Parents’ Preferences and Expectations for a Youth Sport Organization

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The design of youth sport programs varies according to the expected function of the programs. Some of them are developed as competitive programs that identify sport talent; some of them are tailored to serve social and recreational purposes (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003). The impact of sport on youth depends on the design and implementation of sport programs (McCormack & Chalip, 1988). Competitive pressure can affect the key elements of fun, socialization, and learning that children obtain in youth sport (McCarthy & Jones, 2007; Sagar & Lavallee, 2010). This has led some parents and coaches to conclude that learning the sport skills required for competitive success are antithetical to fun with the result that some programs choose as a matter of design and marketing to emphasize one over the other (Strain & Holt, 2000), although it has been argued that to do so is fundamentally self-defeating insomuch as sport requires both (Torres & Hager, 2007).

In the United States, community youth sport programs are run primarily by parents who work as volunteers (Bowers, Chalip, & Green, 2011). Consequently, parents are decision makers not merely regarding their children’s participation (Green & Chalip, 1998; Ferreira & Armstrong, 2002), but also about the ways their children’s club and league work (Chalip & Green, 1998). Consequently, parents’ views about their club and their league are particularly important, for successful club and league functioning (Chalip & Scott, 2005) and for the quality of experience that their children obtain (Brustad, 1995; Scanlon & Lewthwaite, 1986). These findings suggest the need to explore parental experiences and expectations for their children’s sport program.

In order to address that need, families from three swim clubs that had broken away from their previous league to form a new league were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate in a focus group discussion about the current state of their club, their experiences with the former league, and their expectations for the new league. All three clubs were co-educational, such that boys and girls trained and competed together. Five parents from each club (each from a different family) participated in focus groups—one for each club, each lasting approximately one hour. The same set of questions was used for each focus group. For each club, 3-4 focus group parents had multiple children who had swum with the club previously. Their children ranged in age from 5-11 years, and had competed with varying levels of proficiency. All parents came from upper-middle income families in which at least one member had a white collar job. All were white.

The first section of the focus group protocol probed the parents’ experiences since their children had become involved in swimming, with particular emphasis on swimming clubs and leagues. The second section probed their views about the new league, with particular emphasis on what they would like the league to enable for their children. The third section of the protocol included operational questions regarding management of the swimming league, including the nature of parent involvement, camaraderie among teams, and their feelings about their club, the league, and the neighborhood in which the club resided.

Each focus group was conducted by two persons (one serving as facilitator and one keeping notes). Each focus group was also recorded. The two persons responsible for a focus group reviewed their notes and the recording, and separately developed an initial analysis of themes that were present. They then met to determine similarities and differences, and to resolve discrepancies. They then met with five other members of the research team to discuss their findings, and to compare analyses. Thus, each focus group was first analyzed separately by the persons who had conducted the focus group, after which the three focus groups met with five other members of the research team to discuss their findings, and to compare analyses. Consequently, parents’ views about their club and their league are particularly important, for successful club and league functioning (Chalip & Scott, 2005) and for the quality of experience that their children obtain (Brustad, 1995; Scanlon & Lewthwaite, 1986). These findings suggest the need to explore parental experiences and expectations for their children’s sport program.

Two principal themes emerged, which were common to all three teams. First, parents seek a strong sense of community from their swimming club. They sought this for their children and for themselves. Second, parents wanted the club to foster continued learning and improved swimming for their children. They sought this not merely from the coaches, but from the club and league as a community that they had chosen to join.

Although these two themes emerged for all three clubs, the manifest points of reference were somewhat distinctive in each club. Parents at Club A wanted their children to swim in a club that made them feel a sense of belonging. Parents at Club B focused on the social opportunities brought about by their children’s swimming involvement, and the increased parental involvement brought about by volunteering. Parents at Club C talked about the ways that a nurturing atmosphere, a safe environment, and competent coaches enable them to feel a sense of community. Learning was represented as, in part, and outcome of this sense of
community, especially at Clubs B and C. At Club B, parents talked about the need for their children to learn “life skills,” particularly teamwork, sharing and goal setting – all matters requiring a supportive club and league environment. At Club C, parents talked about the ways that the parent-run meets and parent volunteering could enable their children’s learning. At Club A, parents were concerned about their children’s knowledge about swimming, which they understood as learning to swim well – a matter that they felt derived was primarily from the coaches, but also from parents who are responsible for the meets and refereeing, and the policies they set. They noted that those policies could enhance or detract from their children’s sense of community.

These findings demonstrate the pivotal role that sense of community can play in parent-run youth sport club and league functioning. Although clubs may differ in the ways that parental concerns about community feeling at the club become manifest, there is nonetheless an underlying expectation that the value they and their children obtain from the experience derives substantially from the sense of community that they and their children obtain. Further, the findings demonstrate that parents’ view their children’s learning as being, at least in part, a function of the ways that the club and the league function as a community. Although they clearly care about the operational issues of coaching, competitions, and club and league systems, these must be in service to the club and league as a community and not merely in service to training and competition. These findings suggest that the means to design, manage, and market youth sport clubs to foster a sense of community warrant further attention from researchers and youth sport administrators.