Time in the Football Career:
Professional, Personal, and Public Times in the Life of a Player

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PROJECT ABSTRACT

This project is twofold, examining both: 1) how the time-related structure and rhythms of professional football careers affect player development in ways that have gone unaddressed, as well as 2) the role of media coverage in shaping public expectations about the profession (in ways that may be inaccurate and, ultimately, impact player development). While some professional programs have been developed that emphasize the need for players to plan for the future, what is missing is consideration of basic time issues that shape their careers, their lives, and fundamentally drive the game. Similarly, the role of media images in shaping public expectations—including its increasing frequency owed to 24-hour news casts and social media—is a time-related issue that merits attention in its own right. A more detailed PROJECT SUMMARY is included beginning on the next page.

PROPOSED RESEARCH

In stage one of this project, already underway, I am leading a research team of four undergraduates and six graduate students conducting interviews with aspiring (i.e., now in the NCAA), current NFL, and former NFL players about their experiences in the profession of football. The role of personal (e.g., family) and professional (e.g., coaches, advisors, trainers) factors in contributing to players' quality of life is also being explored through additional interviews.

BUDGET

I have received a quote from a transcribing agency (www.LakewoodTranscription.com) used by UT faculty in the past (in the UT system as MindfulMeans LLC) with positive outcomes. The cost will be 1.25/minute for the scale of interviews I will need transcribed (this represents a volume discount). With approximately 100 interviews at 45 to 90 minutes each, this can range from $5,625 to $11,250. Thus, I am requesting the limit of $6,000 to use for transcription fees.
Project Summary

The guiding research questions to be addressed in this larger project are: What are the predominant professional, personal, and public (or mediated) issues in a football career? How do these issues change in relation to stage of career? How are players’ development (and engagement) at each stage impacted by these factors? Persons with various perspectives on these issues are being interviewed in order to collect pilot data and refine the study focus based on outcomes. This includes (but is not limited to): NCAA and NFL coaches, Player Development representatives for various National Football League (NFL) teams, academic advisors for college players at various U.S. universities, and U.S. football players at multiple career stages—from college to professional to former/retired.

The proposed study is grounded in my more than decade-long research and theorizing regarding how our work shapes our experience of time, which in turn has implications for a variety of individual and institutional outcomes. For instance, while the average football career in the NFL lasts less than four years, the psychological demands of the work itself calls for players to envision themselves as invincible and timeless. This presents a challenge to engagement in the academic preparation offered by their universities, and the professional development activities offered by the League. The “successful” player will simultaneously manage multiple activities at varying time scales, or levels of granularity—a feat that research shows is difficult, but necessary, for organizational members in all professions. Specifically, a player must consider their longterm career development while simultaneously experiencing the grueling physicality of survival during a game—all the while, contending with an ever-contracting media news cycle that dissects their every personal and professional move within both short- and long-term windows of time.

In addition to my theorizing on how occupational demands shape organizational members’ personal and professional experience of time, examining the trajectory of a football career yields related insight. The modern definition of career, found in the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a course of professional life or employment, which affords opportunity for progress or advancement in the world,” while an earlier definition refers to “a running, course (usually implying swift motion)”…as in “the course of the sun or a star through the heavens.” Both of these meanings, and the images they convey, fit well with the meanings of career found in contemporary Western institutional and public discourse. A career is at once achieved through a particular course of action and, at the same time, carries with it a sense of urgency that organizational members must engage the right activities with the right timing in order to achieve professional, and sometimes public, recognition (Hassard, 1991). Despite these images tied to time, an inherent yet under-examined perspective on the career as a social construct centers on temporality. While a development or a vocational perspective on the career can yield insight for individuals seeking professional accomplishment, a temporal perspective on the career can yield implications for institutional policies and ethics, social norms and relationships, as well as personal health and well being. This is especially true for the athletic career of a football player—the focus of the proposed study.
Not only does a career unfold over time but also the course of a career proceeds through distinct stages—from future, present, and past—each with different concerns and realities. For example, the concerns and realities expressed by future, present, and past professional athletes regarding issues such as finances, physical health, and personal relationships change over time based on the stage of their career. While this is true for all persons across the lifespan in general, it carries special significance in careers that are nurtured so early and ended so quickly as the football career.

Taken together, the temporality inherent in players’ work-related activities and the temporality associated with their career-related choices (oft-times within a media blitz) present a complex, and even paradoxical, interplay of personal and professional times. At the largest time scale, we have the career of a professional football player. At the smallest time scale, we have an individual play in the course of a game. The goal of the present study is to understand the relationship between these two times, and the role of media coverage and public voices in that process.