

RESEARCH NOTES

Representative Cricketers in New Zealand: Prospects For Collective Bargaining

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The study examined, by postal questionnaire and focus group interview techniques, the propensity to unionise/collectivise and to bargain collectively with team management amongst a group of semi-professional representative provincial cricketers. The paper reports on causal factors associated with the propensity of these sportspeople to deal collectively with team management and the factors in team management and team circumstances acting to block effective action by the players.

This is industrial relations !

The business of sport revolves around the attraction of public audience, the interest of the media, and around consumption. "Within sporting arenas the main event on centre field proceeds under the watchful gaze of the crowd. Standing on the sidelines, so to speak, spectators come to sporting events to follow, to support, to cheer on their team or competition, to be entertained, and to enter into the collective rise and fall of emotion that accompany the game's moments of passion." (Lynch 1991: 50)

For most of us sport constitutes a pastime or hobby, for others it is the centrepiece of life itself. Whatever your perspective on sport, it remains true that the relations between the parties involved in professional or semi-professional sports are based around the same distributive concepts as characterise labour relations generally: the distribution of money and the distribution of authority. Despite the national preoccupation with sport, the field of industrial relations in New Zealand has given scant attention to the employment relationship in sport. How can we ignore such compelling stories as that told by John Arlott, President of the Cricketers Association in England (1974), "Cricketers were the only

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British wage earners with no freedom of choice of employment, no representation, negotiation, arbitration, protection of independently framed conditions of employment. Most administrators believed that state of affairs should continue, while many players were alarmed by the possible consequences of attempting to redress it." (Sissons, 1988: 285).

Information concerning labour relations in New Zealand sport is essentially anecdotal. There is limited information about the process of contract development or administration, and there is no evidence of a scientific study of labour relations in New Zealand sport.

However, in 1994 and 1995 much attention has been focused on the payment of New Zealand athletes. To the forefront has been the prospective professionalisation of the national game. The New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) commissioned an \$80,000 report on the structuring of New Zealand domestic and international rugby and on the administration of players' financial conditions. Meanwhile, domestic rugby league went through a financial crisis which involved the unilateral scrapping of players' contracts by team managements. Athletes and officials returning from the Commonwealth Games were outspoken in blaming the shortfalls in professionalism in New Zealand sport for their poor performances. And to kick off the 1995 centenary cricket season we witnessed poor performances for which many people blame complacency on the part of the players' resulting from financial security, a contractual hitch in the sacking of the national coach, and a drugs scandal.

The present study was set in the blur between what New Zealanders know and what they don't know about the process of payment in sport. It took a specific focus, on a single first-class cricket team, but suggests some generalisable conclusions about the employment relationship in New Zealand sport.

Who earns the money anyway ?

There is a significant overseas literature based around studying professional sport as first and foremost a business, and particularly a business with a unique and important industrial relations climate.

It is clear that there are two consumers in the sports industry. First, the spectators attending matches or following television or radio broadcasts, and second, firms using a league via sponsorship and advertising. To attract and retain these consumers a number of restrictive controls are used by sporting administrators in an attempt to create or maintain a balanced, competitive league. Cairns, Jennet & Sloane (1992) call the concept of league balance "uncertainty of outcome". "Team performances are determined by their relative playing strengths and so activity in the labour market may either produce or reduce product uncertainty of outcome. This interdependence of the product and labour markets has frequently been cited in justification of restrictive controls on the ability of players to transfer freely from one club to another in search of higher earnings." (1992: 7)

Many authors (for example, Weisart, 1984; Noll, 1974; Bale and Maquire, 1994) consider sporting leagues as being natural monopolies. These authors emphasise the perception of

the league as a shared venture. They stress the co-operative nature of team sports, the financial interdependence and the way in which clubs cede significant authority to the league organisation.

As Braham Dabscheck has emphasised in many articles, the core battle of industrial relations in sport is players' and players associations' attempts to gain what they believe is a fair distribution of authority in their working relationship with the league's employers. Dabscheck on the reserve clause, "This monopsonic device, together with a system of maximum wages, severely limits the economic freedom and income of players." (1986: 357)

Eitzen and Sage (1991) claim that money has become the foundation of sport, even at the so-called amateur level. They suggest that the profit motive shapes the decisions of owners, school administrators and the corporations that use sport. As for the players, the employment relationship of sport is becoming increasingly complicated. Perhaps the most misunderstood of these complications is the fact that athletes' salaries must be balanced against the brief, often tenuous, nature of their careers. Further to this point, as Adam (1989) and Gallner (1974) explain, players are forced to deal independently with a number of complex issues that require expertise which in many cases the player will not possess. Areas such as contract negotiation, insurance, and taxation come under this heading.

Players associations have become reasonably commonplace in the world of sport as players have attempted to improve their working rights and conditions. Examples of sporting unions include the Rugby League Players Union (1979) which covers players in the New South Wales Rugby League, the Major League Baseball Players Association (1959), and the oldest continuous players' association the Professional Footballers Association (1907) for English and Scottish soccer players. In 1967 a cricketers association was formed in England; West Indian cricketers have also run a players association; and the Professional Cricketers Association of Australia was formed in 1977 with the advent of World Series Cricket.

Domestic cricket in New Zealand presently functions as a quasi-professional sport, with a smattering of professional players, and an inherent distinction between the richer provinces and the rest. Following the logic of collectivisation in pursuit of a fair share of revenue and a fair distribution of control, the question that this study asked was will New Zealand athletes pursue the collective approach?

The study

The study set out to examine the attitudes, perceptions, satisfactions, and dissatisfactions of the Otago first-class cricket team with regard to their employment relationship. The study examined variables that might influence the players in the Otago cricket team toward collective action in an effort to address some grievances which were made apparent in preliminary interviews with two players. A theory of collective action was developed from a review of the literature, and from this theory a testable model was derived.

Four sources of primary data were obtained. All the players in the Otago cricket squad were sent a written questionnaire. Following this a group of available players was interviewed. Additional insights were sought from two prominent retired international cricketers. And a senior member of the team was interviewed on a one-on-one basis.

The questionnaire was devised to test, in addition to the dependent variable, three independent factors predicted to influence the dependent variable - a propensity for collective action. It was hypothesised that three independent factors would be chiefly responsible for the employees' positive or negative propensity towards collective action. These factors were: (1) feelings / perceptions of group cohesion, (2) personal beliefs about trade unions, and (3) satisfaction with conditions of employment.

It was suggested that workgroups are generally passive and that an event or change in circumstances is generally required to trigger a group of employees into expressing any collective propensity. In addition, it was decided that it was necessary to test the existence of what became labelled the "counter-trigger to collective action". The counter-trigger being perceptions, on the part of the employees, of possible negative repercussions resulting from collective action.

Accordingly, two additional variables were measured, (1) the existence of a trigger to collective action, or an indication of what may constitute a trigger in the future, and (2) the existence, and strength, of a counter-trigger (and if one existed, its nature).

The questionnaire was divided into four sections and involved a total of 34 questions, each to be answered on a five point Likert scale. Section One of the questionnaire included 14 questions testing, "feelings of group cohesion or divisiveness"; for example, "I have a lot in common with my team-mates concerning day to day events during the cricket season." Section Two included ten questions testing the players' satisfaction with the conditions of their employment; for example, "Considering the commitments of time and effort required to play first-class cricket, the pay and allowances I receive are fair." Section Three included two scenarios in which certain players were portrayed as attempting to entice collective action. The questions related to the scenarios were devised to test the possibility of a counter-trigger in the minds of the players; for example, "I would be concerned that supporting attempts to change administrative restrictions or payment levels, in this way, may be detrimental to my position in the team." Section Four included questions testing each player's general beliefs about trade unions; for example, "I believe trade unions to be positive and useful organisations for working people generally." Finally, respondents were asked to supply some background information about themselves: age, occupation, dependents, years in first-class cricket, details of their own and their family's involvement with trade unions.

The interviews were conducted after the compilation and preliminary assessment of the questionnaire data. They were semi-structured but the aim was to gain an overall picture of the players' satisfactions / dissatisfactions, and hence gain increased insights to aid data interpretation.

Results

From the available group of 17 players, 15 fully completed questionnaires were received, constituting an 88 percent response rate. In addition to the returned questionnaires, six senior players returned additional comments and observations which provided very useful information. An SPSS statistics program was used to compile frequencies and percentages. Factor analysis (principle components method, varimax rotation) was then conducted on the questionnaire as a whole and for each independent construct. Reliability tests were then run for each construct. The constructs measured by the questionnaire were measured with very high validity. The independent constructs measured, and their reliability, are presented below.

	<u>Lambda 3</u>	<u>Construct</u>
Construct #1	.91	Group Cohesion
Construct #2	.74	Individualism
Construct #3	.90	Satisfaction with conditions of employment
Construct #4	.88	Satisfaction with managerial control
Construct #5		Counter-trigger to collective action
Construct #6	.95	Personal beliefs about trade unions

Factor analysis indicated that the dependent variable was measured but that it did not achieve significant levels of independent correlations. Meaning that the dependent variable was not measured separately from the independent attitudinal factors. Construct #5 did not achieve a high reliability rating; this appears to be a response to the use of scenarios in this section. This construct was accepted on the basis of face validity.

It was hypothesised that a high degree of group cohesion would encourage a group of employees toward collective action. The results for the group cohesion factor reflected three points of interest. First, in general terms, and in a general day to day instance, the players preferred the idea of acting collectively rather than individually concerning administrative matters. Also, the players felt that they had a high degree of shared interest. In fact 74 percent of the respondents felt, or strongly felt, that they had a lot in common with their team mates concerning day to day events during the cricket season.

Second, team members' perspectives on the business of cricket were very close and compatible. The only matter of significant difference between the players related to personal ambitions in the sport.

Third, the players suggested that differences in performance and perhaps ability would, in an equitable situation, be fairly translated into differences in rewards. Eighty percent of the respondents believed, most of them strongly, that pay should not be based on public attraction. However, 60 percent of the team believed that pay should be based around individual performance. The support for pay based around performance was widely endorsed in the group interview.

It was hypothesised that a degree of player dissatisfaction with terms and conditions of employment would be indicative of a propensity for collective action. A persuasive result was that the team as a whole was very dissatisfied in this regard. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents believed that, given the commitment required to play first-class cricket, the pay and allowances they received were unfair.

As the study expanded on the questionnaire findings of dissatisfaction, it became clear that the team's dissatisfaction had a distinctive nature. First, it was apparent that the players did not expect to make a lot of money out of first-class cricket. Instead, they objected to the loss of earnings and earning opportunities that came with their commitment to cricket. Consistent with this perspective, the players had a very negative view of the competence and efficiency of team management. This was so to the extent that they believed that if management was more competent and professional, then the players would earn more money for Otago cricket, and player payments could then increase.

It was hypothesised that negative beliefs about trade unions generally would lead to a lessened likelihood of the players engaging in collective action. The questionnaire results showed that the players were indifferent to trade unions, being neither strongly positive nor strongly negative. Some limited individual opposition could be said to be a mildly negative influence. However, discussions showed that in fact the players did not identify possible collective actions in their case as "trade union" actions. In this case, personal beliefs about trade unions were accordingly not necessarily predictive of propensity for collective action.

In the theoretical background to the study it was suggested that a trigger had to occur to prompt the team to act on its propensity for collective action. The findings in this case are consistent with the literature. It is difficult to predict what may constitute a trigger to action, but the data suggest that some change in circumstances which changes the players cost/benefit perceptions of collective action would act as a trigger to collective action. The cost/benefit calculation of the players in this case is directed towards what the players believe managements reaction to collective action may be.

Conclusions: cohesion and dissatisfaction versus reaction

It was hypothesised that there would be a positive relationship between a propensity to act collectively (the dependent variable) and several attitudinal variables (the independent

variables). The study did find a positive relationship between some of the independent attitudinal variables and a propensity to act collectively and it was concluded that the team was effectively ripe for collective action.

Also the study yielded two unanticipated findings. These related to the perceived competence of team management as explained in the last section. And secondly, to what could be termed an "intermediary counter-trigger". This is explained below as we answer the question: do we expect, given the teams positive propensity for collective action, the team to engage in collective action?

A counter-trigger to collective action is evident in the Otago team. This counter-trigger is strong enough that it blocks the team's expression of collective propensity. The counter-trigger to collective action in this case takes two forms. The first form is the attitudes held by the younger and less experienced members of the team. These players believe that their involvement in collective action would most likely have negative repercussions for their places in the team and their future aspirations in cricket. At the same time, these players also felt that collective action would most likely be unsuccessful in forcing change because of what they saw as the ineptness of team management.

The second form of counter-trigger is that held by the senior or more experienced players. These players felt less threatened by the possible consequences of collective action. Instead, they have a number of ideas about what form action could take and what the players could realistically expect as a result. These players believe that collective action would involve demands that team management act in a more professional manner, that administration becomes more efficient and that the players are better prepared to perform at peak capacity. This would involve, in the players' view, a number of inputs and ideas from the players into the management of the team, and would involve a slow building process as opposed to immediate change.

Interestingly, the younger and less experienced players when given these perspectives suggested that they would support such action. However, they would only support such action if it was led by the senior players and if the senior players took most of the responsibility. It is this factor which I have called an "intermediary counter-trigger" to collective action. Meaning that the senior players not instigating action serves to provide a counter-trigger to the younger and less experienced players.

It is concluded that collective action has yet to arise because the senior players have yet to instigate it. There appear to be a number of reasons for this: (1) the senior players don't feel the time and effort required for the form of action they envisage would result in enough reward; (2) the senior players feel that any reward coming from such action would possibly not benefit them at all as it would be a long-term process of change, (3) the senior players are not prepared to devote any more time to cricket responsibilities for which they do not get paid.

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