

# Shooting for the Stars: The Dream of a Career in Professional Sports

by

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Despite the abundance of evidence of the very limited odds of a successful, lucrative, and long lasting professional athletic career, young men and women around the world hold an unrealistic view of those opportunities (Eitzen, 2003). Coakley (2007) adds that misinterpretations of media coverage of a few very successful athletes contribute to such distorted views. We are constantly bombarded with stories and news clips by the media about a small number of young men and women that made it while we never get to hear the story of the many that did not make it. Addressing this issue, Dr. Sandy Wolfson (2003) pointed out that kids "...hear Alan Shearer talking about how his teachers told him to work harder at school because he'd never make it big, and look at him now! So that encourages them to think it could happen to them too."

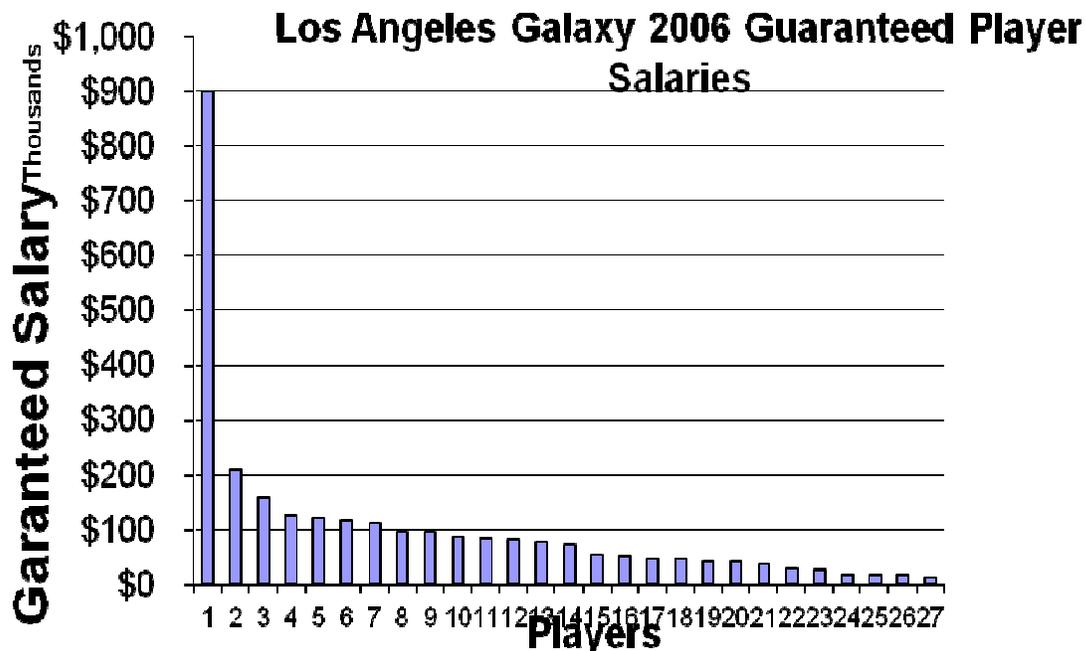
Stories about very young athletes, such as, professional soccer's Freddy Adu (MLS) and professional hockey's Sydney Crosby have generated a lot of media attention. At barely 21, Crosby has signed a 5-year, \$45 million extension to his contract with the Pittsburgh Penguins. Adu who signed with Major League Soccer at the age of 14 commented at the time that "If you're good enough, you're old enough...If you feel like you're ready to go, hey, give it a shot." In 2007 Adu's MLS contract was bought by Benfica, a 103-year-old Portuguese soccer club for \$2 million (Associated Press, 2007). In addition to his estimated half a million+ yearly salary, by the time he turned 18, Adu was also expected to earn undisclosed amounts of money through endorsement deals with Nike and Pepsi (Goff, 2007).

The imbalanced treatment by the media and the general public of the issue of career opportunities in professional sports prompted Tom McMillen, former NBA player and member of the U.S. Congress (cited in Coakley, 1994, p. 386) to warn that "The overall message being drilled into our kids is clear and dangerous . . . Superstars sign 5-year contracts for \$20 million. Teachers sign 1-year contracts for \$20,000.00. In those circumstances, to whom will you listen, your teacher or your coach? Where will you spend your time, in the library or the gym?"

Addressing the probability of "a satisfying and rewarding career" as a professional athlete "Digger" Phelps, former University of Notre Dame basketball coach disclosed in 1983 that "I still have to tell most of the kids who come to play

for me that they're not going to make it as pros, that they should forget that dream . . . and that, even if they do make it, the average pro career is only three and a half years, and when it's over, they'll still . . . have another 50 years to live (Cited in Coakley, 1994, p. 274)."

Coakley (2007) rightly points out that while a career as a professional athlete could be a wonderful experience, most professional careers seldom last longer than 3-5 years, and rarely bring fame and fortune to the athlete. For example, the average career in the National Football League lasts three and a half seasons (NFLPA.com). The average career time line, however, is a misleading value. A relatively large number of players had very short careers. Their "career" often lasted only one season and was terminated as a result of injury. The 3.5 year mark is a statistic that does not do justice to any particular reality. It reflects a mathematical average that is calculated by including the careers of more fortunate players that stayed in the fray for 5-10 years. Thus, the mode career length, not the average or even the median career length, is a more valid value to consider. An illustration of the difference between the average salary and the median salary of professional soccer players in the MLS may shed light on the previously presented point. The total "guaranteed salary," according to the Washington Post (2007) for the Los Angeles Galaxy's 27 players in 2006 was \$2,771,685. Thus, the average salary per player for that year would have totaled \$102,655 ( $\$2,771,685 / 27$ ) masking the fact that the seven highest paid Galaxy players (26% of the players) earned a combined \$1,745,625.00 or 63% of the total purse. The median salary value for the Los Angeles Galaxy players, as well as players of other MLS teams, still provides a skewed image of the true earnings of the vast majority of the players on these professional teams.



In 2006, the guaranteed salary of four of Galaxy's developmental players was less than \$17,000 and another seven players made less than \$50,000. The median salary for Los Angeles Galaxy players in 2006 was thus \$72,000 (Cornell Glen, Forward) while the highest paid player earned \$900,000 (Landon Donovan, Forward). If one removes the salaries of the four Galaxy developmental players, the average salary would be \$117,847 and the median salary would be \$37,000.00 below the average yearly guaranteed salary in 2006 (Brian Dunseth, Defender, \$80,625).

The media attention bestowed on the top picks and the highly publicized ceremony of the selection process may leave the impression that joining the professional ranks is a straight forward process. Naturally, the vast majority of athletes that were designated for the first round selection got drafted. What the public is seldom made aware of is the fact that the odds of a male age 20-39 making it to the pros in American football in 1988, for example, were 1/62,500 for Caucasians and 1/47,600 for African Americans (Leonard & Reyman, 1988). The odds of having a long career as a super star and making large sums of money are even smaller. On the other hand, the odds of getting injured and/or cut from the team after the first season are very real.

In order to illustrate how hard it is to make it to the pros and then have a long career as a professional athlete, I will share here the stories of two (out of dozens of similar cases) of my former students. In addition, to illustrate the conflicts and difficulties parents of some teenagers who are aspiring to become a professional athlete face, I will also share the story of a concerned mom from North Wales.

### **Case Studies**

The first individual was a talented junior tennis player who at the age of 15 was the Tennis National runner-up in the US. The following year, he came back to the Nationals and played better and harder, and with more confidence than he ever played before. Again, he made it to the finals where he played his very best tennis. Despite his remarkable efforts and greatly improved skills, he lost his match in two straight sets 0:6, 0:6. He couldn't hold his serve nor could he break his opponent's serve and at least win one single game! His opponent turned pro in 1988 and qualified to play at the French Open in 1989 where he made history when he defeated Ivan Lendl, the number one player in the world at the time. The 17 year-old Michael Chang from the US became the youngest player in history to win the French Open. Mr. Chang has never won another major event and retired in 2003 following a successful career as tennis pro that lasted 15 years (7-years as a top 10 player). The experience of the talented, exciting, and tenacious Chang demonstrates the enormity of the challenge to make it to the top and then stay at the top.

Tens of thousands of junior tennis players compete in as many as 5000 (usta.com) tournaments each year for the eventual coveted title of the best junior (under 18) player. Once at the top, a handful of players still face a grim reality

best described by Emilio Sanchez: "Every kid who is playing wants to be a pro. The main problem is that the spots available are very, very few. Because in tennis you only have 100 top pros and these 100 pros don't change every year. So it's not like you have 100 chances every year to be a top 100 player because many of these guys can have careers lasting seven to 10 years and only a few guys slip or get injured or retire. So you may have five spots open up in the top 100 every year. Think about that for a minute. You're talking about maybe five spots for all the young players in the world, for all of the academies, for all of the federations all over the world (Nott, 2007)."

The reality a top junior player faces when making the transition from the US junior or the college level may be even grimmer. Players ranked 101 – 200 as well as many unranked players are stronger and more experienced than the typical newcomer and are fiercely fighting for a spot in the in the top 100. Also, the level of play as represented by the average speeds of the first and second serves at the college and junior level as contrasted to ranked ATP players is quite revealing. For example, the average first and second serve speed for 16 of the 32 players who made it to the 3rd round of the Men's Singles at Wimbledon in 2007, was 119 mph and 99 mph respectively as compared to 91 mph and 71 mph for a sample of nationally-ranked under 18 boys (Tennis Speed, 2007). Thus, a college or nationally ranked junior player would have to return serves that are on average 30 mph faster (and up to 40 mph faster) than he is accustomed to while his first and second serves, unless perfectly placed, will present him with a major weakness.

My second student was a super star baseball player who at every age group, starting at little league and continuing through college, was the best and most valuable player of the league, region, and the state he played in. He eventually became one of the top amateur baseball players in the Nation and was invited to pitch for a minor league baseball team. At the minors he was doing very well until he hurt his pitching shoulder. Several surgeries later, he came to our Kinesiology program and got his degree while trying to recover and rejoin the professional ranks. He managed to make it back to the pros for a very short time until he reinjured his shoulder. He then came to the realization that a career as a physical education teacher and coach would be a much more practical choice. He later returned to our program and completed his Masters degree in Kinesiology and is now a successful physical education teacher and coach. Over the past two decades I have had numerous undergraduate, as well as, graduate students in my classes that had very similar stories to tell. I doubt that my observations and experiences regarding this matter are unique in any way.

The final case study that I am presenting here originated from an email message I received from a "concerned mom." Following her visit to the [kidsfirstsoccer.com](http://kidsfirstsoccer.com) website she emailed me for help regarding the following question (Frankl, 2007):

“My teenager son has played football [soccer] since he could walk. I don't think he is an extremely gifted player but he does have a lot of determination and some good skills. He plays for his school and a local team. I keep asking him what he is going to do when he leaves school and he just keeps saying that all he wants to do is play football. I have tried to persuade him to consider other options including joining the armed forces and play for them. He just cannot see that he may not be a good enough footballer to play professionally. Can you give me any advice on either what to tell him or where I could take him either for training or consulting? Thank you. Concerned mom, North Wales.”

Based on her description of the problem she faced, I suspected that the concerned mom from North Wales was engaged in a clash of value differences with her teenager. According to Susan Carpenter and W.J.D. Kennedy "Asking someone to adjust his values is like asking him to alter his sense of reality." I thus pointed out in my answer that while it is possible to persuade a teenager with dreams to make it to the pros through the use of reason, it is not an easy task. The difficulty in negotiating a viable solution in a value differences conflict stems from the state that value differences are instigated not only from disagreements about the substance of a dispute but also out of disagreement about the proper resolution or the management of the issue under dispute. “Given the lack of agreement on both process and substance, parties involved in value conflicts tend to turn to force-based conflict options more often than negotiation or persuasive approaches, because force seems to be the only common language that both sides understand and honor (International Online Training Program On Intractable Conflict, 1998).”

The above is a common scenario that parents of teenager athletes who are overly committed to their sport may face. Value differences issues may be addressed through communications with the mediation of a social worker, therapist, school counselor or any other professional that the parent and her/his teenager may perceive as fair and willing to genuinely consider both positions. The position held by a 15 year-old teenager that he does not need to pay attention to his education since he plans to embark of a professional athletic career not only seems self-destructive but most probably is a recipe for disaster. The available evidence, some of which was discussed above, clearly indicates that the teenager in this case is setting himself up for a big disappointment. Following his current roadmap he may dig himself into a deep hole that he may later find very hard to climb out of.

Many parents share their child's passion for her or his sport and wish him or her all the best and genuinely hope that their child would be able to continue working hard on her/his dream. However, the child must also understand that even if he or she will end up realizing her/his dream, he or she still must also pursue his or her education. The mix of youth and lack of education with super stardom and lots of money is a very lethal combination. Also, in the more likely event of not making it, or making it just for a few months or 2-3 years, young athletes should

know "that nobody is going to give [her/him] a check . . . or give [her/him] a job because [he/she's a former [athlete]. It just doesn't work that way" (Member of the 1988 US Olympic team, cited in Coakley, 1994, p. 274).

As is the case in professional tennis, baseball, basketball, and/or American football, the prospect of a career as a professional football (soccer) player in North Wales or anywhere else on the British Islands does not seem very promising. According to Martin Johnes (2002), "With the exception of the 1920s, domestic Welsh football has not been able to offer the wages or glory that English clubs could and thus Wales' most talented players have plied their trades outside her borders. Similarly, Welsh professional clubs have employed strong contingents of English players." I found no data about the probability of making it into the professional football (soccer) ranks at this time but given the fact that soccer is no longer a national market, but rather a worldwide market (Bourke, 2003), the odds seem pretty grim. My speculation is based on the fact that young aspiring talents from around the globe may now post their videos and other materials online for scouts to review and thus substantially broaden the pool of potential new players. English football clubs can pay much better salaries than most soccer clubs in the world and that would also include American soccer clubs. I know of many young and very talented soccer players in the U.S. who dream about a professional career in England. This new reality makes the prospect of becoming a professional football player in England even more competitive than it has been in any other time in the history of professional football (soccer).

Those fortunate few who do make it to any one of the professional teams' rosters are still very far from "having it made." In a study about upward social mobility and British professional soccer players, Houlston (1982), reported that there was an overrepresentation of players from lower socioeconomic groups in the league. These players experienced a steady decline in earnings and a diminished social status as their playing career dwindled and eventually ended. Average earnings per year for this group declined from about 7,500.00 pounds/year to 3,500.00 - 4,500.00 pounds/year. Several studies in the U.S. indicate that compared to non-athletes, athletes with a college degree earn more and enjoy a higher occupational prestige in their 40s and 50s (Coakley, 2007). Clearly one's quality of life after competitive sports is very strongly related to one's level of education.

### **Concluding Remarks**

"Shooting for the stars" is a dream in the hearts of many aspiring young athletes that leads to a relatively short career in professional sports for a very select few. For this dream to not turn into a nightmare, however, one must keep her or his eyes wide open and never stop working on plan "B." Paying close attention to one's education, as it turns out, is critical for continued success in life for the many that never make it as a professional athlete. An additional growing concern with regard to young athletes' aspirations of becoming a super star is the ever increasing tendency for early specialization. The deleterious effects of extra

ordinary physical, physiological, and psychological demands on young and still growing bodies that stem from intense training and a heavy competition schedule are well documented in a statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness titled: Intensive Training and Sports Specialization in Young Athletes (2007, <http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/106/1/154>). Thus, when shooting for the stars one must first be sure to keep both feet on solid ground.

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