



The Role of Sports Agents in Men's Basketball in a Small Island State

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Original article

Article history:
Received: 28 July, 2023
Received in revised form: 11
December, 2023
Accepted: 20 December, 2023
Published online: 25 May,
2024

Keywords:
Small leagues
Sports agent
Sports career
Support

ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of sports agents in men's basketball on the small European island of Malta. The limited literature on sports agents considers them as athletes' key advisors throughout their careers. The impact sports agents have had and continue to have on player careers and the basketball industry is investigated in this qualitative study. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the Malta basketball scene including professional male basketball players that have played on the island, sports agents who have represented players in Malta, league representatives such as club presidents, and coaches with experience in coaching men's basketball in Malta. Results indicate the role of sports agents as being influential in facilitating contract signings of professional players. Sports agents are seen as beneficial in a professional basketball player's career, but they may also be difficult to deal with, especially for clubs. In addition, the interviewees spoke about how sports agents have influenced the overall average skill level of the Maltese men's 1st Division league, providing modes of improvement for Maltese basketball in general.

Introduction

Professional basketball players face unique challenges in managing the business side of their careers. Many primarily focus on training for their sport and may lack the knowledge and experience to manage the various aspects of their careers themselves. As a result, many players require the services of a sports agent to help them navigate the industry and make informed career decisions (Puscoci & Dragea, 2011), this, is even more so with the increase in professionalisation, commercialisation, and globalisation.

The role of sports agents in professional basketball is multifaceted (Bull & Faure, 2021; Staudohar, 2006). They act as mediators between players and clubs, connecting players with teams for future opportunities and finding suitable placements for players starting their professional basketball careers

How to Cite: Muscat, A., & Buhagiar, N. (2024). The Role of Sports Agents in Men's Basketball in a Small Island State. *Journal of New Studies in Sport Management*, 5(2), 1089-1102.
doi: 10.22103/jnssm.2023.21949.1211



(Van Rompuy & Margoni, 2009). They are also responsible for ensuring that players receive the necessary support from the teams they form part of, such as agreed-upon salaries and accommodation. They provide teams with valuable information about players, such as how they may fit into the team and their potential for success in specific leagues.

However, the role of sports agents is not without its challenges. Some players and teams view agents as unnecessary and even harmful to their careers, while some agents are not knowledgeable about the players they represent or the leagues they send them to, which can be detrimental to both players and the teams they play for. Trust and consistent communication are essential to build a strong player-agent relationship (Barnett, 2010). Agents must prioritize finding the best fit for the player based on their position, strengths, and the team's needs. They must also have considerable knowledge of the league and club officials to help the player adjust to the new country and league since athletes from a small island state have been found to face struggles when transitioning overseas (Muscat, Nesti, Richardson, & Littlewood, 2020).

Similar to the study of Calleja, Muscat, and Decelis (2022), this study is unique since it explores the role of sports agents in professional basketball in Malta, a small island in the Mediterranean that forms part of the European Union and with a population of less than a million. By conducting interviews with key stakeholders in the industry, one could analyse the role sports agents play in players careers and how they affect the men's league. It is hoped that this study will shed light on the roles of agents as advisors in the industry and any cultural implications of working in a small island state.

The existing literature on sports agents is very sparse with journal articles and academic books being practically nonexistent in the field, mostly seen as old in academic circles (Puscoci & Dragea, 2011; Staudohar, 2006) and focused on law aspects (Barnett, 2010) and regulation of the profession (Yilmaz, 2018). Existing literature focuses mostly on football (Rossi, Semens, & Borcard, 2016) and large countries such as the United States (Barnett, 2010) leaving a gap in understanding the role of sports agents in a smaller European league with just six participating clubs in the top league. In small leagues such as that in Malta, male basketball players concentrate primarily on training for their sport, which leaves them inexperienced in managing their careers' business aspects. Thus, many players require a sports agent to manage the business side of their careers (Cortis, 2011). Sports agents usually act as advisors to the athletes, promoting them to potential teams, exploring future job opportunities, and helping them to make sound financial choices, including negotiating contracts (Evans, 2010). Sports agents may at times also be seen as unnecessary and a hindrance to teams (Belzer, 2015).

The role of sports agents

Sports agents are the link between the personal and professional lives of athletes. They provide athletes with financial advice so less due diligence is carried out by the athlete to properly manage their finances and business-related endeavours (Stone, 2014). Although it is possible that professional athletes can represent themselves in contract negotiations, endorsement deals, and other business-related activities, it is rare for professional athletes to do so because they have a primary responsibility to perform during competitions and keep optimal physical shape year-round (Evans, 2010). As a result, athletes may have little to no time, energy, or knowledge to identify fair contractual agreements (Cortis, 2011).

In the 1990s, the profession of the sports agent was not as common as today because many professional athletes represented themselves with the support of their family members in contract negotiations (Cortis, 2011). The issue that many athletes faced as a result of not having professional representation was that during contract negotiations, athletes or family members who would oversee the athlete's professional contracts would lack experience and professional knowledge (Abela, Falzon, & Muscat, 2021; Muscat et al., 2020) and as a result, limit their negotiating power when transacting with teams or corporations contract salaries (Cortis, 2011). Therefore, athletes would often reach an agreement with a team on a contract that specifies a salary may have been short of what they could have earned in the said contract had they obtained representation from a sports agent (Franklin, 1998). The issues that may arise as a result of athletes representing themselves or being represented by family members suggests that sports agents are an asset to a professional athlete's

career by having the ability to increase an athlete's earning potential, helping the athlete fare better economically throughout their career (Zucker, 1997).

Currently, most professional athletes are represented by sports agents (Cortis, 2011). The latter work independently or in collaboration with larger ones, which are conglomerates that employ an abundance of sports agents, each of whom specialises in athlete representation within specific sports (Evans, 2010).

Financial management and contract negotiations

In collaboration with the athletes they represent, agents also advise their clients in contract negotiations between the athlete and brands who have an interest in sponsoring or endorsing them (Barnett, 2010; Bull & Faure, 2021; Purdy, Kohe, & Paulauskas, 2019). Professional athletes, especially those with a great deal of notoriety globally, have had their sports agent negotiate endorsement or sponsorship deals with globally recognized brands, such as that of LeBron's with his sports agent, Rich Paul (Bruell, 2021).

Addressing financial matters as well as life planning, have been acted on by sports agents (Staudohar, 2006). Players are advised by their agents on what to invest in and at times athletes may also seek their agent for help with finding their family's next home, or their children's new school (Bull & Faure, 2021; Cortis, 2011). Taking care of these matters can help the athlete take their mind off their stresses outside of training and competitions (Bull & Faure, 2021) and, thus, impact their performance positively (Zeplin, Galli, Visek, & Staples, 2014). As the athlete becomes more successful in their sport, brands may sponsor or endorse the athletes, which presents a great deal of business and logistics-related issues that need attention. Given the amount of money that is at stake in these contract negotiations, the topic of one's finances is sensitive for many people.

A sports agents' duties, functions, and responsibilities go beyond the usual role which a commercial agent typically carries out. There exists a fiduciary relationship between the sports agent and the athlete they are representing, therefore fiduciary obligations arise (Cortis, 2011). The agent can have a direct influence on where an athlete plays, how their investments are performing, which brands are interested in working with the athlete, and so on. Trust is crucial when multiple parties are in collaboration with each other in a business-related endeavour. This is especially the case with sports agents legally representing athletes, where the athlete's career and financial future can be on the line during contract negotiations (Belzer, 2015).

The unethical reputation of sports agents

Events in the past have shaped the public perception of sports agents, some of whom have been seen as fraudulent and unethical. Sports agents have been acquitted on charges related to bribery, money laundering, and other regulatory breaching (Jessop, 2019).

According to former and current sports agents, an argument can be made that the reputation of a sports agent's profession has been tarnished (Stone, 2014), in part due to the exposure of unprofessional agents such as Tim Collins, Abdul-Jabbar's former agent. Consequently, this can make the athlete shy away from working with a sports agent, question the authenticity of the profession, and at times opt to represent themselves (Belzer, 2015). Sports organisations in the past have also thought twice about negotiating with an athlete who is represented by a sports agent (Franklin, 1998). Given the fact that sports agents represent athletes in contract negotiations, illicit behaviour has scarred the reputation of the industry of athlete management, prompting professional athletes to refrain from utilising sports agents and instead, represent themselves (Stone, 2014).

The number of athletes in general opting to forgo an agent in contract negotiations is growing (Belzer, 2015). It is possible that athletes who are deciding to represent themselves feel they can better manage their careers as opposed to leaving such responsibilities in the hands of someone else. The appeal for athletes to manage themselves brings peace of mind and a strong sense of security because after all, the athlete, who is in possession of their earnings has full control over what they choose to do with their money, so they may not feel that they need career/financial advice from a sports agent. In this case, the athlete takes full responsibility for their contract, endorsement deals, and so on (Belzer, 2015). This responsibility off the court that many athletes are beginning to take on is

combined with the already intensive training schedule that enables the athlete to earn such lucrative contracts. This self-representation practice may benefit the athlete but may also work against them.

Risks involved with athletes representing themselves

Rutgers University professor, Jason Belzer, confirms that athletic representation via sports agents is still necessary, admitting that today's athlete has more opportunities than previous ones did, but also needs to deal with more challenging risks (Belzer, 2015). Belzer states that in contrast to what athletes who represent themselves may think, the role sports agents play when representing a client in contract negotiations requires more than knowledge of market value and worth of the player. Athletes who have opted to undergo contract negotiations without the assistance of a sports agent feel they are knowledgeable enough to agree with a team or brand on a contract under fair terms. These negotiations may however, be too complex for the average professional athlete to comprehend. Most of an athlete's lifetime income comes from their earnings on the court; thus, their contract negotiations require attention (Belzer, 2015).

Skepticism and challenges for sports agents

Professional sports teams negotiate contracts with consideration of the player's accolades, age, injury, and personal history, statistics, and position-specific wear-and-tear (Belzer, 2015). Additionally, sports agents can effectively compare players with a similar position and pay as a bargaining chip to negotiate with teams for a pay increase in their clients' contractual offers. The services a sports agent brings to the table for an athlete may be a key contributor to why athletes are getting paid more and more these days (Belzer, 2015). It may be unrealistic to think that players, especially young ones just getting started in their professional athletic careers, have the knowledge and expertise required to take care of their financial future, let alone negotiate with professional sports teams on what they feel they should be paid (Bull & Faure, 2021; Franklin, 1998).

There are options for athletes to represent themselves in contract negotiations that are effective in negotiating a fair contractual agreement between the athlete and team. It does not have to be a sports agent, but athletes who opt to represent themselves recognise that they should not go into contract negotiations without consulting anyone (Balsam, 2016). For athletes who intend to negotiate their contracts, the professional help they pursue is generally in the form of an hourly-rate lawyer. Having such a lawyer benefits the athlete by enabling them to obtain professional help without the need for the athlete to fork out a commission fee upon signing the contract (Balsam, 2016). Depending on the sport, sports league, or geographical jurisdiction, sports agents charge between 2% to 10% of the athlete's total contract earnings (Balsam, 2016).

Presence of sports agents in men's basketball in Malta

There are generally two to three professional basketball players in each 1st Division Men's team in Malta. Throughout the season, changes in the roster may be made by teams, who are free to replace or sign additional professional players to their team. During the 2021-22 season, there were a total of 17 professional basketball players employed by teams in the 1st Division Men's League (Eurobasket, 2023a). Out of these, 11 are currently represented by sports agents and were represented by agents throughout their time in Malta (Eurobasket, 2023a). The 1st Division Men's League only has six participating clubs in total (MBA, 2023).

The 1st Division Men's league through the duration of the 2021-2022 season saw Luxol and Gzira Athleta employ two professionals. Starlites and Mellicha employed three professionals and Depiro employed a total of five professional players (Eurobasket, 2023a). Virtually all of the professional players that play in the men's 1st Division are American or from a country other than Malta. Maltese players playing professionally do so abroad, except for one case, as Samuel Deguara was a one-of-a-kind Maltese professional player in the 1st Division men's league albeit for a short while (Aquilina, 2020) There is a lack of further data on professional players' seasons in the Maltese league before 2021-2022, however in the 2022-2023 season, the ratio of professional players with sports agents in comparison to professionals without a sports agent is consistent with the season prior, with a marginal 18 percent of professional players in the 1st Division not represented by sports agents (Eurobasket, 2023b).

There is insufficient evidence to conclude these statistics are irrefutable, with Eurobasket.com currently existing as the only database to cover the Maltese basketball leagues and the professional players of Maltese basketball teams (Eurobasket, 2023a). As it stands, there are no prior studies of public knowledge on the role sports agents play in a professional basketball player's career in Malta and how agents affect levels of competition in the league. Thus, a representation of both current and former 1st Division coaches, professional players, and acting presidents of basketball clubs in the 1st Division Men's League have been interviewed for this study to answer the following research questions (i) why should a professional basketball player have a sports agent? (ii) how do sports agents influence the competition levels in European semi-professional and professional basketball leagues?

Methodology

A qualitative method was utilised for this study as it allows for a deep exploration of the research topic and encourages clear insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives (Silverman, 2011). Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the method for data collection because they allowed for a controlled interview process while still enabling participants to freely express their views on the current state of the sports agent profession and Maltese basketball. Quantitative methods did not suit this study due to the potential lack of depth of the participants' responses that quantitative methods such as a questionnaire would produce.

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was utilised to select participants with knowledge and experience on the subject (Emmel, 2013). The sample size consisted of 12 participants, purposively selected based on their experience in the Maltese men's 1st Division basketball league. Four professional players, two club presidents, three coaches, and three sports agents were selected for the study as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant #1: Player	Played his first season professionally in the men's 1st Division league during the 2021-2022 season. Has no agent. Playing his 2 nd professional season in another country.
Participant #2: Coach	Coaches a men's 1st Division team in Malta currently. Has over a decade of coaching experience.
Participant #3: Maltese Club President	Acting president and CEO of a basketball club in Malta with 1st Division men's team.
Participant #4: Player	Started his professional basketball career in another country playing for multiple teams before finishing the 2 nd half of his rookie season with a 1st Division men's team. Has an agent.
Participant #5: Coach	Coaches a men's 1st Division team in Malta currently.
Participant #6: Agent	Sports agent who has represented multiple players who have played in Malta's 1st Division in recent years.
Participant #7: Coach	Coached several Maltese men's 1st Division teams in the past. Has multiple decades of coaching experience.
Participant #8: Player	Played his first season professionally in the men's 1st Division league during the 2022-2023 season. Has an agent.
Participant #9: Maltese Club President	Acting president and CEO of a basketball club in Malta with 1st Division men's team.
Participant #10: Agent	Sports agent who has represented a player who has played professionally in the men's 1st Division league.
Participant #11: Player	Currently playing professionally. Has an agent.
Participant #12: Agent	Sports agent who has represented multiple players who have played in Malta's 1st Division in recent years.

The inclusion criteria for participants such as coaches and presidents, was that they needed to have extensive experience in their respective fields. On the other hand, the inclusion criteria for professional players and sports agents was that they needed to be selected based on their track record as players and agents as well as their impact on the Maltese 1st Division league, respectively. The professional players interviewed were all non-Maltese due to the limited number of professional Maltese basketball players. A sample size of 12 interviewees is adequate for this study as it allowed for a range of perspectives to be shared by the various league representatives, including sports agents. The goal was to increase the diversity of responses, as well as to avoid bias towards relevant topics of discussion. The number of participants is not important in a qualitative study, the aim being to reach data saturation (Emmel, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

After getting the necessary permissions to proceed with the research from the University Research Ethics Committee, participants were sent an information letter through their publicly available email and social media pages. The interview participants who showed interest in participating, emailed the first author directly, provided consent before taking part in the study and were informed that their identities would be anonymised. The confidentiality of the data was also ensured by storing the recorded interviews and transcripts in a secure hard drive accessible only to the researchers. Participants were also informed that if at any point they felt uncomfortable with any of the questions or wanted to terminate the interview, they could do so.

Interviews

The interview questions were formulated following a review of the literature, keeping in mind the first author's experience in the field together with the participants' varied experience in basketball. The questions asked focused on the role of sports agents, in 1st Division Maltese basketball, as well as the sports agents' influence and role in the league in the past and present. The questions were designed to encourage the interviewees to express their unique opinions and experiences. Since the questions were open-ended, participants were able to express their experiences and opinions on the topic freely. Follow-up questions were also used to clarify any points of confusion or expand on interesting points raised by the participants.

Following a pilot study and some minor amendments to the interview protocol, arrangements were done to meet the participants at a venue and time of their convenience. The interviews were conducted by the first author, these were done face-to-face or over the phone since some of the interviewees were not residing in the same country as the researchers. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder mobile app with the participants' consent. The length of the interviews varied between thirty and 80 minutes and were conducted in the English language. These interviews were recorded during the 2022-2023 1st Division men's basketball season in Malta.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed suggested method which includes: (1) familiarising data, (2) initial coding, (3) searching for themes (4) reviewing themes (5) theme definition and labelling (6) report writing. Thus, first the data collected through the semi-structured interviews by the first author was transcribed verbatim and then categorized into commonly occurring themes. The second step in the data analysis process was to code the data line-by-line to determine the relevancy of the responses to the research question. This involved carefully reading through each transcript and identifying segments of data that were relevant to the research question. The purpose of this step was to break down the data into smaller segments that could be more easily analysed.

Once initial coding was completed step three involved reviewing the coded data to identify common viewpoints shared among participants relating to sports agents and Maltese basketball. This involved comparing and contrasting the coded data across all participants to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data. The purpose of this step was to identify themes that were relevant

to the research questions and that could be used to support the study's findings. The fourth step in the data analysis process was to critically review the identified themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data derived from each interview. This involved revisiting each theme and subtheme to ensure that they were supported by the coded data together with the second author. Any inconsistencies or discrepancies were addressed, and in step five, the themes were refined to better reflect the data. Finally, in step six, the themes identified within the interviews were presented in a narrative form, with selected quotes from the participants' interviews used to support themes and subthemes. This involved weaving together the various themes to create a cohesive story that accurately represented the data collected in the study.

Validity and Reliability

Throughout this study, steps were taken to remain reflexive and aware of the potential impact of the second author's own background and biases on the research process and findings. As a Maltese 1st Division basketball player, he acknowledged that his experiences and perspectives may have influenced the way he approached the research questions and analysed the data. To mitigate this, the first author engaged in regular reflexivity exercises and discussed interpretations with the second author and other peers. Additionally, effort was made to recruit a diverse sample of participants and to consider multiple perspectives in the analysis.

To ensure validity several strategies were employed to increase the rigor and accuracy of the methods employed. Obtaining data from multiple sources and perspectives allowed us to corroborate and validate findings across different data sources (Russell & Gregory, 2003). We employed a focused sampling strategy to recruit a diverse sample of participants that represented a range of characteristics and experiences relevant to the research questions. The authors then conducted member-checking with each respective participant to confirm the correctness of interpretations and ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented in the analysis (Candela, 2019). Finally, the authors engaged in a thorough review of the literature to situate the study within the broader research context and ensure that findings were consistent with existing research in the field. Overall, these strategies helped to increase the validity of the study and further enhance the credibility of the findings.

Results

This section delves into the key findings derived from the interviews with players, coaches, club presidents, and sports agents in the context of Maltese men's basketball. It serves as a foundation for understanding the complexities and opportunities associated with agent representation, the challenges faced in league growth, and the importance of fostering positive and productive relationships within the basketball community in a particular country. The main themes and sub-themes that emerged can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Codes, Subthemes and Themes Table

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Players navigating complexity	Transitional challenges	Non-linear path to success Finding agents that can truly help Making connections with agents Integrating pro players into roster Finding success in adaptive scenarios
	Club-player dynamics	Matching players with right teams Agency fees Team budgets Tension between player and coach Late payments from teams International mobility
Agents boost players' success	Agent representation	Crucial links to career opportunities Network for player exposure Player-agent connection

		Fitting players as professional in select leagues Agents securing player contracts
	Team perspective	Successful deals benefit players/clubs Honesty and transparency Taking risks Agents influencing teams Clauses protecting teams from agents Rule changes affecting agents' fees and player impact
	Less stress on player	Limit distractions Alleviate job search Financial investment advice Players focus on physical performance Mutual interest for player to win
Self-representation	Success without agents	Opportunity for player growth Managing oneself Favourable conditions for all parties Direct interaction with players and teams Accessibility to knowledge intermediaries
	Professional player success	Maltese league players moving to higher level Facing adversity head on Taking advantage of opportunities given Considering pros and cons before opting for representation
Agents contributing to league development	Traits of higher-level leagues in Europe	Professional coaches More funding Higher player salaries Matching pro players with needy teams More pro players in league
	Factors for league growth	Increasing exposure of 1 st Division league Investing for future generations Partnerships for development National coaching framework Pro players staying in league for multiple years

Players navigating complexity

Participant #4 stated that he found professional opportunities through his sports agent. The agent proved to be successful in securing professional opportunities for him and helped him participate in an elite-level league in Europe where virtually every player in it is considered a professional. However, there were also times where Participant #4 felt his agent could have done a better job of informing him about the team expectations and the kind of impact he is expected to make when on the court.

Transitional challenges

While Participant #4 has had a good relationship with his sports agent, there were instances where he and his agent were not on the same page. Participant #4 had opportunities to play in various countries as per the recommendation of his former coach. However, his agent advised against pursuing them, giving little explanation as to why. Participant #4 became wary of the internal interests of agents potentially conflicting with the players' best interests around this time as a result of this incident. Participant #4's agent advised him to sign in a league other than the Maltese 1st Division.

As sports agent Participant #12 stated, some (agents) may not have the necessary knowledge to adequately represent their players. Just as Participant #4 said, they "may advise players to take certain opportunities and avoid others based on their understanding of basketball leagues, levels of competition, the lifestyle in a particular country, and the potential for future opportunities." Additionally, President Participant #3 stated that, some clubs may be hesitant to work with agents due to the fees involved in signing players who have representation.

Club-player dynamics

In recent years, President #3 attests that regulations have been put in place to prioritize qualifications for sports agents representing basketball players. However, there are still loopholes that have the potential to complicate player-team transactions. He emphasises the need for contracts to be “crystal-clear” so there is no confusion or controversy throughout the term of the contract. Sports agent Participant #12 and President Participant #3, believe that more regulations are needed locally to mitigate the harm done by inexperienced agents to players.

Agents boost players’ success

All interviewees reported that sports agents primarily act as mediators between clubs and players, connecting professional players with clubs for future opportunities as well as finding a suitable placement for players just starting their professional basketball careers. The player's best interests should be prioritized above those of the agent, to benefit all parties involved. Participant #2, a professional coach states that sports agents are helpful for players in that they ensure players receive necessary support, such as agreed-upon salaries and accommodations. They are also responsible for providing teams with valuable information about players, such as how they may fit into the team and their potential for success in specific leagues. However, Participants #1, #3, and #4 consistently reported instances wherein sports agents were deemed untrustworthy, resulting in detrimental consequences for the careers of the players under their representation.

Agent representation

As Participant #3, a president notes, “Many professional players are brought to Malta through the work of sports agents.” He emphasises the integral role played by sports agents in the recruitment and placement of professional players in Malta. Participant #6’s observation underscores the substantial impact of sports agents in facilitating the international mobility of athletes and contributing to the growth and diversity of the basketball landscape in Malta.

Sports agent Participant #6 articulates the multifaceted strategies employed by agents to promote their clients' skills and abilities. The participant highlighted the dynamic approaches agents adopt, such as the creation of compelling highlight reels or player profiles that serve as visual showcases of their clients' athletic prowess. Additionally, Participant #6 underscored the significance of agents actively participating in scouting events and engaging in personal networking with representatives from various sports teams. This comprehensive approach to player promotion signifies the intricate and proactive role that agents play in navigating the competitive landscape of sports recruitment. The insights provided by Participant #6 shed light on the diverse and strategic efforts undertaken by sports agents to enhance the visibility and marketability of their clients within the sports industry.

Team perspective

It is especially difficult for some teams to sign players within the given budget of the club. Typically, sports agents represent the players who play professionally in Malta. Presidents of basketball clubs, such as Participant #3, regard this as an obstacle that hinders a basketball club’s ability to sign players given the agency fee involved. As it stands, this fee is 10% of the entire contract, “which can be thousands of euros in some cases,” Participant #3 confirms.

This situation between clubs and agents, specifically the club’s desperate reliance on agents to bring talented players to their team can escalate when teams have to make roster changes during the season. As Participant #3 mentions, most clubs “cannot comfortably sign additional players to replace the professionals they intend to cut from their team, resulting in teams refraining from making any changes.” Participant #3 does state however, that, this is not the case with all clubs, and there exist, albeit very few basketball clubs that “have the financial backing” to make such alterations to the team roster.

Coach Participant #2 claims that many clubs, such as the club he coaches, “value a player’s character as a factor when searching for free agents to sign.” Agents can help teams find the “exact kind of player they are interested in pursuing, both on and off the court.”

Self-representation

A player's agent attempted to sway the player into signing in another country rather than in Malta. According to Participant #4, "The move to this league would positively reflect the agent's reputation to place players in high-level professional leagues." On the other hand, Participant #4 adds that "the move that never happened to this lower-paying, yet higher-level league may have led to further opportunities to play in elite-level leagues with much higher pay in the future, at least that is what my agent told me." The level of Participant #4 at the time of his transfers between teams could have influenced his movement from team to team. To the agent's credit, Participant #4 found further opportunities to continue playing professionally, and his time in Malta is a prime example of this, however a situation such as this can push the player to self-represent himself.

Professional player success

Participant #2 believes that players represented by agents are perceived by teams as being of higher skill than those who are not represented. According to Participant #2, as well as coach Participant #7, this is because agents typically "only represent the most talented players." Theoretically, the more talented the player is, the more likely they are to receive offers from teams to play professionally. However, it is important to note that despite an agent's best efforts to have their players achieve contracts, unfortunately, player Participant #8 admitted, "These opportunities do not always come for players with agents."

While agents can be costly, Participant #2 believes it is important for teams to be willing to pay agent fees to secure the most talented players. Sports agent Participant #12 emphasizes that the agent needs to advise the player on what is best for their career moving forward. This is vital, as Participants #2, #3, and #12 on the other hand, remarked on instances where the agents they were in contact with did not know the regulations of the league. This influenced the participants decision to not collaborate with such agents.

Success without agents

Participant #1's case highlights that athletes can succeed without sports agents, however, some athletes may not have access to knowledgeable intermediaries, such as family members, to negotiate a fair deal. Participant #1's case serves as a compelling example, illustrating that athletes can indeed thrive without the direct involvement of sports agents. However, it also sheds light on the broader reality that some athletes, due to various circumstances, may not have readily available access to knowledgeable intermediaries, such as family members, capable of skillfully negotiating contracts and ensuring equitable deals in the competitive realm of sports.

Agents contributing to league development

Coach Participant #5, notes that "there has been a decline due to a generation gap where the work ethic and appetite to improve the skill set among current players are inferior to those of previous generations." To address this issue, Participant #5 thinks investing in educating coaches/leaders and promoting the game in the mini-basket section can instill a love and passion for the game. Participant #5 makes the point that "the players they (agents) send to Maltese clubs generally do not stay long and fail to make a lasting impact on their basketball clubs."

Participant #5 noted that "very few professional players have left a mark in the local scene. Some agents use the local league to offload players who cannot find signings in better leagues, rather than genuinely facilitating the development of the local scene." He adds that if monetary budgets rise to expectations, top-quality players may consider Malta, but "local clubs must step up to provide an environment that is in line with their abilities."

Traits of higher leagues in Europe

Half of all participants believe higher salaries for players provide more of an incentive for more talented players to play in the league. All agree that more basketball clubs are needed and that a small league stagnates the level of play since the teams play each other in competitions so often. Participants cite other leagues in Europe with much more structure and pathways for growth and stability that remain applicable to Malta's league in an attempt to make the league better. Eight out of the twelve

participants believe that a rule change, already applied by other leagues, to increase the number of non-Maltese or homegrown players on the court at a time per team would allow for more professional players to compete at the same time, bolstering the level of competition on the basketball court. Half of the participants stated that having more basketball facilities around the Maltese islands would help grow the game further by introducing the game to disenfranchised communities and future generations of athletes. Taking these necessary steps to improve the level of play can open many opportunities for players in search of representation from a sports agent to help find them an opportunity to play professionally.

Factors for league growth

Participant #6, a sports agent also highlights the challenges faced by agents in assessing players due to the lack of reliable statistics in lower-level leagues such as the 1st Division in Malta, although these have since improved in their reliability with dedicated statisticians in attendance at every game. Participant #6 suggests that partnerships with entities in larger markets, such as Italian sponsors and basketball leagues could potentially be a solution to developing local talent by increasing exposure and resources for player development. Additionally, Participant #6 mentions sponsorship and marketing is another topic that requires further investigation and can help determine a better way forward to ensure basketball clubs have sustainable financial backing as the league aims to grow.

Discussion and Conclusion

Agents must have a thorough understanding of each player they represent and the leagues they send their players to, to provide the best opportunities for their clients (Bull & Faure, 2021). Building a strong player-agent relationship requires trust and consistent communication. Players who have agent representation trust their agents to act as advisors, helping them make informed career decisions based on the agent's knowledge of basketball leagues, levels of competition, and living conditions in various countries (Van Rompuy & Margoni, 2009). However, some agents are not knowledgeable about the players they represent or the leagues they send them to, which can be detrimental to the players and the teams they play for. Agents must be able to market their players effectively.

Agents and their lack of knowledge of particular league regulations has the potential to harm the player, who ultimately, is the individual that is having to experience and adapt to these new situations firsthand. Participant #2, encountered a sports agent representing a player that their club was considering signing. The agent did not know how many non-nationals are allowed on the court at a time per team. As Participant #2's team already had more than two non-national players on the team, the agent's lack of knowledge could have hindered the player's growth and future opportunities by potentially sending him to a team where he would have to share playing time.

Agents have a pivotal responsibility in safeguarding the interests and well-being of their clients. In alignment with the assertion made by Pusocci and Dragea (2011), which suggests that sports agents may offer personal counseling, Participant #6 highlights that agents, including himself, can extend emotional support to players during challenging periods, such as injuries or personal struggles. In these situations, agents assume a role akin to that of a therapist for players. This underscores the multifaceted nature of the agent-player relationship, wherein agents not only navigate professional aspects but also provide crucial emotional support to enhance the overall welfare of their clients.

Participant #8 encountered a journey marked by engagements with several agents before ultimately securing a professional playing opportunity in Malta. Despite boasting an extensive basketball resume, the participant faced challenges as his previous agents were unable to secure a fitting placement for him. This experience sheds light on the complexity of player-agent dynamics, emphasizing that even individuals with notable representation may not always find immediate opportunities to play. It underscores the unpredictable nature of the sports industry and the varied factors that influence the trajectory of a player's career, reinforcing the notion that success is not solely guaranteed by having top-tier representation.

Players need to be informed about all team offers available, and agents need to be transparent with their clients about these offers (Bull & Faure, 2021). Participant #4 placed trust in his agent to find

him professional opportunities as well as evaluate the best options for the player to make for his career but a lack of communication created confusion and disappointment.

Unfortunately, in some cases, agents have been known to exploit their clients for personal gain, engaging in unethical or illegal practices. For example, some agents have been found to collect fees from both players and teams or to pressure players into signing contracts that are not in their best interests (Berger, 2015). Such practices can have serious consequences for players, including financial losses and damage to their careers. To address these issues, regulatory bodies such as the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) have established guidelines and standards of conduct for sports agents, aimed at promoting transparency, fairness, and ethical behavior in the industry (NBPA, 2019).

Teams must be willing to pay agent fees to acquire the most talented players. This benefits teams by allowing them to find the player that best fits their team and ultimately gives them the best opportunity to win championships. Agents need to be informed of the leagues they are marketing their players to (Van Rompuy & Margoni, 2009) and provide guidance regarding the optimal career decisions for future progression.

Sports agents have a direct influence on the number of professional players that come to Malta to play basketball. However, there is a risk that clubs may not do their due diligence in finding the right player for the team. This can result in mismatches in terms of the player's skillset and the club's needs. Clubs need to be proactive in their talent identification process and work closely with agents to ensure that they are getting the right players for their team. Some clubs shy away from working with sports agents due to their unwillingness to pay them their commission fee (Staudohar, 2006), but often do not have the right skills to sign the right player for their team.

Basketball clubs prefer not to make roster changes during the season, but there are cases where coaches, as well as team managers, deem the changes necessary. For example, both presidents that were interviewed acknowledge the need to change professional players when there is either too much conflict between the professionals and local players, or coaches on the team. Another reason a player may be changed during the season is that players are sometimes let go due to their poor performances on the court. Clubs that make these changes indicate they are trying to remain competitive as they find solutions in the form of new players to help the team win as many games as possible.

Agents must understand the strengths and weaknesses of their players, as well as their past experiences and the opinions of their past coaches, to make informed decisions. They must also be knowledgeable about the rules and regulations of each league to find the best fit for the player. However, not all agents are knowledgeable about the players they represent or the leagues they send their players to, which can be detrimental to both players and the teams they play for (Cortis, 2011).

The contribution of agents to the Maltese basketball scene extends beyond the individual players they represent, also offering substantial benefits to teams. Agents serve as conduits of crucial information, providing teams with comprehensive insights into their players' profiles. This encompasses a nuanced understanding of not only their on-court abilities but also their off-court character, work ethic, and overall suitability for the team dynamic. By acting as intermediaries between players and teams, agents facilitate a more informed decision-making process for team management, helping them assess the holistic value that a player brings to the organization.

Agents play a crucial role in championing the interests of players, ensuring not only the provision of essential accommodations but also the fulfilment of agreed-upon salaries as stipulated in their contracts (Bull & Faure, 2021). Beyond these foundational responsibilities, agents undertake the task of strategically marketing their players to potential teams, aiming to secure lucrative opportunities that not only propel the athletes' careers but also yield a commission fee for the agents. This dynamic becomes especially significant for professional players competing in lower-level leagues, where stellar performances may merit new opportunities for career advancement. The agent's dual role as a supporter of players' well-being and a catalyst for their professional growth highlights the multifaceted nature of their responsibilities within the landscape of sports representation.

As experienced by player #4, the agent facilitated his placement in various teams in different countries throughout Europe, which allowed him to gain experience and improve his skills as a player. The agent was able to connect the player with other teams within a short period, which could have

been difficult for some agents to achieve. This example highlights instances where agents can be crucial in elevating player's out of contract vulnerability and finding them another job.

Participant #5 believes that fostering a love and passion for the game can be achieved by investing in the education of coaches and leaders, as well as promoting the sport within the mini-basket section, which is paramount for the basketball development of future generations. Along with this, there should be competent personnel to instruct players and develop their skills to a threshold where the player can compete at a high level. This investment in local individuals and better resources for coaches can build a stronger mentality to be more competitive. The intricacy of the issue of Malta's competition level taking a dip despite the consistent presence of professional players on teams indicates a greater issue is at large involving sports agents and their ability to make a lasting impact on the league.

According to participant #5, sports agents may be already equipped to mediate contract signings for Maltese clubs that benefit a club's long-term vision for developing their local players. Unfortunately, this is not what is being done the majority of the time. Sports agents can clear the communication gap between the player and the club by expressing to each party what is expected of them as established in the contract. Beyond the contract however are seemingly subtle yet potentially transformational decisions sports agents can make to benefit the long-term future of a basketball club, especially in Malta. Sports agents can find players that are not only skilled but also make the players around them better. This encourages the local development of players by maximising the advantages of having foreign professional players on basketball teams in the 1st Division.

While some argue that sports agents are essential for athletes to succeed in their careers, others believe that athletes can negotiate their contracts and navigate their careers without representation (Belzer, 2015). Without professional representation, athletes may be at a disadvantage in negotiating the terms of their contract and may end up with a less favorable deal. Additionally, if there are any disputes or legal issues that arise during the course of the contract, athletes without professional representation may find it more challenging to navigate these issues effectively. Thus, it is crucial to consider the pros and cons of working with a sports agent before making any commitments.

Some interviewees shared common perceptions about player development and the growth of the league. To address these issues, interviewees proposed specific adaptations to league formats based on their experiences in different roles, such as club presidents, coaches, and sports agents. The proposed adaptations are supported by the interviewees' years of experience and anecdotes, which provide a clearer vision for the growth of the sports agent profession and the improvement of leagues.

Sports agents play a crucial role in the careers of professional basketball players in Malta, helping them make informed career decisions and connecting them with teams. The interviews provided valuable insights, with each participant offering unique perspectives that enriched the findings. Despite the significance of sports agents, challenges exist, such as some players and teams viewing agents as unnecessary or uninformed. Trust and communication are vital for a strong player-agent relationship, and agents must prioritize finding the best fit for the player. This study has provided a comprehensive overview, highlighting the importance of agents and the challenges they themselves and players face. Further research can explore strategies to overcome these challenges and improve the experience and outcomes for professional basketball players in small nations such as Malta.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the players, coaches, agents and club presidents who participated in this study.

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