Development of Youth Triathlon: A Delphi Study

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Sport development is a compelling issue for policymakers in national and international federations (Chalip, Johnson, & Stachura, 1996). When considering development, sport governing bodies are faced with the challenge of 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). As an overarching policy for continued growth, national governing bodies (NGBs) develop programs and policies to enhance participation. However, the NGB often relies on regional and local efforts to implement these policies. Hence growth requires a coordinated and integrated effort across national, regional, and local levels. Yet, the tasks required at each level vary, as do the challenges they face.

It is not surprising that organizations and providers throughout the development system do not always agree on strategies and tactics to grow the sport. This is particularly true in triathlon, where youth development is still relatively new. The recent growth of triathlon has fueled debates about the appropriate ways to facilitate participation of young athletes in triathlon. The resulting debates are important to understand as administrators attempt to expand programming, improve recruitment and retention efforts, and increase membership as the sport grows and matures. The concern for policymakers is that organizations and providers at each level (national, regional, and local) experience the challenges of growth differently. Although all providers seek to develop participation in their sport; resources, information, and potential barriers vary, particularly from level to level. Consequently, each struggles to solve the challenges in developing youth triathlon.

While there are increasing opportunities for youth to participate in triathlon, USA Triathlon (USAT) and the regional and local administrators and coaches are still grappling with ways to systematically develop programs for school-aged children that will increase overall participation in the sport while also enhancing the competitive development of youth triathletes. Therefore, purpose of this study was to identify experts' perceptions of the critical challenges to developing youth triathlon.

The study was designed based on the Delphi Method (Martino, 1983). A Delphi study consists of a panel of experts interacting remotely through a series of rounds in response to a key stimulus question or questions. Each panelist responds to the researcher. Experts share and justify their positions, but are never identified to the other respondents. The responses are collated and sent out to all panelists in the next round. Rounds continue until the group reaches consensus, or a majority and minority viewpoint. A panel with a high level of expertise in youth triathlon was identified for this study. The expert panel was comprised of USAT regional board members, USAT Regional Development Coordinators (RADC), high performance team coaches, former U23 team members, youth event directors, and youth coaches from around the United States. The expert panelists had intimate knowledge of youth program development and implementation, youth coaching, and/or youth race management. Twenty-five potential panelists fitting the criteria were solicited for the study. Nine expert panelists responded to the inquiry and completed all three iterations of the Delphi study.

The literature supports three rounds of iterations to sufficiently identify consensus or disagreement (Costa, 2005; Dietz, 1987). Therefore, three rounds were used in this study. In round one, panelists were asked to identify the top three challenges currently facing youth triathlon development. Responses to the open-ended question yielded ten themes: awareness, facilities, opportunity, cost of participation, funding, competition from other sport coaches, USAT support, coaching, peer support, and uniform racing guidelines.

In round two, the ten identified challenges and associated comments were sent to all panelists. Panelists were asked to rethink their position based on the comments of all panelists, to determine whether they agreed or disagreed with each of the ten challenges identified, to identify any challenges they felt were missing from the ten originally identified by the panel, and to once again specify which three challenges they felt to be the most critical. As in the previous round, respondents were asked to provide the reasoning behind their choices.
Panelists’ responses from round two resulted in consensus around four key challenges to developing youth triathlon. As panelists examined the ten challenges once again, they agreed that several were highly related. For example, they felt that opportunities to participate were actually available. However, people were not aware of the opportunities. Similarly, cost of participation was originally identified as a challenge. As panelists shared more views on this challenge, they felt this to be a false perception also due to a lack of awareness. In this way, the ten original challenges were reduced to four: awareness, competition from other sports, USAT support, and coaching.

In the final round, panelists were instructed to review all comments and consider possible ways to minimize each of the four challenges. Panelists were asked to explain who might be responsible to implement each of their recommendations - the NGB, the RADC, coaches, or another stakeholder group. The results show that there are salient challenges to developing youth triathlon, and highlight the distinctive ways in which stakeholder groups frame potential solutions to common challenges. Information sharing, marketing efforts, and partnerships were the most commonly suggested changes. More basically, each of these efforts implicates the importance of effective organizational linkages (cf. Leonard, 1982) within the development system for triathlon, and between triathlon organizations and potential partners. Implications for sport development are discussed.