Exploring summer student employment in the USA: British perspectives of the Camp America and soccer coaching experience.

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Abstract

Youth summer camps are an established element of American culture. These camps typically focus on a range of activities, including educational, sporting and health-related pursuits. Such is the extent of involvement in the camps there is a considerable and consistent need for workers. Participation in recreational sport is also a significant part of American contemporary youth culture and education. Interest in playing soccer in particular continues to grow among young male and female Americans. Nationally however there is a lack of recreational-level instructional expertise in the sport. As a consequence, a market has emerged for international student volunteers and employees to work both on summer camps and for soccer-specific coaching companies. Given the similar linguistic and socio-political parallels between British and American society, an increasing number of students from UK universities are gaining access to short-term positions in this industry. This paper examines the perspective of British students who have held such positions, in relation to the logistical and cultural characteristics and the value and challenges associated with summer work of this nature. Interviews were conducted with six camp counsellors and six soccer coaches. Camp America was found to be a challenging, demanding but rewarding experience. It was suggested that the range of activities and responsibilities required of a counsellor helped develop their skills and capacity to perform under pressure. This role was considered to be a positive experience in preparation for trainee or prospective teachers. Given the relatively limited duration of individual soccer programmes, soccer coaches were typically exposed to a higher number of children, locations and experiences within the period of their contract. Whilst the role was described as demanding it also provided opportunities to explore the country. The paper concludes that both positions; one voluntary and one paid, facilitated a cultural exchange of ideas and an increased appreciation of the sporting, cultural and political characteristics of American society.

N.B. “Football” is referred to in this article as “soccer”, because that is the term most frequently used by the majority of research participants, and within much of the literature which focuses on this subject in the USA. The word is derived from the term “association” for which it is a form of abbreviation. When representatives of the English public schools met during
the nineteenth century to clarify the regulations of football, insurmountable disagreements led to the formation of two codes of football, namely rugby football and association football. The former was named after the school which pioneered the handling game and the latter after the association of schools wishing to prohibit rules such as handling (Rookwood and Buckley, 2007). The subsequent global proliferation of association football led the widespread dropping of the term “association”. National variations of football developed in other countries including America, Australia and Ireland. The popularity of these led to the term football being used for American, Australian Rules and Gaelic versions respectively, with association football in these countries typically referred to as “soccer”.

**Introduction**

The youth population of USA has long been engaged in a ‘camp culture’. During vacation periods, particularly in the summer, many pupils partake in holiday camps. Although the extensive number of available camps focuses on a variety of cultural components including health and education, sport remains one of the key elements on a national basis (Ewing, Seefeldt and Brown, 1996). Woven into the patterns of most major institutions, sport is one of the most popular cultural practices in American society, to the extent that involvement in sport in some capacity is considered almost a ‘public duty’ (Sage, 1998). Many camps reflect and contribute towards this fascination and dedication to sport. Such is the extent of participation in summer camps from young Americans there has been an increasing need and opportunity for international volunteers and employees. Many of these come from the student base of the British university system. This partly reflects the socio-political, cultural and linguistic similarities between American and British society. The demand for UK personnel might also be explained by the popularity of soccer and the keenness of many UK students to get involved with coaching. The number of soccer-specific programmes has grown rapidly since the 1980s, often employing students from UK institutions on short-term (and sometimes long-term) contracts. This article focuses on two forms of ‘employment’, namely Camp America, which typically adopts a multi-disciplined focus, and companies which offer sports coaching solely in soccer. A number of businesses in both industries rely heavily and in some cases exclusively on British workers. Despite significant levels of participation on these camps from British students, minimal research exists which examines the motivations, logistics, advantages and challenges associated with the experience from the perspective of student workers. Previous investigations have tended to focus more on children’s participation and the philosophy underpinning summer camps. The lack of existing work coupled with the continued expansion of the industry highlights the need for this study.

Camp America is a globally recognised phenomenon, and is described by Koch (2005) as the most extensive summer work experience programme in the world. There are a
number of different agencies that provide a similar service and range of experiences for participants, including *Camp Counsellors USA*. However, businesses of this sort are commonly referred to collectively as Camp America. According to *Camp Counsellors USA* (2008) the roots of this tradition were planted in 1861. Smith (2000) offers a historical account of the foundation of American summer camps, noting that the Gunnery Camp established in that year was the first of this kind. Founded by school teacher Frederick Gunn, this initiative involved taking the entire school away to camp for a fortnight, with pupils partaking in a variety of activities. Gunn dedicated the next twelve years to developing what has since become a national tradition, and he is credited as being the founder of organised youth camps in America (Smith, 2000). In 1910 the *American Camp Association* (ACA) was founded, an organisation which considers its role to involve promoting, preserving and improving the camp experience (ACA, 2008). Currently they accredit over 2,400 camps, each of which is instructed to implement more than 300 specific regulations. These rules facilitate the primary functions of this organisation (ACA, 2008). Not all camps come under the jurisdiction of the ACA however. Koch (2005) claims that over 12,000 American summer camps operate each year, catering to more than 10,000,000 children. Although the history of soccer-specific “clinics” (i.e. non-residential camps) is comparatively less extensive, there is a number of well established nationally recognised soccer coaching companies currently in existence. *Major League Soccer* (MLS) was among the first to be founded. Formed in 1969, this company is renowned for acquiring the services of British university students. Presently 270,000 players and coaches take part in MLS camps each year (MLS, 2005). *Challenger Sports* adopt a similar approach to employment, and currently employ the most personnel on an annual basis. Founded in 1985 as the *All American Indoor Sports Incorporated*, the name changed to Challenger Sports in 1997. Although several other companies exist or have since existed including *Britannia Soccer, Noga and Pro-Excel*, many of these organisations have disbanded or merged, or have not become operational on a national basis. MLS and Challenger are considered the two dominant nationwide organisations in this industry.

This article examines the previously underrepresented perspectives of British students who have held short-term positions in America. Twelve individuals participated in this study, six from each industry. The opinions of three males and three females were gauged for each category. Respondents were only selected if they had worked in a variety of different camps in at least three states. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, in order to gain an insight into the workers’ experiences (Silverman, 1997). This method provides a rich source of data to support qualitative inquiries of this nature (Gratton and Jones, 2004). Responses are coded to denote employment type and participant number. Quotations from [paid] soccer coaches are outlined by the letters “SC” followed by a number, with “CA” emphasis-
ing a remark from a Camp America [volunteer] worker. Respondents were invited to comment on their experience in terms of the socio-political and logistical characteristics associated with working in such environments. Questions were also posed regarding the value and challenges of their positions. The responses from interviewees and a related discussion form the structure of the remainder of this article. This paper is constructed by two writers with personal experience in this area. The first author worked as a Camp America counsellor in 2007 and 2008 in Maine. The second author has travelled to all fifty American states, and was employed by Britannia Soccer and Pro Excel as a soccer coach working on camps across twenty states during three consecutive summers commencing in 1999.

**International volunteering and employment in USA**

One of the key differences between the two positions discussed here; volunteer or employee hinges upon the issue of financial compensation (not just pay). For British staff on short-term contracts, Camp America essentially operates on a voluntary basis. Staff or “counsellors” are given some financial reward, but as one interviewee explained: “...If you want to just earn money don’t go on Camp America. You go for the experience. You get pocket money each week but it’s not much. Sometimes they help with flight money and visas but you would earn more in England doing the same job” (CA3). Soccer coaches are paid each week but their wages were considered: “Usually quite low. If you’re on your fourth or fifth summer or you are directing a camp as well as leading it, or you do double sessions then you get more money. But you don’t get well paid for what you do” (SC4). Therefore the inconsequential or non-existent financial reward was not considered a key reason for applying for such positions. Instead, “…working on the camps is really more volunteering. But there’s loads of benefits to that, especially abroad” (CA2). As Dann (2002: 240) notes:

> Travelling is a way to discover new things about ourselves and learn to see ourselves more clearly. Volunteering is a way to spend time within a different culture, to become part of a different community, to experience life from a different perspective.

Cole (2008) notes that student volunteering dates back to the nineteenth century, when universities established missions in deprived inner-city areas, encouraging assistance from students. Lautenschlager (1992) contends that volunteerism in America is inspired by the concept of mutual help and co-operation, which is rooted in the traditions and values of the pioneers who helped forge American culture. Volunteering, travelling, and overseas employment have recently come to be viewed as attractive elements of the British student experience (Hall and Hall, 2006; Sugden, 2007), particularly regarding gap year and summer employment opportunities (Simpson, 2004). Meier and Stutzer suggest that “volunteering constitutes one of the most important pro-social skills” (2004: 39). More specifically, Deepak (2007) claims that
student volunteers are amongst the most active students, who identify and serve the needs of their local and wider community, dealing with challenging situations, and interacting with diverse groups of people. Ellis and Campbell (2005) state that volunteering is usually undertaken by those who choose to go beyond their basic obligations, acting in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit. The industries explored in this work may not always necessarily serve as examples of volunteerism in the strictest sense, however as one respondent argued: “…A lot of what you do you don’t get paid for, so therefore most of it is voluntary” (CA1).

Krumpelmann (2006) argues that undertaking work of this nature can support a student’s educational development and further their career prospects. This is true particularly in light of the increasing competition in the UK graduate employment market (Bartley, 2008). On a related point, the growing popularity of summer positions in America was also thought to be linked to the enhanced competition for jobs in the UK: “…A lot of people do it as it can be a struggle to find work in England. But then, having worked in America your CV improves as do your personal skills, so it’s easier to find work back home” (SC6). A similar argument was also raised by Simpson (2004) who agreed with the benefits of the Camp America type experience. Another respondent noted the socio-political suitability of British students working or volunteering in America: “…England has a strong connection to America in politics and socially. So it’s easy enough for us to get working visas and to adapt to the American lifestyle. Plus a lot of camps are in places you wouldn’t normally see if you were just travelling… You learn from those you work with and the people you meet” (SC1). Krumpelmann (2006: 176) also notes the value of taking up such a position in America, claiming that the variation in participants, staff and organisers one interacts with helps create an “environment for enriching cross-cultural exchanges”. Respondents also commented on the possibility to travel after completing contractual responsibilities, with one interviewee arguing that: “…America is easy to get around and there’s so much to see. If you can put up with the ban on drinking until you’re 21 and the nightmare customs can be, it’s one of the best places on earth” (CA5). Similarly, Mills (2004: 13) suggests that the expanse of land and variety of cultures available to explore is another reason to travel after working in America because, “USA is so large that a lifetime of visits would hardly exhaust its potential”.

**The Camp America experience: coaching as a volunteer**

The majority of respondents commented on the extent of responsibility, the variety of activities, and the challenges associated with working on Camp America. When asked to describe the experience one interviewee stated: “…its half teaching, half babysitting. You are with the kids all the time. You get to do so many things with
them, but it’s hard work. You eat, sleep, work, play, virtually always with the kids” (CA6). After successfully completing the application process, workers are assigned to a particular camp for approximately three months. The focus of the camp often suits their preference and abilities, although there are some exceptions to this: “…Most people who chose to go on sport camps get to do that, but sometimes if places are short then you go where you’re told. But you have a good time wherever you go” (CA2). Respondents did however comment on the range of “external pressures” workers are subjected to. Interviewees noted for example that camp directors often lived on site, which: “…added to the pressure of doing well and looking after the kids. You can’t relax often because there is always so much work to do and you’re always being watched” (CA2). In addition, another argued: “It’s more than coaching. You have to be with kids practically all the time” (CA4). Most counsellors reported that they had to stay in a cabin with at least one other counsellor and around six children of similar ages, where they had to act: “…as their mum, dad, coach, big brother and entertainer all rolled into one” (CA6). Ditter (1999) offers a similar contention, stating that the role of a camp counsellor involves being a friend, a surrogate parent and a coach. One interviewee claimed this approach enabled: “…A deeper understanding of a place and a group of kids. If you moved around all the time you wouldn’t get that. It’s more like school in that way, so it was good preparation for my PGCE” (CA4). Smith (2000) makes a similar point, claiming that living with a group of people and experiencing new activities provides valuable lessons for counsellors.

The multi-sport camps were said to offer staff as well as participants the opportunity to: “…try new things. I was a lifeguard, and worked on outdoor sports like canoeing, as well as gymnastics” (CA5). Another interviewee stated that: “…the Americans play so many sports that you have to be able to coach lots of sports. It was a good chance to learn about their culture and the facilities were amazing. Plus the variety stops you and the kids getting bored” (CA1). The diverse range of activities on offer at the camps was also considered a challenging aspect of Camp America for some respondents, one of which noted: “…having to coach so many sports and do so many things you’ve not done before, you’re outside of your comfort zone” (SC5). The same participant noted however that in doing so: “…you learn about yourself and what you can do. I’m more confident now of being able to cope with awkward situations” (SC5). Another demanding aspect of the role involved being subjected to “…some really difficult kids. Some are sent away to camp and don’t want to be there. Or they don’t like some of the activities. Trying to get kids with mixed abilities involved and interested and to behave is hard. But it helped practice my coaching skills and it made me realise I definitely want to be a teacher when I finish uni” (CA3). Therefore this was considered a useful experience for those wishing to become teachers: “…adapting to a different continent, new pressures and demands is good practice for teaching. Most people aren’t prepared for it, but go away with new skills and ways of working”.
The Camp America experience was described as challenging and rewarding by each interviewee. The facilities available and opportunities open to counsellors were considered unparalleled by equivalent experiences in Britain. The exposure to new ideas and exchange of sporting and cultural practices were also discussed as positive elements of working on a camp in the USA. Some participants made negative comments about having to remain in a fixed location, but most enjoyed the depth of experience, and argued that: “…you can take a few weeks after camp to travel and do your own thing. By doing both you get a better CV, a better understanding of American culture and the chance to spend three months in the sunshine playing sport. What’s not to like?” (CA2). Another claimed that: “…to have another continent on your CV is massive, and it says a lot about you as a person regardless of what line of work you go into” (CA5). The assortment of the children's backgrounds, abilities and experiences and the range of activities available were thought to improve a counsellor’s capacity to adapt to alien environments, to promote interaction amongst those under their supervision, and to help the campers maximise their potential as young socially responsible beings.

**Soccer coaching in America: as a paid employee**

Responses gauged from soccer coaches suggested that this form of employment provides a very different experience for British students compared with Camp America. There are a number of prerequisites to obtaining a place which are applicable to both positions. These include an interview and the visa application procedure required for all those wishing to work in USA. Unlike Camp America however, coaching companies such as Challenger now insist that applicants attend a training day or weekend in the UK before being accepted for a position. This was said to ensure that prospective coaches are of the required standard and meet the desired specifications of the employers: “…the training day was good as you feel prepared when you go out as you know what to expect. Plus you know you can rely on the other coaches as they’ve been though the same thing” (SC2). However, some interviewees offered a variety of opinions regarding the set up and locations of soccer camps. Some said they were based in one area for the duration of their contract whilst others commented that: “…most lads move around a lot. You coach Monday to Friday. So you ring head office on Thursday and they say where you are the next week, how big the camp is and who you’ll be working with. It’s exciting finding out” (SC4). Most instructors found that although some regulations existed, the coaches were largely responsible for them-
selves: “…you can be 1,000 miles away from head office at some camps. As long as you stay out of trouble and do your coaching, your time is your own” (SC3). The tendency for coaches to travel during the weekend was considered another positive element of the experience: “…you get to go out in different places and meet up with people you know. Plus you take detours if something is nearby. One weekend we went to Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon as our camp was between them” (SC6).

In addition, coaches are given temporary memberships to motels and petrol cards to purchase fuel, together with rental cars (typically one between four): “…you don’t pay for accommodation or transport. It’s just food and drink at the weekend, but that’s it really” (SC1). Respondents claimed that this experience is: “…ideal as it lets you travel and work. You improve your coaching; your CV and job chances back home, and see America. Some travel at the end of the summer, but most have already seen so much they just want to go back to England” (SC5). During each coaching week, workers typically stayed with host families, usually on their own: “…the soccer clinics aren’t residential so you stay with families. That helps you learn about the American way of life. And you’re on your own so you’re forced to come out of your shell. It’s good as they tend to show off and treat you all the time, but that means you’re always working in a way. If you get a bad family it can be a nightmare” (SC5). However, as another coach argued: “…you don’t pay for anything, and only stay five or six days at each place, and then you can go out at the weekend. The wages aren’t great so it helps you afford it” (SC4). Leffel (2004) suggests that lodging with host families when based in an alien environment allows for an insider’s perspective of how people live, a contention reflected in this research: “…you see how they act as families, what they eat and how they spend their time. And you learn a lot just from conversations at dinner. If you were just coaching you wouldn’t get that chance” (SC3).

As with Camp America, the soccer coaches also noted that the children they worked with reflected a range of ages, abilities, ethnicities, motivations and experiences. Such diversity appeared more apparent for the soccer coaches however, given the number of different camps and locations in which they worked: “…you can be in the Bronx one week and the Hamptons the next. From age five one week to sixteen the next. Girls, boys, teams, schools, you do it all” (SC2). Also, coaches are given a manual before they fly out to America and are instructed to learn and follow the practices set out for them. This was considered both helpful and limiting for some coaches: “…if you’re inexperienced then its good to have it but the manual isn’t that good. When the camp director isn’t around you just do your own thing” (SC4). This illustrates that coaches can feel they are subject to scrutiny by those in authority, even though senior management personnel may not even be in the same state: “…it’s a big thing who’s directing the camp. If they’re chilled out it’s ok. But if they’re on a power trip they can make life hard for you” (SC4). Respondents noted that: “…it’s important that
we’re able to express what we know. So having a director that let’s you do that is great. You’ve got to remember why we’re there. If Americans could play and coach football we wouldn’t get any work” (SC3). This was a commonly expressed opinion, and a factor which was considered to have helped stabilise the industry: “…there’s always coaching work in America. The kids love it but the parents can’t coach it” (SC1). Many American youth sports programmes rely primarily on parent volunteers. However, as Wiersma, and Sherman (2005) note, many have not received any formal technical training to adequately prepare them to coach. Soccer coaching requires a specialized body of knowledge (Mumford and Gurgley, 2005), and as one respondent argued: “… America doesn’t have the coaches. It’s growing but it’s not a big part of their culture yet as other sports dominate. We were the British experts brought over to coach a British sport. It’s the best thing I’ve ever done” (SC3).

Conclusion

Although American camp culture has received some academic analysis, few studies have examined the role and experiences of international workers. This is particularly the case regarding the British student population, and considering the emergence and recent growth of the American soccer coaching industry, this research may make a positive contribution to such an understanding. This paper explored the perspectives of those who have held such positions. Camp America personnel (volunteers) noted that the range of experiences, extent of responsibility and demands of the position were beyond their expectations. Although they did not receive payment for their efforts, all respondents considered the experience hugely rewarding. The role of a paid soccer coach appeared similar in terms of being a learning experience but dissimilar in terms of the demands placed on the worker. Coaching hours were not considered too challenging, with weekends largely free of responsibility. The cultural lessons learned from staying with a number of families in a wide variety of locations, together with the abundant opportunities to travel and socialise between camps were all considered further positive elements of the soccer coaching experience. Respondents from both avenues considered work of this nature to be deeply enriching, providing insights into a different culture and a framework for world travel, a point also discussed by Rennard (2007). Interviewees did explore the value of their experiences therefore, but notably such reflection tended to be short-term in focus. Some participants felt that this was because they had not yet fully reaped the rewards of having held the position, as one respondent claimed: “…I’m still at uni so I’m not sure what it will mean later on. But I’ve done it twice now, so that’s got to help me get onto teacher training” (CA2). This kind of reference to career aspiration was repeated by several respondents, many of whom expected the position they had held to positively impact their application for a PGCE course or to gain graduate employment: “You need a degree. And it matters where it’s from and what grade you get, but you need to fill your
CV with other things that say something about you. Working in another continent does that” (SC3). A similar point was made by Goodman (2006), who claimed that many employers seek to recruit personnel who have proven their capability and commitment by undertaking such experiences.

Sumka (2000) claims that students who study or work abroad attain skills in intercultural communication and in so doing, improve their problem solving abilities. He also contends that such work helps participants gain respect for cultural differences, and helps people to learn new ways of seeing and thinking which challenge old assumptions and beliefs. Respondents in this research offered similar albeit often less detailed contentions, for example: “…Camp America makes you a better student, a better coach and a better person and to teaches you about the world” (CA6). This work has aided our understanding of the experience of being a soccer coach and camp counsellor in America, but clearly however further research is required. Dwyer and Peters (2004) examined the long-term impact of international positions on a student’s personal, professional, and academic life. They claim such experiences positively influence the career path, world-view, and self-confidence of students. Although this contention is not a reference to the specific context examined here, it does highlight the need for an exploration of the long-term benefits of involvement in work of this nature. Further study on this subject could also focus on the opinions of those who have worked both as a soccer coach and a counsellor in America. This might afford a meaningful comparison between the two programmes. In addition, future research could examine the perspectives of participants as well as employers within this industry, including UK-based recruitment directors, and those responsible for the management of the various initiatives in America. Drawing from their experiences, counsellors could provide further insight into the value and challenges of working and volunteering in America, and what impact this can have on a participant’s future academic and employment prospects. Such research could help us to understand the extent to which the American youth population benefit from the exposure to British sporting, educational and cultural practices at soccer coaching clinics and summer camps.

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**JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote**

1. Author’s reflective comment: I would thank Joel Rookwood for all the help and guidance he has given me throughout the past year. It has been much appreciated, and without which I would not have been able to complete this research. I would also like to thank Paul Watson, for his constant support, motivation, and advice which has helped me to keep on-track throughout my final year at university.

2. Author Profile: Emma is 21 years old and graduated in 2008 with a degree in Sport Studies. She has spent the past two summers working at a camp in America and is planning to continue to do this for the forthcoming year. Her interest is in working within sport development, this being a pathway she wants to follow for the foreseeable future.

3. Dear reader, if you find this article interesting and require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me, Emma Watson: emawat@hotmail.com; or Joel Rookwood: rookwoj@hope.ac.uk.