Consider an example about work-life balance. Absent any other employees, Employee A may choose to take the weekend off for vacation with their family. However, if other employees are working that weekend, such behavior might influence Employee A to stay and work instead. This comparative behavior introduces a slightly

different motivation to work— one that has to do with competition with/against other employees rather than simply fulfilling the fiscal or social contract with the employer. In similar fashion, this competitive work environment could also impact the behavior of organizations. For example, in non-competitive environments, organizations may need to provide additional compensation for extended work hours, especially at non-traditional times. However, in a competitive work environment, where some employees are willing to work those hours without extra compensation, the employer is less motivated to provide that incentive. In some cases, the willingness of employees to work beyond the financial or social contract may even create situations where organizations can exploit employees, knowing there will be an ample labor supply to fill the gaps vacated by seemingly less motivated employees (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

This competitive dynamic is the value of tournament theory perspective and the impetus for this study. It allows us to explore employee motivation and organizational behavior in a competitive context, where negotiations between employee and organization also take into account the behaviors of other employees seeking to win the tournament or at least secure a more secure position therein.

The context for this study provides an excellent space to examine this competitive dynamic using tournament theory. The front office of sport organizations, including college athletics, manifest the characteristics of an organizational tournament structure. Examining employee experiences within these competitive and demanding conditions of a tournament structure can help identify areas of employee strife and help organizations adjust tournament conditions in order to maximize employee output and performance. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of sport employees to assess tournament conditions and resulting employee outcomes as well as suggestions to overcome detrimental tournament conditions. In the following sections we review tournament theory literature, the context of college athletics, and the contributions of this study.

Theoretical Framework

Tournament Theory: Employee Pursuit of Prize

A tournament has been defined as the mechanism of firms inducing effort from their employees by pooling a portion of wages at one rank into the available wages at the next level, therefore giving each a financial motivation to compete for promotions (Connelly et al., 2014; Lazear & Rosen, 1981). Organizations can be structured to use tiered salary dispersion, requiring employees to win a tournament in order to receive increased pay, privileges, or other benefits (Messersmith et al., 2011). The increases provided to tournament winners function as motivation for the employee. Increases are often awarded through “zero-sum” parameters, where participants are faced with being the “winner” among the tournament pool or receiving no prize (e.g., a managerial opening being awarded to one junior employee who “wins” the competition).

This dichotomous system can create doubts for participants about whether to even participate. Further, this structure incentivizes winning, which promotes competition between all tournament participants. Therefore, organizations need to create a prize for winning that manufactures optimal employee effort (Boudreau et al., 2011; Moldovanu & Sela, 2001). Organizations need to consider the ideal prize (Downes & Choi, 2014), size of the tournament (Boudreau et al., 2011), win percentage (Chen et al., 2011), and handicapping (Pfeifer, 2011) to maximize the number of motivated participants.

Research has examined the optimization of pay increases and wage dispersions as a means of motivating employees (Becker & Huselid, 1992; Bloom, 1999; Boudreau et al., 2011). Organizations have finite resources, meaning that increases of pay for one level of employee creates a pay boundary at a lower level (Bloom, 1999). Competition is influenced by an incentive effect, where the spread of financial rewards is tiered to compensate the winner more, and provide less for every spot below first place (Becker & Huselid, 1992). Employees may lack motivation if the organization provides too little reward for winning or if the tournament includes many competitors and only one prize (Becker & Huselid, 1992). Studies examining the effect of pay dispersions and prize spreads on employee output or firm performance have been mixed (e.g., Greckhamer, 2016). Pay dispersions are not only motivating for those on the cusp of reaching executive-level pay but also for employees further down the organizational ladder (Grund & Westeregaard-Nielsen, 2008). Organizational performance has also been shown to increase when employees are competing for tournament incentives, like prize spreads between job levels (Downes & Choi, 2014). Employee motivation for winning a tournament may not be limited to just salary increases, as other (albeit limited) research has shown motivation can also include benefits such as club access or privileged parking (Becker & Huselid, 1992). It is possible, then, that certain contexts could establish a tournament structure where employees would be incentivized to “compete” for other non-financial outcomes like greater autonomy, more flexible work hours or place, or more influence over organizational decisions. Conceptually, competition for these types of outcomes are within the tenets of tournament theory, yet it remains relatively unexplored empirically.

Alternatively, businesses can diminish organizational performance and employee motivation if they cannot find the right mix of pay spread, fairness, and tournament size (Pruijssers et al., 2020). Tournament participants need to believe the tournament is a fair competition (Grund & Westeregaard-Nielsen, 2008). For those who believe their odds for winning the tournament are lower than others, or if there is a dominant participant competing against the rest of the field, participant performance is reduced. Further, as the reward for winning increasingly widens from non-winners, participants will also explore more aggressive, or reckless methods to win the tournament (Becker & Huselid, 1992). Creating an environment that pushes participants to try alternative methods can be beneficial for companies looking to produce innovation (Boudreau et al., 2011) but can also create unethical behavior or unhealthy work environments (Pruijssers et al., 2020).

Adverse effects of employment incentive systems based on tournament theory go beyond employee performance. Certain tournament conditions can push employees to leave their job (Messersmith et al., 2011). Competition between tournament competitors can deter collaboration, strain personal relationships between colleagues, and create fear of job instability (Connelly et al., 2014). Too broad of a pay spread may convince employees that promotions are unattainable and require them to seek employment with another organization in order to compete (Downes & Choi, 2014). Poorly designed tournament conditions can make participants feel an obligation to expend all of their resources to win the first stage, leaving them with competitive burnout (Amegashie et al., 2007).

The Tournament Context: Intercollegiate Athletics

Like many sport-related vocations, the talent market for jobs in intercollegiate athletics is filled with eager candidates willing to work long nontraditional hours for free, or far below minimum wage (Odio et al., 2018; Weight et al., 2021). Many who enter the sport profession are doing so because of passion for the field, perhaps extending their fandom into a vocation, or

transitioning from athlete into coach or manager to help the next generation (Swanson & Kent, 2017; Todd & Kent, 2009). Some employees enter the profession due to its association with sport, a career outlet often perceived as “fun” or “sexy” because of media attention and connection to childhood dreams (Mathner & Martin, 2012). The great majority of college sport employees are collecting lower wages and have limited opportunities to secure meaningful pay spreads until they reach the positions at the top of their organization (Weight et al., 2021).

Sport environments provide a direct connection to the tournament theory tenet of winners and losers. College sport is a competitive career field, like many other professional and semi-professional sport outlets. College athletic departments have shown a willingness to terminate employees in a number of departments for a lack of success compared to rivals, such as losses on the field or insufficient Twitter followers compared to conference peers, creating an intense pressure on employees to compete directly with those working within rival athletic departments but also for promotions with those within their athletic department (i.e., Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Pifer & Huml, 2020; Weight et al., 2021). This combination of environmental factors has created an oversaturated career field, characterized by hyper-competition and limited resources for pressurized growth across the sport industry. The challenges faced by those working within college sport are not new, as previous articles have discussed issues of internship exploitation, workaholicism, mental health, burnout, work-family conflict, and other negative consequences experienced by those working within the field (e.g., Graham & Dixon, 2014; Huml et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2017, 2019; Lee & Chelladurai, 2017; Odio et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2019). The ongoing issues suggest this type of environment is ripe for showcasing the possible conflicting experiences of employees as they grapple with the tournament conditions against the attractiveness and security of mid-level positions, as well as the glamorous prizes of influence and salary at the top of the organizational hierarchy. Examining these employee experiences can help identify areas of employee strife and help organizations adjust tournament conditions in order to maximize employee output and performance.

Summary and Research Questions

A greater understanding of employee experiences provides an opportunity to extend tournament theory tenets beyond direct financial compensation (e.g., pay dispersions and prize spreads). Employees have been shown to be motivated by social status, such as position titles, common access to executives, and invitations to exclusive events, as a prize for winning a tournament (Moldovanu & Sela, 2001). We argue that it is possible that tournament participants can also be motivated by forms of job stability and security, and the opportunity to achieve mid-level positions that provide a better balance between work and other responsibilities (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003).

Given the variety of environmental and organizational factors that create a tournament-like reward structure in sport organizations, we posit that understanding the employee experience in this context would provide insight into the consequences (intended and unintended) of such a reward system. Exploring these work experiences can help identify tournament conditions that affect employee performance and output. Toward this end, we propose a single exploratory research question to guide this research:

RQ 1: How do employees experience their tournament conditions within the competitive career outlet of intercollegiate athletics?

Our findings provide important insights into employee outcomes and motivations within a tournament setting. In this study, we found that tournament theory can be aptly applied to uncover trade-offs that participants were willing to make to retain their positions in the tournament. We discovered how passion in the career field led to tolerance of difficult tournament conditions. We discovered a number of negative outcomes from tournament participation, such as lack of work-life balance, broken relationships, and others. Finally, we uncovered suggestions for survival within and modification of the tournament conditions. Each of these contributes to our understanding of the tournament climate, and how non-financial incentives and factors interact with previously identified financial motivations and negotiations within tournament structures. These advance our understanding of theory and practice in sport management, as described in detail in the conclusion of this study.

Method

Participants

A large diverse sample of intercollegiate athletic department employees ($n = 1,724$), was utilized for analysis in the current study because it comprises one of the largest labor pools in the sport industry, and encompasses a wide variety of jobs within a single setting that range from entry-level (e.g., graduate assistant) to executive (e.g., athletic director), across an array of job types (e.g., marketing, event management, operations, finance, coaching). Following IRB approval, an online survey was distributed via Qualtrics software to the entire target population of NCAA athletic department employees ($N = 33,194$). Potential participants were sent an initial email that included background information about the study, institutional review board required information (e.g., potential benefits and harms), informed consent, and a link to the survey. A follow-up email was sent one week after the initial email to non-respondents. One week after the follow-up email the survey was closed and data was downloaded from Qualtrics into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. This distribution yielded a response rate of 13.03% ($n = 4,324$) completed surveys and included 1,724 narrative responses. This response rate is similar to previous studies using survey methodology within this population (e.g., Weight et al., 2015).

The majority of the participants self-identified as male (53.7%), White/Caucasian (86.9%), and 56.8% reported not having children. The average age of participants was 36.76 years ($SD = 11.6$) with a range of 22 to 75 years and experience working in a collegiate athletic department ranged from the first year on the job to 56 years ($M = 11.23$, $SD = 9.4$). Just under half of the employees who participated held titles in middle management (e.g., assistant directors of academic support, compliance, operations, etc., assistant coaches, athletic trainers, and strength and conditioning coaches). A majority of the participants were employed at Division I non-Power-Five conferences (51.3%; e.g., Ivy League, Mountain West Conference). Table 1 displays a complete listing of the nominal demographic variables.

Approach and Instrument

This study focused on the qualitative responses that were included within a larger, quantitative data collection that assessed participants on their work experiences. This larger data collection included scales on work engagement, burnout, work-family/family-work conflict, and work addiction. These quantitative scales were further explored by Weight and co-authors (2021). The survey concluded with the open-ended question of interest in the current study: “is

Table 1
Participant Demographics

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Position		
Middle Management	787	45.6%
Support Staff	402	23.3%
Head Coach	259	15.0%
Senior leadership	200	11.6%
Graduate Assistant / Student Worker	61	3.5%
NCAA Division		
Division I non Power-5	471	27.3%
Division I Power-5	885	51.3%
Division II	165	9.6%
Division III	203	11.8%
Gender		
Man	926	53.7%
Woman	797	46.2%
Other	1	0.1%
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	1498	86.9%
Black/African American	92	5.3%
Biracial	46	2.7%
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	41	2.4%
Other	28	1.6%
Asian	12	0.7%
Children		
No	979	56.8%
Yes, under than 18	475	27.6%
Yes, older than 18	168	9.7%
Yes, younger and older than 18	66	3.8%
Currently expecting	36	2.1%
Relationship Status		
Married	889	51.6%
Single	497	28.8%
Long-term Relationship	280	16.2%
Divorced	56	3.2%

n = 1724

there anything you want to add related to your work experiences as it pertains to working in intercollegiate athletics?" Forty percent of the sample ($n = 1724$) provided narrative responses ranging from a few words to a few paragraphs (average of 40.5 words per respondent) which translated into 128 single-spaced pages of text (69,752 words). These narrative responses comprise the data for the current study.

Our study is based in the broader interpretive framework of Social Constructivism, which is often described as interpretivism. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explain, "In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (p. 24). Because these experiences are socially constructed, when embracing this approach, authors will often interpret the data post-hoc. That is, "rather than starting with a theory (as in post-positivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). Consistent with this approach, and given that employees likely do not view their work experience in the vernacular of "tournament theory," we utilized an interpretive approach. That is, we did not directly ask employees about their experiences working in a tournament structure. Rather, we asked them about their experiences working in intercollegiate athletics. Then, we interpreted the data through a tournament theory lens.

Qualitative analysis of this open-ended question creates a reasonable description of the experiences of the research participants (Miles et al., 2018). Given the purpose of the study, and the vast number and depth of responses from the target population, this single-prompt interpretive design was deemed an effective method for the study. That is, even with a single prompt, participants shared detailed and informative stories about their experiences, the factors surrounding their experiences, their feelings and responses to their experiences, and insights about implications for other employees and the system itself. Then, tournament theory nomenclature was imposed post-hoc to utilize familiar organizational language and facilitate unbiased responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lee & Lee, 1999). Thematic analysis and pattern matching were utilized (Miles et al., 2018). Codes were created after a careful, individual review of the data by two researchers followed by substantial peer debriefing among all four members of the research team (Patton, 2002; Saldaña, 2015). This approach allowed us to use the theoretical tenets of tournament theory and apply them to the participant responses to categorize their responses within second-order codes. Constant comparative data analysis wherein researchers use multiple stages of categorizing the data while making constant comparisons grounded in the data and theory is a widely used method for analyzing qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hyde, 2000). Sport-focused studies have effectively used similar methods in their data analysis on populations of Senior Women Administrators (SWA; Hoffman, 2010).

First-level, provisional codes were comprised of three main categories: conditions, effects, advice (Miles et al., 2018). The overall goal of this process is to find patterns of meaningful themes through the grouping of similar responses of participant experiences (Patton, 2002). Through the attentive reading and rereading of the coded data and first-level themes, discussion among the research team, and reliance upon the theoretical foundation, 33 second-level themes were identified and pattern matching was applied with the propositions from the theory (Hyde, 2000; Miles et al., 2018). These sub-themes were grouped into the following: a) nine tournament conditions, b) seven tournament effects, c) four suggestions for tournament survival, and d) four suggestions for tournament modifications (these themes are listed Tables 2-5 with representative quotes in text). No causal relationships between conditions and effects were measured, but rather themes emerged from participant responses describing specific conditions of employment and effects of these conditions.

Two researchers independently coded the entire body of narrative responses (line by line) to test the reliability of the coding process. There was a very high level of inter-coder agreement (96.8%) with only 56 disagreements among 3,448 decisions yielding a Krippendorff's (2004) Alpha of $\alpha = .963$ supporting the reliability of the coding process and providing tangential evidence of validity for the code. Disagreements were reviewed and discussed by the researchers until consensus was reached on all final codes. This allowed each researcher coding the responses to clarify and confirm interpretations performed by the other coders for consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We also included a coder that has an official role in college athletics as a means of improving confirmability and reduce bias in the analysis (Amankaa, 2016). Finally, interpretations of each coder were assessed by a separate researcher that was not involved in the coding to interpreting the findings as it relates to the context of college sport and the general sport management field. This was done to strengthen the reliability of our results based on similar, past studies.

Results

Results are presented by four main themes including tournament conditions, tournament effects, and tournament advice, broken into suggestions for tournament survival, and suggestions for tournament modification. Given the volume of qualitative data, sub-themes were tabulated to provide a sense of frequency and salience of the sub-themes (Miles et al., 2018). Sub-theme response percentages are based on the number of participants' mentions of a sub-theme divided by the number of mentions within the overarching theme. This process helped the authors identify the most salient themes, and aided in managing the tension between completeness and parsimony in presenting the data. In other words, the most salient themes are presented below and in the tables, understanding that these themes do not capture every possible response from the participants (Miles et al., 2018).

Tournament Conditions

Respondents described the sport work culture to be an all-consuming lifestyle, with unsustainable scheduling, intense and escalating pressure/demands, exploitation of easily replaceable lower-level employees, and an imbalance between expectations and resources. Employees acknowledged significant underpayment for their commitment to the organization, and cited instances of administrative abuse of power and sexism. A smaller group of respondents, however, described the competitive highs and intangible benefits within the industry as worth sacrificing for (see Table 2). An in-depth presentation of the most prevalent four sub-themes within the category of tournament conditions are discussed below.

An All-Consuming Lifestyle. The most common theme expressed by individuals working within intercollegiate athletics was that it is an all-consuming lifestyle. Thirty-eight respondents specifically cited the common phrase used to describe working in intercollegiate athletics: "It's not a job, it's a lifestyle." Consider the following examples across sports, positions, and divisions:

Intercollegiate athletics is more of a lifestyle than a career. I've seen many people who cannot handle the demands of the field. Those folks seem to fade away quickly and find work elsewhere. (Division I Power-5 Operations Manager #1049)

It is a challenging field, but I am single and don't have a family, so I immerse myself in my work... Those who 'burn out' or feel 'exhaustion' are people who continually don't bring positive energy every day. We know what we signed up for when we got into this industry - it is a lifestyle more than a career. Being happy about our lifestyle is a choice. (Division I Power-5 Sports Information Director, Football/Baseball #1143)

It's a lifestyle. There is no 'on the clock' or 'off the clock' time. This only works if you don't see your job as work. It must be your vocation, something you feel you are meant to do, rather than a place to collect a paycheck... I think to do it right, this much time is required. (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Cross Country/Track & Field Coach #898)

Interestingly, not only did the participants suggest this career was all-consuming, their responses held a fascinating disdain for those who complain, question the demands, or do not devote themselves fully to sacrificing for the good of the organization. For example, "If you're concerned about 'work life balance,' you picked the wrong job. If you want 'work life balance,' there are plenty of jobs that pay more money for less hours than college coaching" (Division I Non Power-5 Head Golf Coach #1092).

Table 2

Tournament Conditions

An all-consuming lifestyle with no boundaries
 Unsustainable schedule
 Intense & escalating pressure
 Competitive highs/intangibles are worth sacrificing for
 Exploitation of easily replaceable lower-level employees
 Imbalance between expectations and resources
 Insufficient pay
 Exploitation of administrative power
 Sexism

n = 1062

Unsustainable Schedule. Reflected in many of the narratives above, respondents discussed the unsustainable schedule required for tournament participation. Numerous participants described 60 - 90-hour work weeks with extensive travel and weekend work. These narratives were generally accompanied by uncertainty about the long-term sustainability of the lifestyle.

The number of hours employees work corresponds to the competitive environment: more is always better in athletics - more reps, more work, more effort, more time. The tricky part is negotiating this as a post-athletics adult, when more isn't always better. Limiting our effort goes against everything we believe and have been told. I'm always in-season because I work with all teams and I put in about 60 hours/week. (Division I Power-5 Associate AD, Student-Athlete Services #785)

The ‘work hard/win at all costs’ mentality held by athletes’ and coaches’ trickles into administrator’s positions. I’ve been in a medium-sized D3 department and a small D1 department and both have placed little value on work-life balance. I feel pressured to work more hours than I am paid for and will not put my own needs ahead of work. I feel that if I were to push back and work fewer hours, I would be seen as not doing my part or putting enough work in and would then receive a poor reference when I choose to move to another department. (Division I Non Power-5 Ticket Operations Assistant, #102)

The expectation to work nights, weekends, *and* regular 9 am to 5 pm hours year after year, season into season is summarized by the expectation that “intercollegiate athletics is a 24/7 industry. With social media and year-round recruiting for all sports, it will consume you” (Division I Power-5 Director of Facility Technology, #1052).

Intense & Escalating Pressure. With tangible and highly visible output via team wins and losses, the intense and escalating pressure was documented by respondents. Employees described it as “a crazy world that never stops with a lot of self-induced pressure” (Division I Head Coach, # 1017), “an uphill climb where we can take 2 steps forward but eventually get shoved a few steps back” (Division II Assistant Athletic Trainer, #1267), and “overwhelming wherein no matter how much work I do, I’m still not doing enough” (Division I Power-5 Graduate Assistant, #1121). Another employee described the pressure in this way:

Employees in intercollegiate athletics have ‘hard’ deadlines. When events happen, all preparations and job duties have to be ready. There is no ability to ‘get that done next week’. Also, not only is there internal stress, but also external stress based on reactions of fans, officials, conference office, campus departments/organizations, etc. (Division I Non Power-5 Sr. Associate AD – Business Operations #1053)

This pressure is underscored by the tremendous imbalance between the supply and demand of jobs. For those not willing to keep up, there is a long line of employees ready to take a coveted spot within the industry, “there is always someone willing to do [the job] for less” (Division I Non Power-5 Associate AD of Athletic Development, #799), “the leadership is abysmal and unfeeling. Such an emphasis is placed on winning that successes are not acknowledged, but the slightest mis-step is derided endlessly” (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Director of Compliance, #118), and “it is hard when it feels like if you make a mistake or are learning that you might get in trouble and fired” (Division I Non Power-5 Head Coach, #351).

It is a demanding business and it seems that you are expected to drop everything and be available whenever needed, whether by text, phone, email, or in person. If you are not, then you are perceived as not committed to the job and the ‘stakeholders’ will move on to the next person who is willing or has the time to drop everything. I think this is what leads to such high burnout and stress levels. (Division I Non Power-5 Academic Coordinator/Learning Specialist, #1031)

There is a pressure in athletics that there are "many people that are qualified and would love to do your job" which I believe subconsciously heightens the amount of time people spend in the office. The belief that they can find someone else that is willing to work all the time. There is an expectation of working weekends (hobby job) but also the

obligation to work "normal hours" Monday through Friday 8 AM-5 PM.
(Division I Power-5 Assistant Director of Facility and Events, #745)

The exponential increase in demands over the last decade and increasing approach to intercollegiate athletics as a business with win-dependent job stability for head coaches and their staffs was mentioned as a reason for heightened pressure from the top-down:

I believe most workers in collegiate athletic departments are very passionate about what we do and competitiveness of the climb to the top is a major driver. But the amount of pressure there is to perform at a high-level at all times is a major strain. In marketing particularly, we are tasked with putting more fans in the seats than ever before while ticket prices are skyrocketing and the hassles of attending a game are driving more and more fans to just watch in the comfort of their home...Coaches have been allowed to run amok over employees at my various stops. Because they are making so much more money than before, they are under immense pressure to win, which in turn makes them want their hand in every facet of the program to gain the slightest edges wherever they can find it. Frankly it's exhausting. (Division I Non Power-5 Director of Marketing #1343)

Competitive Highs / Industry Intangibles are Worth Sacrificing For. Amid the narratives filled with exhaustion, pressure, underpayment, and imbalance existed a group of employees that stoically and optimistically pressed forward with a career in intercollegiate athletics because the industry intangibles, competitive highs, and salaries of those who make it to the top are worth sacrificing for. The following quotes from participants provide evidence of this theme, "It is grueling but very rewarding. (Division I Non Power-5 Coordinator of Athletic Academic Support #1038)".

I feel overwhelmed, drained, and exhausted because of my work *a lot*. However, I also feel extremely excited and fulfilled in my job *a lot*. It is not an easy environment to work in, but it is worth it, and I love my student-athletes. (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Coach #1175)

In addition, many expressed the belief that current sacrifices in lower-level positions are "worth it" in hopes that one day they can achieve the ultimate lifestyle with requisite pay as a head coach and or senior-level administrator:

As a coach still relatively new to the industry, the amount of time I invest into my job and our program is a sacrifice towards building a sustainable future in this industry as well as a more stable work-life balance down the road. (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Coach #731)

For those who invested many years in the industry, they were now more able to manage their profession, and viewed the sacrifices as worthwhile overall: "You know the job when you get into it, so no one should complain. We get to work in this industry, not have to, it is a privilege (Division II Athletic Director # #22)". This thinking is reinforced in the following quote from a senior-level employee:

I would be naive to say it does not have an impact on family life in a negative sense. But working in intercollegiate athletics provides a great experience for my children as they grow up around our programs and student-athletes. (Division I Non Power-5 Associate Director of Athletics #1230)

While clearly not every employee viewed the context of athletics as one that remained desirable or viable over time, there was definitely a sense that the more senior level positions offered greater security and attractiveness for those who could reach them.

Tournament Effects

Respondents relayed several effects of working within the hyper-competitive intercollegiate athletics culture. These effects (see Table 3) include a lack of work-life balance, physical and emotional exhaustion, choosing to leave the field, broken relationships, feelings of overwhelming responsibility, feelings of excitement because of the energizing and rewarding environment, and cognitive dissonance being torn between reward and sacrifice.

Table 3

Tournament Effects

Lack of work-life balance
Physical & emotional exhaustion
Choosing to leave the field
Broken relationships with family and friends
Feelings of overwhelming responsibility
Rewarding, exciting, energizing environment
Cognitive dissonance - torn between reward and sacrifice

n = 577

Lack of Work-Life Balance. The overarching effect of the competitive culture is summarized well by a Division I Non Power-5 Sport Psychologist who said, “There is no balance. It’s a constant race and you just recover when you can” (#295), “There is no balance. I’ve given up hobbies, time with friends, and my health. (Division I Power-5 Assistant AD of Marketing and Promotions #379)”. Another respondent shared a similar thought with varying nuance:

There is no balance. Just work. Everyone worries about lack of balance for student-athletes; no one is taking care of the needs of the department employees. (Division I Power-5 Director of Broadcast Operations #1299)

As respondents expressed their lack of work-life balance, it was clear that within every organizational sub-unit, employees felt their lot was worse than everyone else’s. The following quotes provide glimpses of perceived work and work-life effects across different units and divisions: “Burnout is really common in compliance” (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant AD for Compliance, #1241), “there is no work-life balance if you’re in marketing. (Division I Non Power-5 Marketing Assistant #277), the athletic training profession is over-worked and

underpaid across intercollegiate athletics” (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Athletic Trainer, #958), strength and conditioning staffs are underpaid, overworked, and underappreciated” (Division I Non Power-5 Strength & Conditioning Coordinator #452), “college coaching is incredibly demanding - the pressure to win requires a total commitment to the job” (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Basketball Coach #1540), “coaches and administrators have no idea the amount of work it takes to run a communications department” (Division II Director of Athletic Communications #339), “there is no off-season for administrators” (Division I Power-5 Sr. Associate AD, #531), and “working at a smaller school means less staff and resources. There are coaches at these levels who would like you to operate on a DI level, but we just can’t humanly do that” (Division II Sports Information Director #438). At every position, and every level the employees felt their position was more difficult and strenuous than others.

Additional Tournament Effects. The lack of balance throughout the industry leaves a wake of physical, emotional, and social consequences that lead to exhaustion, broken relationships, burnout, turnover, and regret. These effects were articulated emotionally by Division III Director of Athletic Communications #502:

Pursuing a career in athletic communications/sports information is the biggest single regret of my life. I’ve missed too many weddings, funerals, baptisms, birthdays, (etc.) of family and friends in order to watch losing sports to count. My career has seriously affected many of my friendships, as I am no longer included in any plans, due to the fact that I have always had to refuse by saying ‘Sorry, I have to work.’ In addition to the stress and never-ending nature of the job, I lose sleep nearly every night wondering if I am stuck in this field for the rest of my career. With the nature of my position here, and in talking to many others who hold my role at other schools, I find it seemingly impossible to pursue a successful romantic relationship.

Echoing this sentiment, the ever-present levels of stress, job uncertainty, time-commitment, and lack of fair pay led nearly 1 in 5 respondents to discuss their hope to leave the field in pursuit of a better life. Respondents shared examples of extreme sacrifices and consequences, including living apart from spouses and children because of multiple moves due to job instability, physical and mental breakdowns after months on end with no days off, divorces and broken relationships due to workaholicism, and a constant struggle between being drawn to the excitement and rewards of being within the industry and the significant costs to personal well-being. Despite these sacrifices, many remain in the industry because of the joy they find working with athletes. Division III Head Football Coach #319 reflected on this struggle:

There are two types of coaches - those that have been fired, and those that will be fired. The longer I stay in this industry I have realized this: it’s a great job, but a terrible profession. For every multiyear contract for a head coach, there are hundreds of guys living at or below poverty all for the glory of the game. I’ve lived in my office on three different occasions not because I wanted to. I could not afford rent! Obviously, you have to have passion to work in college coaching. My window has closed for a chance at a big-time college program or NFL job. However, I’ve done other jobs, made more money, and yet have been more miserable not being a leader or mentor of men.

For those who have put in the years of schooling and volunteer work and finally landed a full-time position, there comes a time they must decide whether the sacrifice is worth the cost. This is reflected in the following quote:

I am a coach for track and field...The profession is very unhealthy...I have watched many great coaches in our country leave the sport over the last five years because they are fed up with the profession because they work too much, are tired of dealing with administrators who don't understand what we go through, have unrealistic expectations, poor compensation, and not enough time to reenergize. I have been making plans the last year to leave the profession for the same reasons. (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Coach #1390)

Suggestions for Tournament Survival

Some employees reflected upon lessons learned through years in the competitive work environment. From these narratives there was an acknowledgement that the industry is not going to change, so in order to make it work, employees need to be proactive in finding balance. Four primary suggestions emerged on how to survive and thrive (see Table 4): integrating family into work and work into family, finding the right boss/fit, setting personal boundaries, and taking advantage of down time/seasonality.

Table 4

Suggestions for Tournament Survival

Integrate family into work and work into family
 Find the right boss/fit
 Set personal boundaries - prioritize wellness, take vacations
 Take advantage of down time/seasonality

n = 219

Work-Family Integration. While there were many narratives that expressed the difficulty of balancing family and work, a few found family to bring a much-needed perspective to the stressors of the job:

Having children has made it much easier to let go of work when I return home in the evening. There are very few true ‘emergencies’ that can't wait until I get into the office the next morning. I used to think everything was an ‘emergency.’ Our office most definitely has a “be seen” culture, whereby people come to the office at all hours for the purpose of being seen as a hard worker. Having kids has helped me to let go of that asinine practice. (Division I Power-5 Director of Digital and Social Communications, #1419)

As with any job, it's all about making it work. You have to prioritize your "to-do" list and manage time wisely. I also think it's more of a work-life integration than a work-life balance. How can I integrate my family into my work? My wife and girls come up to my office almost daily so we can go to whatever sporting even is going on that evening.

Finding a way for them to feel connected to the department allows me to work and enjoy time with them at the same time. (Division II Assistant Athletic Director, #1318)

The majority who discussed work-family integration emphasized the joy of bringing family to events, having children learn from and grow up with their athletes, bringing children to the office to work with them, having a partner who is supportive and invested in the work, and finding family in coworkers.

Finding the Right Supervisor/Fit. In order for this integration to be possible, many emphasized the importance of finding the right fit between employee and supervisor, or employee and department: “My boss is also very understanding about a work-life balance and told me to leave when my athletes are gone and enjoy myself” (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Athletic Trainer, #993). Another respondent provided the following quote:

I find the work-life balance comes directly from your boss. In my case, this current head coach I am working for has the best work-life balance I have experienced. He lives 45 minutes away from the office with a wife and two kids, so he is good about making things work. Comparatively, my past two former jobs and my collegiate experience, my head coach was not married and lived less than a mile from work. There was no balance and unnecessary time spent in the office (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Coach, #1270)

Given the power-dynamics within the organizational structure, a heavy emphasis was placed on the role of the direct supervisor and the importance of finding a boss who values and mirrors balance.

Setting Personal Boundaries/Seasonality. While the majority of comments discussed a lack of down-time, year-round seasons, and little ability to take personal time, those who offered advice emphasized the importance of proactively setting personal boundaries, not being afraid to prioritize wellness and finding time to re-charge whenever possible. Others emphasized the importance of advocating for yourself. The following quotes illustrate these suggestions:

The department is pretty open to me taking ‘mental health’ days and not having that count against vacation or sick days so long as I give them fair warning. (Division II Sports Information Director #438)

Things happen in cycles and phases... send this questionnaire to me in late may or June and I probably have some different answers... There is great Joy in the days where it's "All Dad All Day" and might be why I like to vacation out of the country with my family... I don't have a problem putting work behind me at times but there are times when it need to be a focus and I am thankful that my family seems to understand..... I also am lucky enough to have those around me who do feel the same way... and occasionally together we adjust practice times to allow staff members to attend a family "event" (My daughter is playing Volleyball in the state tournament Thursday and we have adjust practice so that I may attend) (Division I, Power-5 Associate Athletic Director for Sports Medicine, #1264)

Suggestions for Tournament Modifications

A large portion of respondents offered organizational suggestions to help modify the current culture within the industry (see Table 5). These included raising pay (“better pay for my position” (Division II Assistant Coach #25)), implementing overtime (“I wish we got paid overtime” (Division I Associate Head Coach #946)), and/or minimum wage standards, allowing flexible work schedules and telecommuting (“Telecommuting one day a week would be life-changing” (Division II Associate Athletic Director #61)), mandating days off for staff as has been legislated for athletes (“NCAA needs to stop us from killing ourselves. Mandatory dead periods in recruiting” (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Coach #685)), and facilitating exercise opportunities for staff (“I would be more satisfied and motivated in my job if there was support to be physically fit” (Division I Senior Director of Compliance #791)).

Table 5

Suggestions for Tournament Modifications

Higher pay, overtime and/or minimum wage standards
 Allow flexible work schedules/telecommuting
 NCAA should mandate mandatory days off for staff
 Facilitate exercise opportunities for staff

n = 212

Many of the accounts emphasized the “be seen” or “face time” culture as a root of many of the issues within the industry. Schedule flexibility and opportunities to work from home appeared to have a significant influence on employee satisfaction and well-being. Thus, solutions that address systemic pressure for office face time were offered by a number of participants:

There needs to be less ego, less ‘working for perception’ and ‘working to stay busy.’ It should be acceptable to leave when you are not busy/have completed all your work duties within reason, without being judged for being lazy. There needs to be more time off allowed for simply family time or vacation time to prevent burn out. People will perform their jobs at a much higher level with more personal/family/away from work time. Let's stop glorifying a 10-12 hour work day and start praising efficiency and stress management. (Division I Non Power-5 Assistant Director of Strength and Conditioning, #257)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of sport employees to assess tournament conditions and resulting employee outcomes as well as suggestions to overcome detrimental tournament conditions. Indeed, the findings provide important theoretical and practical implications regarding the application of tournament theory to exploring workplace conditions in a demanding industry. Of great importance is the finding that employees’ work motivations include much more than the financial benefits offered. Tournament theory focuses on the financial aspect of employee motivations, suggesting an increase in wages will motivate employees to work harder (Connelly et al., 2014). However, the findings of the current project

suggest work conditions in themselves are essential to employees' motivation and experience (see also Dixon & Warner, 2010; Oja et al., 2018). Therefore, it is possible employees are willing to sacrifice one area of benefits as long as other desirable benefits are offered (e.g., low pay but positive collegiality).

Theoretical Contributions

The results from this study can be interpreted both from the individual and organizational level. From an individual level the participants seem to understand their work conditions (i.e., tournament) and the behaviors they must engage in to survive in particular with and in competition with other employees. Our findings demonstrate how participants identified challenges and frustrations within their work experiences, such as a lack of pay, unsustainable scheduling, work visibility, feelings of exploitation, and lack of balance between demands and available resources. Further, participants noted willingly entering into such an industry, even with multiple educational degrees, for an unpaid position (e.g., volunteer assistant coach), suggesting employees are not only entering voluntarily, but the positions – even those that are unpaid – are extremely sought after. More experienced employees noted how they had to “pay their dues” (Weight et al., 2021, p. 374), illustrating an understanding of the vocational demands that would be placed on them.

This commitment was seen as critical component, especially by those lower-level employees who were seen as replaceable. This suggests that employees, especially lower-level employees, are not only fighting with and against other employees for promotions, but also to retain their position within athletic departments. Entry-level positions may be a “promote or perish” tournament setting, compared to others within the organization. Employees may be forced to accept the harsh tournament conditions and maintain productivity while continuously being evaluated on their performance, especially in comparison to other employees. This may force participants to be innovative as they are forced to continually demonstrate their comparative worth to their department.

Intriguingly, results do not show a promotion with major financial gain is their primary motivation for continuing to stay engaged in the game. There was very little data about aspiring to become an athletic director – the top position within the athletic department. Rather the responses reflected a desire for the prize of a reasonable job. Previous tournament theory research has coined similar attractive benefits as perks (Becker & Huselid, 1992). Our data indicated these benefits would be more aptly described as “normalcy.” This could be reflective of the difficult tournament conditions experienced for all of the participants that are either (a) currently experiencing in order to achieve a position with stability or (b) those who recently achieved a position in middle management. Employees seem aware of the challenges of creating job stability within college athletics (possibly from experiencing burnout in order to achieve a stable position) and perhaps no longer want to maximize their agency at the costs of further jeopardizing their work-life balance.

These findings extend previous literature as they suggest employees working in difficult tournament conditions may be motivated more by securing a promotion that offers a sense of “normalcy” (versus overworked conditions) as opposed to a promotion that comes with a large salary increase. For example, previous studies examining work-life balance have theorized that employees are motivated by achieving better balance between work and non-work obligations (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). This study supports these motivations within a tournament theoretical framework. Tournament conditions are to be designed in order to maximize motivation and output from their employees (Pruijssers et al., 2020). If employees are working in

a tournament to be rewarded with the prize of the “normalcy” provided in a middle-management position and will cease to participate in tournaments for that reward, it creates an inefficiency within the tournament settings that hurts the employer (and subsequently the employees). The results also point to the need to more critically examine the organizational context. Experiences described within the results of this study illustrate a lack of investment in employees and at times a disregard for their personal and professional well-being. Creating strong demands of employees may pit employees against each other (by comparisons of who will and will not perform the demanding jobs), rather than simply following more dyadic financial and social contracts (e.g., Kim et al., 2019). Previous literature notes that many traditional supportive employee policies offered by organizations (e.g., flexible hours, family leave, autonomy) may not be offered or useful due to overall demand of the job (see Dixon et al., 2023). As such, sport organizations need to reevaluate the way they are investing in their employees, and how the lack of support offered is (negatively) impacting the experiences of their employees. While sport organizations have been hesitant to offer increased work flexibility, those who receive flexibility from remote work within the sport industry have reported several benefits, such as reduced negative work-life spillover (Huml et al., 2023).

The employee descriptions of embracing and even celebrating the difficulty of the environment do not diminish its need for critical reflection in a 21st century human resource management world. That is, the overwhelmingly pervasive trend in human resource management in both scholarship and practice is toward human capital development (Fulmer & Ployhart, 2014), toward environments that value longevity and positive employee experiences (Marescaux et al., 2013), and toward cultivating work-life balance (see Stock et al., 2014). Yet, sport organizations remain firmly entrenched in notions of “the grind,” “sacrifice for the team,” and “survival of the fittest” (Kim et al., 2023). While potentially effective in a strong labor market, these notions will continue to be pressed as finances are stretched and other sport employment opportunities continue to emerge, particularly on a global scale. These types of environments, while popular at the entry level, do little to retain a strong and reliable workforce over time, as employees burnout and fade rather than thrive (Amegashie et al., 2007; Odio et al., 2014). Both scholars and practitioners would do well to re-examine the underlying assumptions surrounding this context and work to rethink their toxic nature in a proactive approach toward the next generation of sport managers.

Practical Implications

Our study suggests employees’ work motivations extend beyond financial benefits. Accordingly, employers are encouraged to seek out alternative incentives and utilize them to enhance the motivational context for their employees. Knowing that financial compensation is limited within college athletics, administrators can leverage their employee’s passion with things like appreciation, tickets and VIP access to a sporting events, opportunities to enjoy and promote their identity as college sport professionals. All of these promote the advantage and the prestige of working in this setting. Employers could also incentivize tournament participants for their dedication and/or performance with incentives for additional paid time off or potentially with gear and other perks for family and friends.

In addition, employers need to think about non-financial supports that may be available to alleviate difficult tournament conditions. For example, mentoring and formal support networks within the field may also be useful for supporting employees in navigating the expectations and conditions within this tournament field. On-site childcare, autonomy, and flexible work hours/location have also been supported as practical mechanisms for enhancing employee work

conditions (e.g., Dixon & Warner, 2010; Taylor et al., 2019). Many of the participants noted understanding the industry they were entering and the demands that would be placed upon them from the tournament conditions. However, we can no longer encourage individuals to accept poor working conditions and a lack of organizational supports, as research has illustrated the negative impacts of overwork climates (Albrecht et al., 2018). As such, organizations must strive to provide additional, tailored supports to employees when they require conditions such as long hours, frequent travel, etc (Taylor et al., 2021). Dixon and colleagues (2023) suggest organizations work to develop innovative, individualized policies based on employee preferences (e.g., different policies for employees who prefer to segment their work and family as compared to those who prefer to integrate work and family) to best enhance the experience of all employees.

Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this study was its cross-sectional design. Future research could address with longitudinal designs that follow individuals over the time of their career, exploring changes in experiences and conditions over the career and life-cycle. In addition to areas mentioned above, our findings offer some potential avenues for future research. First, future research should continue to examine the intersection of tournament conditions, including pay, to determine what employees are willing to trade-off within their jobs and what aspects of the tournament are most motivating. Our participants wrote about a number of tournament conditions that they prioritized over compensation, which presents a research opportunity for extending the current majority of studies on tournament theory, which have examined pay spreads and pay dispersions for creating optimal tournament conditions. Further examination of non-financial compensation tournament conditions is clearly needed.

Our study focused on a qualitative prompt at the conclusion of an online-based survey sent out to all participants. While this open-ended question elicited a large number of in-depth responses from participants, participants were only provided with one item and limited direction in order to guide their responses. The sample of respondents was also predominantly White/Caucasian. This limits the application of our findings beyond the context of the study and would welcome further examination along a similar context and theoretical framework to reinforce these findings. Clearly, the study demonstrates that tournament theory can be utilized to understand individual and organizational behavior in sport; however, a much more nuanced understanding would be necessary for truly valuing the contribution of tournament theory beyond its economic basis, especially from a sport context (see Chalip, 2006). These findings also point to the need for further examination of whether careers known to attract employees based on their “passion for the field” may be at greater risk of creating difficult tournament conditions, assuming that employee passion will supersede the challenging context. Is it possible to design tournament contexts that maximize passion rather than relying on it? If so, what would those conditions be, and how could output be maximized if both passion and conditions were optimal?

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how tournament conditions matter and employers need to think beyond financial compensation as a means for motivating their tournament participants. Our findings reported how participants were willing to sacrifice previously-established desired benefits, such as pay, for other benefits like a supportive supervisor. The challenging tournament

conditions faced by the participants created a number of negative outcomes (i.e., burnout) and advice for others on how to navigate tournaments within the industry in order to avoid the worst of these negative outcomes.

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