

Exploratory Study on Recognition of Soccer Agent and Expected Roles : Focused on College Soccer Players

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined Korean college soccer players' perceptions of and need for agents and the roles and competencies expected of them based on in-depth interviews with college soccer players. By exploring the significance of soccer agents as perceived by college soccer players, this study aimed to provide basic data necessary for training soccer agents for college soccer players and establishing regulations for college soccer agents. The research results can be summarized as follows: (1) The players interviewed generally showed a positive attitude toward soccer agents and were aware of the need for an agent; (2) the roles expected of an agent by college soccer players were different from those expected by professional soccer players: preparing opportunities to join Korean and foreign professional clubs, supporting and managing players, and facilitating smooth communication; and (3) the core competencies expected of a soccer agent by college soccer players were official agent certification, networks with professional soccer clubs, and understanding of the soccer industry. The results of this study highlight the need for stakeholder organizations in soccer to establish a systematic agent platform for college soccer players and take efforts to eliminate unregistered agents who engage in inappropriate activities. Qualified agent education and training for college soccer players will help protect them from unregistered agents and foster high-quality agency services.

Key words: college soccer, agent, sports, agency service

Introduction

A sports agent is defined as “a person who is given the authority by individuals engaged in sports disciplines, including players and coaches, to act on their behalf for their rights and interests and receives remuneration for

such services” (Kim, 2017). With the emergence of agents in the modern sense of parties performing comprehensive and diverse tasks beyond the passive role of negotiating an annual salary contract for the athletes they represent, the sports agent industry has grown, especially in the United States (US), where professional sports are largely developed. In Korea as well, activities of sports agents began as the professional sports leagues were launched and grew, but various problems have

arisen due to the absence of an official agent system and the lack of a systematic sports agent training platform. For example, soccer players' transfer contracts have been canceled due to the lack of professional capacities of unregistered or unqualified agents (negotiation power and experience). Recently, such problems have worsened—there have even been reports of agents demanding payment from players, who are in desperate need of experience in international soccer clubs, to negotiate with foreign soccer clubs (Kim, 2017). Such incidents have raised awareness of the need to introduce a sports agent system as an institutional device for the development of professional sports and the protection of the rights and interests of athletes. Recently, discussions of the development of sports agent industry have been kindled by relevant studies such as a review of court decisions regarding sports agent contracts (Jin, 2017), plans to introduce a Korea-style sports agent system (Kim, 2017), and case studies of the resolution of annual salary disputes (Lee, 2021).

College sports in Korea play an important role as producers in the sports ecosystem while serving to connect school sports and professional sports. The Korea University Sports Federation (KUSF), the only organization dedicated to college sports in Korea, was established in 2010 with the aim of systematically fostering college sports teams and efficiently managing pending issues of university sports. KUSF has devoted much effort to projects aimed at developing college sports, such as the elimination of reward-based talent scouting, systematic academic management, promotion of academic performance, and branding of college sports (Kim, 2017). Despite these pivotal roles, the KUSF has yet to prepare an agent system or regulations for student athletes. The sports agent industry is growing in Korea with the growing demand for agents to represent student athletes, but there are no agent systems or regulations for college athletes, and no formal research has yet been conducted on this compelling issue.

In the US, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has established and developed an

agent system for college athletes. To protect collegiate athletes from victimization and help them with a smooth entry into the professional arena, the NCAA has strengthened regulations for agents representing college athletes, allowing only certified agents to contact them (Jessop, 2019). For example, with the growing victimization of student athletes due to an increasing number of unqualified agents, each state in the US adopted the Uniform Athlete Agent Act in 2000 to protect the interests of student athletes and educational institutions. Under this act, all athlete agents are subject to registration before initiating contact with student-athletes. The year 2004 saw the enactment and entry into force of the Sports Agent Responsibility and Trust Act, a federal law regulating sports agents, with the aim of protecting student-athletes from inappropriate agents and of preserving amateur sports (Shropshire et al., 2016). Although there are vast differences in the scale and system of college sports between Korea and the US, given the current efforts to promote college sports in Korea, the attention and interest of all stakeholders, including industry and academia, are utterly needed for measures to improve the quality of sports agents and build an official sports agent training platform for Korean university athletes.

Among Korean university sports, soccer is most popular: 87 universities participate in the U-League operated by the KUSF, with events outnumbering those of other sports (KUSF, 2022). As of October 2022, 2,635 college soccer players were registered in the Korea Football Association (KFA), outnumbering the players in other sports. College soccer players are keen to demonstrate their skills in soccer matches and to join professional clubs, and they require agents to conduct negotiations with professional soccer clubs on their behalf. Since the main role of a sports agent is to provide players with opportunities to start a professional career and make their values known to the soccer stakeholders, agents represent college players to prepare opportunities for them to join professional soccer clubs at home and abroad and manage their activities so that

they can fully focus only on the matches.

However, there are also cases where college soccer players have been victimized by incompetent and improper agents. For example, in cases where agents embezzled money under the guise of the opportunity for tests to join an international club (Jin, 2017), the players were victimized by agents' dishonest and fraudulent behaviors, and yet there are no institutional and legal regulations to protect players' rights and interests. There are also reported cases of unfair contract terms and cancelled contracts with international clubs. College soccer players in Korea need to be protected from these unqualified and fraudulent agents, and college sports need an official agent system and relevant regulations.

To solve problems in contractual relationships based on a proper understanding of the role of a desirable agent, an approach based on contract theory (Hart & Holmström, 1986) is considered. Information asymmetry is the core concept of contract theory applicable to contractual problem-solving between players and clubs. Information asymmetry is at the root of the conflicts of interest between club and player, whereby their economic relationship has a hierarchical structure, with the club taking the upper hand with regard to information and the players' rights and interests inadequately protected due to lack of information. In this relationship, an agent must represent the player and fulfill a functional role that can guarantee conditions or rights that both parties can agree upon based on information symmetry.

Accordingly, this study was conducted as a basic exploration into the significance and role of college soccer agents in Korea. To this end, in-depth interviews were conducted with college soccer players to identify their perceptions of and need for agents and the roles and competencies expected of them. This study is significant in that it provides basic data for college soccer agent training and establishing relevant regulations, and also for follow-up research on college sports agents in Korea. Furthermore, it provides

directions for policy development with hands-on suggestions of measures to nurture the growth of college soccer players and the development of the Korean university sports agent industry.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted to understand and explore the significance of soccer agents for Korean college soccer players by examining their perceptions of and need for agents and the roles and competencies expected of them. Participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. As a result, 14 college soccer players playing in the U-League participated in the study through in-depth interviews. By focusing on players, the study intended to identify their perceptions of sports agents and to collect basic data for establishing measures for the development of Korea's college soccer agents. The participants were recruited from all four years of study (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) considering the differences depending on the years of playing. Regional representation was established by recruiting the participants from universities located in 7 of the 10 municipalities and provinces covered by the KUSF College Sports U-League as of 2022. In addition, 4 of the 14 participants had a good rapport with the researcher and understood and expressed the purpose of the study well. After in-depth interviews with them, 10 additional players most suitable for the research topic were selected via snowball sampling based on the recommendations of the participants. Taylor (2011) pointed out that while using insiders in a qualitative study can be advantageous owing to the rapport already formed with the researcher, which boosts the reliability of the data collected, it also has the drawback of a tendency to omit or marginally cover well-known information or sensitive issues. Accordingly, particular care was given to ensure an appropriate proportion between insiders and

non-insiders and to build a sufficiently strong rapport with non-insiders in the course of in-depth interviews. Table 1 outlines the participants' general characteristics.

Data Collection

Open-ended Questionnaire

To collect comprehensive data on the study topic, an open-ended questionnaire survey was administered to two college soccer players. The use of an open-ended questionnaire can prevent interference from the researcher's subjective opinions, and thus has the advantage of directly reflecting the interviewees' opinions. The open-ended questions were formulated by the principal researcher based on the procedure proposed in the existing qualitative research paradigm and previous studies. The validity of the questions was tested in an expert meeting with co-researchers, and expressions and compositions were revised and supplemented (Mason, 2017; Silverman, 2021). The open-ended questionnaire consisted of questions about college soccer players' perceptions of and need for agents, behaviors expected of an agent, and agent's

skills and competencies (Table 2).

In-depth Interview Guide

The in-depth interviews with 14 college soccer players were conducted in a location preferred by the interviewees to create a comfortable atmosphere to encourage them to express their thoughts comfortably. First, based on the results of the preliminary open-ended questionnaire survey administered to two soccer players and pre-interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed so that interviewees could clearly reveal their thoughts about agents in an in-depth interview structured to proceed from general to specific questions. In-depth interviews based on a semi-structured questionnaire were conducted with basic questions about class level, position, years of playing, and agent retention, as well as detailed information such as college soccer players' perceptions of agents, their need for agents, and the roles and competencies expected of agents. Data were collected through pre-interviews and in-depth interviews, and data were further diversified using e-mail, social media, and phone calls.

The theoretical basis of the semi-structured

Table 1. *Description of the Participants*

Participant	Academic Class	Position	Years in Soccer	Region of School	Have Agent (Y/N)
A	Freshmen	Defender	8	Seoul	N
B	Sophomore	Midfielder	9	Seoul	Y
C	Sophomore	Forward	10	Incheon	Y
D	Junior	Forward	10	Gyeonggi	Y
E	Junior	Forward	10	Gyeonggi	Y
F	Freshmen	Midfielder	9	Gyeongnam	N
G	Freshmen	Defender	10	Gyeongnam	N
H	Sophomore	Defender	12	Gyeongbuk	N
I	Senior	Goal Keeper	11	Gyeongbuk	Y
J	Senior	Defender	12	Chungnam	N
K	Junior	Midfielder	10	Chungnam	N
L	Junior	Forward	11	Chungbuk	N
M	Sophomore	Goal Keeper	10	Chungbuk	N
N	Senior	Midfielder	13	Incheon	Y

questionnaire was derived from sources such as Korean and foreign academic journals, dissertations, books, and news articles identified using keywords such as “college sports,” “college soccer,” “sports agents,” “roles,” and “need” (Jin, 2017; Kim, 2017). The content of the in-depth interviews and questioning methods was flexibly modified according to the situation, and more concrete and diverse interview data were collected by eliciting the overall opinions of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In-depth interviews were conducted offline or online, as desired by the interviewees, considering the COVID-19 situation. For each offline interview, the venue was selected as a place where the interviewee could comfortably talk. The content of each in-depth interview was transcribed from the recorded or videotaped data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

We conducted a textual analysis of the data obtained through open-ended questionnaire, pre-interviews, and in-depth interviews. Each interview was recorded and saved on a computer to ensure that the interviewee’s feelings or thoughts were not distorted and that as much data as possible were obtained for sufficient analysis. The collected data were subjected to a three-step data analysis process to obtain the final results: (1) the transcription stage, in which the in-depth interviews were faithfully transcribed and saved; (2) the topic coding and application stage, in which transcripts were read repeatedly and critically to identify the inherent meaning, followed by the coding and summarization of the meaningful parts. Categorized data were then regrouped

into coherent themes, which were derived as higher categories through a conceptualization process; and (3) the meaning generation stage, in which the relationships between the upper categories (perceptions, need, roles, and competencies) and their respective subcategories were determined and the transcripts’ contents and the categorized results were compared to ensure their adequacy without meaning distortion or loss.

Validity and Reliability of the Data

To enhance the validity and truthfulness of the data, triangulation-based categorization was applied to the contents of the open-ended questionnaire and in-depth interviews by an expert panel consisting of one sports psychologist and one professional sports manager. In the process of data classification, peer debriefing and member checks were conducted to reach a consensus whenever differences in opinion arose between the researcher and co-researcher. Data collection methods were diversified through a literature review and in-depth interviews through the triangulation process that cross-examines related data in various ways. Next, in the peer debriefing process aimed to prevent content bias during data collection and analysis, data including in-depth interview questionnaire, interview transcripts, and study results were reviewed with the aid of two professionals (one sports management professor and one sports psychology professional) with experience in conducting qualitative research involving Korean and foreign sports agents and Korean college athletes. Lastly, in the member check, which was performed to prevent hermeneutic errors in the collected data, the

Table 2. Key Questions

Key Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your perception of soccer agents? • Is there a need for soccer agents? • What should you expect from a soccer agent? • What skills and competencies does a soccer agent need?

transcribed data were shared with the interviewees to ensure that their intended meanings were adequately conveyed, and additional data were collected by contacting them again. In addition, the research results were reviewed based on the feedback received from the interviewees to enhance the reliability of the collected data and results.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure adherence to the ethical standards of research, every participant was provided with all necessary information and knowledge, including the researcher's affiliation, contact details, and research purpose and procedure before the in-depth interview was conducted. In addition, they were explained in great detail that their personal information would remain confidential and would not be divulged publicly.

Results

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to understand the significance of soccer sports agents. Based on the results, measures were suggested to improve agent activities for college soccer players. The results derived are as follows:

College Soccer Players' Perceptions of and Need for Soccer Agents

Sports agents are professionals who perform negotiations for scouting or annual salary contracts with professional sports teams on behalf of the athletes they represent and carry out activities to enhance their economic values through efficient management of their sports activities (Martin et al., 2022). In the in-depth interviews conducted in this study, 10 out of 14 college soccer players showed a positive attitude toward the services of sports agents such as signing opportunities, player management, player value enhancement, data management, and supply support, while four showed a

negative attitude due to inappropriate and fraudulent agent activities and high fees. The athletes' positive and negative attitudes toward agents were expressed as follows.

Positive Attitudes

The majority of participants in this study held a positive perception of soccer agents and admitted a need for them. Those who responded positively found sports agents necessary for their services such as signing contracts, annual salary negotiations with professional clubs, securing sponsorships, providing supplies, and managing records and data. In particular, college players considered agents necessary because they provide players with the practical help required to starting their careers with professional and company teams by utilizing agents' networks with sports teams. They also felt that agents were required to find them opportunities to play in a foreign league when they were not taken by Korean sports teams.

"I think positively about agents because they seem to make it easier for college soccer players to join professional clubs. Agents search for suitable clubs and introduce players using their networks with clubs, so I think agents are indispensable for players to join professional clubs." -Participant B

"When a player joins a professional club and signs an annual salary contract, it would not be very tactful for the player to make a hard deal or directly talk about the financial part of the deal. But if an agent transmits the player's position or speak on his behalf, it is certainly an advantage. So, my perception of an agent is positive." -Participant C

"While a college player is working, an agent can help him by systematically managing his records and data. He can also contact club insiders or foreign partners to negotiate contracts. So, I think

an agent is a must.” -Participant F

“College players who have agents seemed to be provided with supplies including football cleats and clothing. In fact, universities also support sports equipment, but not as much as we need. I find it positive that agents provide material support for their athletes.” -Participant G

“It is impossible for all college soccer players to join Korean professional soccer teams. I don’t know myself if I could join a Korean club. However, an agent can arrange an opportunity to enter a foreign club in a medium-level league, making it possible to continue a career playing after college graduation. So, I think I need an agent.” -Participant N

Negative Attitudes

While the majority of the soccer players who participated in the study recognized the need for an agent and had positive perceptions of them, there were some players who viewed agents negatively. They mentioned cases of agents taking advantage of inexperienced college players, who suffered economic victimization due to demands for money or failure to represent their actual values, and student athletes who were placed in desperate circumstances after being scammed by unqualified fraudulent agents. They also found the fees that players paid agents unfairly high, and complained about the agents’ negligence in managing players after they signed a contract for agent services.

“There may be many advantages for a soccer player to work with an agent, but it is prone to financial problems because some agents misappropriate players’ earnings for their own benefit.” -Participant M

“I think agent fees are a waste. Stories of earlier classes who entered professional soccer teams often sound like they are dissatisfied with their agents because the agents neglect player management once a contract is signed.” -Participant A

“When playing in the U-League or other tournaments, many agents come to watch the match and contact players. Some agents work with an official license, but considering that many unqualified agents are currently active in the field, I doubt their professionalism.” -Participant J

“The coaches and directors also say that the association is paying much attention and it seems that they provide opportunities to contact them in various ways... To be honest, it looks like it ends there, and there don’t seem to be any definite procedures or rules. So, it makes me nervous just to wait, but I think it’s even more difficult to set off in search of opportunities.” – Participant K

“Media articles tell stories of college soccer players being scammed by agents. I’ve read an article about agents asking for money to join a Korean or foreign professional soccer team. In particular, agents who contact desperate players and ask for money to go to a foreign professional team to take a test do not seem to provide the services they promised after they receive the money ... It seems there are many agents that scam student athletes and parents.” -Participant H

Soccer Agents’ Roles Expected by College Soccer Players

In general, sports agents take on roles such as salary negotiations and contract services, endorsement and sponsorship contracts, player management, responses to

the media, and financial management. The participants in this study were aware of the roles and tasks of soccer agents who have established a clientele of professional soccer players, even though they were college soccer players. However, the roles of a soccer agent as expected by college soccer players were found to be different from the main roles of professional player agents. The analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed that the participants considered the agents' main roles to consist in creating opportunities to join a professional club, providing supplies and supporting player data analysis, performing player management and communication.

Creating an Opportunity to Join a Professional Club or Find Employment

All the participants in this study mentioned "creating an opportunity to join a professional club" as the most important role of a soccer agent. The ultimate goal of most college soccer players is to become a professional player after graduation and the participants also hoped that an agent would help them start a professional career. As of 2022, the number of players on the 87 college soccer teams registered with the Korea Football Association is 2,635 (Korea Sport & Olympic Committee, 2022). In 2021, about 120 college players were scouted to professional clubs, excluding priority-designated high school players, and some players went abroad to play in foreign leagues. However, more than 2,400 college soccer players were forced to retire, showing that only a small proportion of college soccer players can start a professional career after graduation, which is thus a highly competitive pathway. Under these circumstances, Korean college football players try to play in foreign leagues with the help of agents. In addition, they seek to work in the soccer industry if they fail to start a professional career, and soccer agents were thus also expected to provide a foothold for college players to work in the soccer industry after graduation.

"The most important thing for college players is to start a professional career. I have been playing soccer since I was young with the goal of becoming a professional player. However, I think much of it depends on which agent we meet. This is because agents make it easier for players to enter professional soccer teams and increase the possibility of continuing a career as a player. For college players, the most important role they expect of an agent is to help them start a professional career." -Participant H

"I think it is the agent's role to arrange their entry into a professional or company team. I hope that agents introduce players to clubs with their current capacity and future potential, and use their networks with clubs to propel their entry into a professional career. Of course, this would be possible only if I work hard and perform well, but considering the sheer number of college soccer players, I would like to leverage the competitiveness of an agent to enter a professional club." -Participant C

"I expect a soccer agent to help me sign with a foreign club. It seems that more college players are going abroad to play in foreign leagues than I thought. Even though the level of play is lower than in the Korean professional soccer league, I think that playing in a foreign league would give me another opportunity. Of course, it would be nice to join a Korean professional soccer club, but if it's difficult, why not transfer to a foreign league? I hope my agent can arrange that opportunity." -Participant J

"I would like to work in the football industry rather than starting a professional career after graduation. I want to work at a football agency or a football marketing company. What I expect of an agent is

to provide me a foothold to work in the football industry rather than simply introducing me to a football club and affording me the opportunity to join. Since many players have difficulty entering a professional soccer team, I think it is an important part of an agent's role to help college players who are about to terminate their career as a player to find jobs, even if the agent and the player initially met to gain entry to a professional club." -Participant F

Supporting the Player with Supplies to Enhance Performance and Player Data Analysis

The participants in this study considered support to enhance performance an important role of an agent. They tended to respond affirmatively to the agent's role of providing supplies and producing highlight videos based on play data analysis. They also answered that it is one of the most important roles of an agent to provide training supplies such as football cleats when the contract is signed between agent and player, even though basic supplies are provided by the university, because the college supplies are often inadequate. In addition, college players have difficulty producing the videos and organizing the data needed when applying for clubs after graduation, and many hoped that the agent would take over their work on data analysis and video production.

"For college football players, support for football equipment is very important. Supplies are provided by the university, but they are far from sufficient. It's difficult to buy them out of my own pocket, and I feel uncomfortable asking for support from my parents. Therefore, it would be nice if the agent could provide enough training or personal items." -Participant G

"Since I am still a student, I do not pay fees to

the contracted agent, but the agency helps me a lot. In particular, I get my personal items at discounted prices through the mediation of the agency. Of course, I buy them with my own money, but I am grateful that the agency helps me buy the supplies at a discount." -Participant B

"I think it is important for college soccer players to view match play data and videos to improve their skills. However, there is a limit to match play analysis, however closely I watch. Of course, the university team analyzes it, but I don't think it's enough to improve my performance and develop my skills. I think it would be very helpful if the agent analyzed my play in a match and delivered the results." -Participant F

"I think I need to appeal to the scouts of professional teams in order to start my professional career. I admit that there are too many college players to check the performance of each of them, so I think it's a must to have a highlight video of the matches I played in order to join a professional or company soccer team. Since I have limitations in producing a video myself, I hope to receive that help from my agent." -Participant E

Smooth Communication for Player Management

The participants described that the role of an agent was also to communicate frequently with student players and help them in areas other than their performance on the field. Particularly because students were burdened with academic performance issues such as class attendance and assignments because they had to study and practice soccer at the same time. Participants also agreed that an agent's role involved managing the player's personal training schedule, resolving conflicts, and providing advice when conflicts arise between players and coaches.

“It is difficult to strike a balance between sports and studies. It’s our reality that we can’t neglect studies because we need to get a minimum grade to play in a match. Of course, the university and KUSF help me with my studies, but I doubt it’s enough. I expect my agent to manage my studies outside of sports.” -Participant L

“Most players engage in personal training in addition to team training. You can see differences in the quantity and quality of personal training between players with and without an agent. I think it is essential for an agent to help players manage their personal training schedule and help them train in a regular place. I think an agent should play a role of thoroughly helping players manage their personal training.” -Participant I

“While being active as a player, I sometimes run into conflicts with my coach from differences in opinion or friction. From my position as a player, it is sometimes difficult to bring forth my opinion or situation in detail to the coach. I hope my agent will give me advice and help me maintain a smooth relationship with my coach.” -Participant E

Soccer Agents’ Competencies as Expected by College Soccer Players

Bull and Faure (2022) indicated the following qualifications of an agent: negotiation power to sign contracts, professional knowledge in the relevant domain including laws, regulations, and accounting, foreign language skills to arrange opportunities for professional career abroad, and evaluation ability to scout talented players. However, in the in-depth interviews conducted in this study, there were differences the competencies of a soccer agent as expected by the college soccer players and those mentioned in the literature. Most important requirements

for participants were whether the agents had strong networks with professional soccer clubs, whether they were licensed, and whether they had a good understanding of the soccer industry. In contrast to the findings of previous research that professional soccer players tend to prioritize legal knowledge among an agent’s competencies, college soccer players prioritize the networks between agents and clubs that can be used for their entry into a professional club rather than their legal knowledge. This demonstrates that the first goal of college players is to enter a professional soccer team. They also wanted licensed agents, presumably because they have experienced being contacted by unqualified and unlicensed agents and some have been victimized by fraudulent agents. The concrete answers to the competencies expected by the participants are listed below.

“Because agents negotiate in signing a contract with a professional soccer team, they should have strong networks with profession clubs. So, in selecting an agent, I will try above all to find out whether the agent has good relationships with many stakeholders in the industry and strong networks with professional clubs.” – Participant K

“I have met a lot of agents, but many of them didn’t know the basic rules or agent’s functions. I think a lot of people who are not licensed agents come to the stadium to scout college soccer players. An agent’s other competencies are also important, but I think the first thing to check is whether the agent is licensed by the association.” – Participant M

“I think we need an agent who understands the soccer industry and has professionalism. I believe I would have more career opportunities if I met an agent who understands the soccer industry. Also, even after I retire as a player, I will then

be able to do various things related to soccer. So, for me it is important how well an agent knows the soccer industry; that is a competency an agent should have.” -Participant B

Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored Korean college soccer players’ perceptions of and need for agents and the roles and competencies expected of them in order to identify areas in which to improve the training of agents for college soccer players and establish college soccer agent regulations and systems. To explore the significance of college soccer agents, a qualitative research method of inductive category analysis was applied that yielded the following conclusions.

First, the participants tended to show more positive than negative attitudes toward sports agents and recognized the need for an agent. Many answered that agents are needed, particularly because they help college players enter professional clubs through their networks with clubs, which indicates that college soccer players attach great importance to their professional career after graduation. The participants who showed a negative attitude perceived the need for an agent and the advantages of having an agent but responded negatively to having an agent on the grounds of the victimization of student players by the activities of unregistered agents who lacked the qualifications of a licensed agent. Second, the roles of an agent expected by college soccer players were different from those expected by professional players reported in a previous study (Kim, 2017). While the participants in this study answered that the agent’s main role was to prepare opportunities to join Korean and foreign professional clubs and to support players with soccer item supplies, play data analysis, player management, and smooth communication, general professional players prioritized salary negotiations, endorsement contracts, player management, responses to the media, and financial

management (Kim, 2017). These differences are considered to be attributable to the differences in the environment and circumstances in which college and professional players find themselves. Third, the competencies that college soccer players participating in this study expected agents to have were different from those found by previous research (Kim & Kim, 2005). Regarding competencies that agents should be equipped with, the participants in this study mentioned strong networks with professional soccer clubs, licensing as agents, and a good understanding of the soccer industry as most important. While some research has found that players who play in the professional league tend to prioritize the legal knowledge of agents (Kim & Kim, 2005; Lee, 2021), college players prioritized the official certification of an agent over their legal knowledge. This may reflect the fact that student players are often contacted by unqualified and unlicensed agents and some have been harmed by fraudulent agents.

Based on the results of this study, we propose the following measures: First, it is necessary to recognize college soccer players’ need for agents on the part of stakeholders, such as the KFA, KUSF, and Korea University Football Confederation (KUFC), and to establish a systematic agent platform for college players. The participants in this study also hoped to have a systematic agent platform in college sports and mentioned the need for agents for student athletes. In the US, the NCAA has established an agent system for college athletes and has strengthened regulations for agents to protect collegiate athletes from victimization and help them achieve a smooth entry into the professional arena. In the same vein, efforts will be needed to establish regulations and systems for agents for student athletes belonging to the KUSF, which is the governing organization for the Korean college sports. In this respect, most of the players participating in the study recognized the roles and efforts of the KUSF, but regretted the absence of regulations on student athlete agents. Therefore, we look forward to the agent regulations being issued by the KUSF, which

supports student athletes as their primary point of contact.

Second, more effort needs to be put into eliminating unregistered agents who engage in inappropriate activities and victimize student athletes. It is commonly observed that ineligible agents without a license or whose license has been revoked remain active in the college soccer space, and researchers have reported that agents not meeting the requirements are still authorized to act as agents. Accordingly, there is a compelling need to take measures to apply a thorough screening and penalty provisions to eliminate unqualified agents and protect players from victimization by ensuring the provision of services by licensed agents. Third, establishing student athlete agent training is as important as establishing student athlete agent regulations. Many students do not check the agent's qualifications when they contact an agent and sign a contract, which can harm them. In summary, there is a need to build an institutional safety net to protect the interests and rights of student athletes based on the matters identified in this study, which also suggests the need for systematic education to resolve the asymmetry of information for both student athletes and agents. This education can be an occasion for student athletes to ensure that their legitimate rights are guaranteed and for agents to leverage their skills to solidify the foundation of their activities.

We note three limitations of this study and suggestions for follow-up research. First, since this study involved student athlete agents as viewed from the perspective of college football players, future research will have to be conducted on student athlete agents from the perspective of soccer stakeholders. This would help establish a systematic agent platform for student athletes based on the research results for various stakeholders such as coaches, administrators, and school officials. Second, since this study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to determine the significance of college soccer player agents, a quantitative approach is required in follow-up research. In this context, it is

necessary to conduct a full-population survey to investigate the need for agents as perceived by college football players and to analyze the relationship between players and agents. Third, this study focused exclusively on soccer out of all college sports. Considering that many student athletes are active in other college sports in Korea, follow-up studies extending to other sports are needed to be conducted.

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