

Managing a Confederation of Rivals: Lessons from Triathlon

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Sport development has long been a concern of policymakers in national and international federations (Chalip, Johnson, & Stachura, 1996). There are two compelling issues that are revealed when sport governing bodies consider development: growing participation and enhancing competitive standards (Green, 2005). These two concepts become associated when the objective of policy is to create a deep pool of athletes from which elite competitors can be drawn (Broom, 1991; Green & Oakley, 2001). In the interest of continued growth and participation, governing bodies develop programs and policies for youth participation as an overarching national strategy. In order to meet these strategic objectives, governing bodies rely on regional and local volunteer associations to implement them.

The challenge in sport settings is that there are two interdependent levels of policymaking: a national or league level, and a club or team level. Although both seek to develop participation in their sport, clubs compete with one another for members and compete to become excellent. Thus, they are natural rivals. On the other hand, at the aggregate (league or national level) the overall development of a sport, particularly the formulation of policies pursuant to the sport's growth, are best served by the proliferation of clubs and cooperation among them. The resulting confederation of rivals must consequently be managed to mitigate the effects of the natural competition among clubs (Chalip & Scott, 2005; Szymanski & Ross, 2007).

The sport of triathlon offers a compelling setting to examine this issue. As a rapidly growing young sport among adults and children in the United States, triathlon has just begun its youth development process. While there are growing opportunities for youth in triathlon, USA Triathlon (USAT) and the regional and local associations are still grappling with systematic development programs for these school-aged children that would help increase overall participation as well as enhance competitive development. The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges of managing a confederation of rivals, with particular emphasis on the effects of the natural competition among clubs for participants and status.

Data were collected via participant observation of a triathlon club, semi-structured interviews, and a content analysis of the USAT regional websites. Participant observation occurred over a period of one year with a local triathlon club in its second year of existence. Fieldwork included attending practices and races. Sixty minute semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the local USAT regional athletic development coordinator (RADDC), five local triathlon coaches, and four parents of youth participating locally in triathlon. Interviews were conducted via telephone or via an internet-based networking site that enables users to communicate via videophone or microphone. Lastly, a content analysis of the USAT regional website was conducted to collect information about youth programs offered by the region.

Results of the study indicate conflicts in three distinct areas: athletes, program vision, and funding. Participant observation and interviews revealed competition for participants by "stealing" talented youth from other clubs. A youth coach supported this finding by stating, "I'm not trying to take the kids on purpose, I just know I can offer them a better training environment. That guy's (the rival coach) just not safe."

There was also conflict over program vision. Interviews revealed differing views as to how the young athletes should be developed, with one coach stating, "The biggest challenge that I face with youth is them being pushed to far to fast...So, the first thing I will tell them (especially 7 and 8 year olds) is to get involved in a team sport – I don't care if it's soccer, basketball, volleyball – I think there is camaraderie and lateral skills that can be developed." On the other hand, a rival coach stated, "Our biggest challenge is that our kids don't know proper bike handling skills or proper training because they are spread too thin playing other sports...We need to focus early so they have these skills early in life and we don't lose them to other sports."

The last point of contention was with funding from USAT for the High Performance Team program. The goal of the program is to increase the number and quality of developmental programs serving young athletes across the nation. The program provides grants to seed the establishment and growth of well-organized training programs. The conflict arises among the clubs over the way programs are selected. As one coach states, "It's not fair because they're (USAT) just going to pick the people they want, they don't care how good the program really is...it's so political." Another issue, as the RADDC illustrates, is whether the region will even get a funded program, "...there will probably be some regions that don't have any high performance teams because they are not very active or too widespread. I know that nationally, in the first year, they will chose up to 8 teams, but they may only chose 5. They will be based not only on the proposal, but regional demographic and then the elite coach and how that particular person will work with their athletes."

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Together, these three sources of conflict rendered an ongoing climate of hostility and distrust. Coaches criticized each other behind their backs while complaining about the very same behavior from other coaches. Parents complained of inequities of opportunity for their children. The RADC stated that secrecy was often necessary in policy-making. There was consensus, however, that these same factors hindered the overall development of the sport.

The challenge for NGBs is to develop strategies that not only meet the objectives for advancing participation and enhancing competition nationally, but also to understand why the current entrepreneurial model for sport organizations can foster a climate that hinders growth. For the NGB to meet its development goals, conflicts among providers must be managed. Professional leagues have done this by empowering a commissioner and supporting this position through a commissioner's office. No such position yet exists within USAT (or other NGBs). Another means that has been used to mitigate conflict has been to establish projects with superordinate goals that require cooperation among the disputants (Stern & Sternthal, 1975). If that were to be attempted in this case, strategic planning should endeavor to identify projects that would require cooperative effort among the clubs. To date, that objective has not been incorporated into strategic planning.