

Sport Development for Adolescents: The Barrier of Adult Agendas

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Sport development requires the ongoing recruitment and retention of participants (Green, 2005). Consequently, national sport federations seek to develop means to encourage ongoing participation in the sports that they govern (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008).

Adolescents have proven to be the most challenging market segment to recruit or retain in sport programs. A substantial body of research shows that adolescents have the highest rate of dropout from sport (Malina, 1996; Taylor et al., 1999), and are the least likely to initiate sport participation (Perkins et al., 2004). The problem of adolescent participation also has flow-on consequences for the sport industry. Adolescent participation in sport is a significant predictor of sport participation later in life (Tammelin et al., 2003), and the loss of adolescents from sport shrinks the market for adult sport, which reduces the revenues from sporting good sales and adult sport programming. Further, since physical activity throughout the lifespan has been shown to be vital for health (Warburton et al., 2006), the loss of adolescents has negative consequences for public health systems – a matter that sport organizations are increasingly being asked to address (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). This presentation describes and evaluates the effort to build adolescent sport participation during a five year action research project in a rural community (population 8,000).

The project was undertaken as a partnership between the state health department and the city government, with a university-based research team serving as facilitators and evaluators. A community coalition was formed to formulate and oversee implementation of the project, which sought to increase the amount of physical activity in which residents engaged. Strategic planning during the first year identified adolescents as a pivotal group to target.

Six focus groups (3 male and 3 female) averaging ten participants each were conducted (by the research team) with local adolescents (age 12-17) to identify sports adolescents might value, as well as barriers to their participation. Data were transcribed and analyzed to identify key themes and issues. Findings were then reviewed separately by two groups of marketers to consider marketing implications and brainstorm marketing tactics. A plan was then formulated, reviewed, and adopted by the coalition.

The university-based research advised and evaluated implementation. Evaluation included attendance at coalition meetings, stakeholder interviews, participant observation at the six events included in the marketing plan, four follow-up adolescent focus groups (three years after the first), and a survey of community taxpayers.

Participants in all six focus groups identified action sports as their key interest. They were most familiar with skateboarding, for which they wanted a skateboarding facility. They also recognized that the community had a famous disc-golf facility, and they indicated an interest in learning to play. In addition, they were concerned that biking was "uncool."

Consequently, the strategic plan sought to foster biking by promoting BMX. Marketing tactics included two bicycle rodeos (six months apart), two special events featuring a nationally competitive BMX team, and a family biking event. Plans were made to construct a skateboard park and a BMX track using volunteer labor and donated materials on land to be donated by the local recreation department. Promotion of disc-golf was to be achieved via workshops and formation of an adolescent-run club.

The events to promote biking were popular, with the BMX events attracting several hundred local teens. The BMX riders talked-up bicycling, with the result that formerly empty bike racks at the local schools and parks began to fill. Announced plans for a BMX facility were greeted with enthusiasm by teens who attended the events. Plans for that facility and for the skateboard park stalled, however, as city officials worried that these activities were a departure from the recreation department's normal focus, which was on sports programming that would support the excellence of local high school teams.

Consequently, the Recreation Department Director constructed a survey asking respondents to specify their priorities for facility development, including a new BMX facility and skateboard park (but with no accompanying explanation of the rationale or need). It was placed at city hall where taxpayers came to pay bills. Although it was only completed by 44 persons, the comparatively low rankings given to the BMX and skateboard facilities were treated by local authorities as evidence for low priority, and plans for the new facilities were shelved.

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Interest in biking quickly declined, and within a year bicycle racks were again empty. The follow-up focus groups found that adolescents still wanted action sports. However, this time adolescents also stated that their desires would be unheeded by adults. The focus group protocol also sought their advice for the upcoming disc-golf workshop. They suggested that the event should focus on basic skills, particularly throwing techniques. The workshop was turned over to a local disc-golfer who competed with some success in professional tournaments. He created an invitational event, with the workshop incorporated as a side component. Publicity then emphasized the tournament, rather than the workshop. Although elite disc-golfers from throughout the state attended, the workshop attracted only 10 participants. This was treated as evidence that adolescents were uninterested, and further plans to promote the sport were dropped without further consultation with local adolescents.

The finding that adult agendas directed sport development along pathways that diverged from those desired by the mass of local adolescents is consistent with other work on programming for adolescents (Hyde, 1976; Wills et al., 2008). Much of what appears to be adolescent rejection of sport may actually be adolescent rejection of adults' agendas for adolescent sport. These findings support Voyle's (1989) recommendation that systems for sport development should include opportunities for adolescents to take a more active role in the planning and implementation of their sport programming.