Comparing Practices of USA Rugby Against a Global Model for Integrated Development of Mass and High Performance Sport

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The sport of Rugby union football (hereafter, “Rugby”) has a long history in the United States of America (US). The sport has been played in the US since 1874. US teams have participated in global competitions in men’s and women’s 7-a-side and the full 15 player game, with the men’s team competing in all but one Rugby World Cup to date. Although the US is currently ranked 18 (of 116 countries) in the world, it is the reigning Rugby Olympic gold medal holder. However, this form of football is well behind the US’ National Football League (NFL) and soccer versions. This study examines the current state of Rugby and its national sport body, USA Rugby, in the US against an ideal-type global model for high performance (HP) development that integrates mass participation (Smolianov & Zakus, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). We sought to determine what ongoing developments and improvements of the sport might be possible. The basic thesis is that an HP system can develop sport talent, but that this can only occur to full potential through an effective, underlying system of mass participation.

This paper seeks to identify a holistic system to advance Rugby and to facilitate Rugby’s success in the US so that they may become a leading Rugby nation; thereby positively influencing overall US Olympic performance and national health. Men’s and women’s 7-a-side Rugby has been accepted into the Olympic Games beginning in 2016. The sport is played by over 75,000 people in the US and an estimated 2.5 million worldwide making the sport of Rugby the second most popular team sport in the world, behind only soccer. Opportunities for Rugby’s US success are great given the expertise and talent available in similar territorial games such as American football. However, in order for Rugby in the US to join the global ranks by being competitive against leading teams such as South Africa, Australia, England, Argentina and other top 10 nations, a world class, holistic HP Rugby program must be developed. Referencing practices from around the world would better inform USA Rugby regarding its high performance status (Sparvero et al., 2008). USA Rugby’s knowledge of global practices in both improving international performance and maximizing national participation is particularly important in light of the US Olympic Committee’s (USOC) recent move away from grass roots funding, which may result in decreased mass participation (Dittmore et al., 2008). This study completed a thorough literature review to define HP practices and models, and to create ways in which to implement a general sport model.

Literature on general sport delivery systems from 28 Australasian, North and South American, and Western and Eastern European countries were analyzed to construct a globally applicable model of high performance Rugby with an integrated mass participation element. With this model a content analysis of the USA Rugby website and organizational documentation was conducted to collect information against the following seven elements of the general model:

Macro level (socio-economic, cultural, legislative, and organizational):

1. Balanced and integrated funding and structures of mass and elite sport
2. Partnerships with supporting agencies

Meso level (infrastructures, personnel, and services enabling sport programs):

3. Intellectual services
4. Competition systems
5. Training centers
Micro level (operations, processes, and methodologies for development of individual athletes):

6. Talent search and development
7. Advanced athlete support

Next, a questionnaire of 62 statements was developed and validated by 12 international experts, including executives from sport governing bodies, academics, Rugby coaches and administrators.

The survey samples of coaches and administrators were collected via email addresses from various sources, including: USA Rugby, college and university websites, and the Territorial Rugby Union websites (seven total sites representing the seven regions in the USA Rugby structure). The questionnaire was delivered online to a sample of 74 US Rugby coaches identified to be certified by the International Rugby Board in order to coach their elite or college teams. Respondents were asked to think about USA Rugby’s system as a whole and indicate how often each of the desired practices was performed, from ‘never’ to ‘always’ on a 5 point Likert scale. They were also asked to elaborate on practices and whether some should be improved or implemented. The 62 statements were also used to conduct semi-structured telephone interviews with the seven Territorial Rugby Union Presidents or Vice-Presidents.

The survey results will be completed by the end of 2009 in order to report the results at the NASSM 2010 Conference.

The presentation will discuss the model developed for comparing the USA Rugby model against other such models to identify areas for necessary improvement and practices transferable to the US. Following presentation of the survey results, a list of prioritized recommendations will be presented so that USA Rugby may successfully implement the model. It is hoped that this study will assist USA Rugby in advancing the development and success of Rugby and its composite teams while contributing to mass participation and the health of the nation.