Sports Careers Not Just for Athletes
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Full Text:

There are more ways to hit a homer in your career than playing sports.

It's one of the most dramatic moments in the world of sport: With seconds left on the clock, a player bursts into action and leaps from somewhere near the free-throw line. The ball glides through the air and makes a spectacular swoosh through the hoop. And the crowd goes wild.

Would you like to be the player in this scene? Who wouldn't want to be adored by millions of fans the way former NBA superstar Michael Jordan is? Or maybe you'd like a career as a baseball slugger, tennis star, or pro quarterback?

It's great work--if you can get it. But there are only a few thousand slots available for professional athletes. Of these slots, only a few are for stars who become household names. In a country of more than 260 million people, those aren't very good odds.

If you're a gifted athlete with dreams of making it to the pros, good luck. If not, does that mean a sports career is outside the realm of possibility? The answer, fortunately, is no.

Many people who aren't professional athletes pursue sports careers. They work in a variety of challenging fields ranging from coaching to sports journalism. Other expanding job areas are managing sports teams, promoting athletic events, and supporting the needs of athletes. All in all, approximately 4.4 million people work in sports and sports-related careers, according to the Women's Sports Foundation. As the popularity of all kinds of sports continues to grow, opportunities to work in sports-related jobs are actually increasing.

Promising Career Stats

"Since there are more and more school, college, and professional teams, getting a sports-related career is more probable than it has ever been," says Russ Blunck, sports information director at Western Oregon University. "It is a fun and rewarding career and lifestyle. For the most part, athletes and coaches are fascinating, motivated, and special people. It's a pleasure to spend your days working with them."

Fortunately, Americans just can't seem to get enough sports. In recent years, pro sports leagues have expanded and then expanded again. Colleges have expanded athletic programs to include women's teams. Sports such as soccer, wrestling, and auto racing are becoming even more popular.

"The world of sports continues to grow across the nation as well as internationally," says Julie Powell, a sports management professor at Union University in Tennessee. Powell believes that the need for employees will grow in high schools as well as colleges. "I personally feel that we are heading toward an increase in athletic training personnel on the high school level. Before long, schools will need their own athletic trainer instead of using hospitals' personnel."

Fields of Dreams

Here is a brief overview of just some of the career areas that focus on sports:

* Coaches work at all levels including high school, college, and professional sports. In addition to highly visible head coaches, the field also includes large numbers of assistant coaches.

* Athletic directors and other managers provide leadership for high school or college athletic programs. General managers and other administrative personnel plan and oversee the activities of sports leagues (or conferences), professional sports teams, and other organizations.

* Sports journalists and public relations specialists develop communications about sports. Some write for newspapers, magazines, or broadcast radio. Some write for television programs. Others work for college or university athletic departments.
* Athletic trainers work with athletes to promote their physical conditioning. Trainers help them overcome injuries and keep them at their peak.

* Sports agents represent professional athletes. They negotiate contracts for them. They help those breaking into professional sports, as well as experienced professional athletes.

* Other career specialties include executive directors of sports associations, marketing directors, event coordinators, administrative assistants, and sports scouts.

With so many opportunities, chances are good that you'll find a match with your own interests and abilities. Of course, the job market can be highly competitive. But those who succeed have the opportunity to perform truly enjoyable work.

"If your strength is communication, a job as a sports information director might be right for you," Powell says. "If you are a great teacher and want to have an influence on kids, you may consider coaching. The possibilities are endless."

For Powell, a major plus is the opportunity to work with student athletes. "I currently work at a small liberal arts college. And I'm able to have a personal relationship with many of our athletes," she says. "To watch them grow and learn is an amazing experience." Interacting directly with athletes might involve coaching eighth-grade basketball players or a high school football team. Or it could involve assisting a college volleyball team.

A good Workout

Most sports-related jobs involve plenty of hard work and require a high energy level. Here is sports information director Blunck's description of just one day on the job:

"Today I'm working on an article for a magazine and doing a radio interview. I'm also arranging a newspaper interview between a local reporter and a football player. Then I have a meeting with our athletic director. Finally, I'll be watching football practice for Saturday's game and checking on injured players. And I also have to work on our soccer media guide and prepare to be host of next week's coaches show on TV. If there's any time left over, I'll prepare notes for my radio broadcast this weekend. There is never a dull moment!"

Of course, no profession is without its downside, and that is true of sports-related careers. One drawback is that, in many cases, the pay is lower than might be desired. "Since the field is competitive, schools can afford to pay you less than market value," Blunck says. Another reality is that many jobs require putting in long hours. For coaches, athletic directors, and many other positions, working 60 to 70 hours a week is commonplace. "You also need to be service-oriented," says Mark Bankert, assistant athletic director at Malone College in Canton, Ohio.

On the other hand, many get extended time off. For example, jobs in schools often include vacation breaks between semesters or during the summer. Moreover, sports-related jobs are rarely boring. "I enjoy the flexibility of the job. And each day is different," Bankert says.

So just what does it take to be successful in a sports-related career? "You need to be organized and flexible because things don't always go according to plan," says Powell. Problems will always arise, she notes. A piece of equipment might need repair just before a big event. Or an official or statistician might not show up for the game.

Training--Not Just for Jocks

If you're interested in checking out a career in this area, consider pursuing some type of training. Playing sports can be a start, but it's not really enough in most cases. This is true not only in specialized areas such as sports journalism, but also in coaching and sports administration.

"There's a myth that if you played a sport, you can coach it," says Tim Flannery, assistant director of the National High School Association. "But it takes a lot of background. Coaches need to know everything from how to motivate people to how to handle legal responsibilities." For those interested in a possible coaching career, his organization provides a helpful program for learning the basics.

Majoring in an appropriate college program is a great way to obtain basic preparation. Many colleges offer programs in sports management, sports medicine, recreation management, physical education, or other related areas. To find out more, contact any college in which you're interested and request a catalog. Most schools also offer Web sites providing basic details about their programs.
It's also a good idea to take on a volunteer or part-time role in a sports organization. This might be a school athletic department, a city or county recreation program, or any other sports-related organization. You can get a start in your own school. By getting some firsthand experience, you can determine if a sports-related career is something you genuinely want to pursue.

What Does IT Take?

Here are a few specific sports careers that might interest you. Take a look at each description. Do you have (or want to develop) the recommended skills and personal traits? Place a check in front of the skills you have or want to develop. See which sports careers might work for you,

Sporting Goods Retail Manager directs the ordering, displaying, and sales of retail sporting goods.

**Recommended Skills and Traits:**

- financial expertise
- decision-making skills
- organizational skills
- presentation skills
- bachelor's degree

Coaches train and instruct athletes. They create game plans, run practice sessions, and teach competitive tactics.

**Recommended Skill and Traits:**

- leadership skills
- decision-making skills
- ability to inspire athletes
- team-building skills
- bachelor's degree

TV Sports Producers work with a team to create up-to-the-minute, high-interest stories. They know how to use video and audio equipment.

**Recommended Skills and Traits:**

- sportswriting skills
- organizational skills
- assertiveness
- risk-taking
- creativity
- bachelor's degree

Sports Journalists do research and conduct interviews about a newsworthy event or topic. They work for newspapers, publishers, radio and TV stations.

**Recommended Skills and Traits:**

- investigative skills
- persistence
deadline-oriented
passion for sports
bachelor's degree

Personal Trainers work for fitness centers or directly with clients. They test physical fitness and plan exercise programs.

Recommended Skills and Traits:
interpersonal skills
first aid
nutrition counseling
injury prevention
one-year professional or technical certificate or diploma

Rating Your Potential for a Sports-Related Career

Would a sports-related career be right for you? Take this quiz to get an idea of our potential.

1. I enjoy reading about sports in newspapers and magazines.
   a. Yes, often b. Sometimes c. No, never

2. I have been active in school or community sport programs.
   a. Yes, every active b. Somewhat active c. No, never

3. I would not mind staying in the background while athletes bask in the glory of sports accomplishments.
   a. I wouldn't mind. B. It might be a problem. C. It definitely would bother me.

4. I am a good organizer.
   a. Yes b. Maybe c. Not really

5. I am dependable with deadlines and other tasks
   a. Yes, always b. Usually c. Deadlines aren't important to me.

6. I have good communication skills.
   a. Yes. b. Maybe c. No

7. I am energetic and enthusiastic.
   a. Yes b. Not especially c. No

8. I am a hard worker.

9. I love being outdoors.
   a. Yes. b. Sometimes c. Rarely

10. I enjoy meeting new people and getting to know them.
   a. Yes b. Occasionally c. Not really
TOTALS

a.____ b.____ c.____

SCORING. Give yourself 10 points for (a) answers, 5 points for (b) answers, and no points for (c) response. Then total your score.

If you scored 55 points or more, you might consider pursuing a sports-related career. Read more on specific carriers volunteer in a sports program, and study appropriate subjects. If you scored fewer than 55 points, stop and evaluate whether a sports career is right for you. If you’re still interested follow the advice above to check things out more thoroughly.

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