Quidditch: Simultaneously Pursuing Snitches and Gender Equality

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Based on the fictional sport of the same nameake in the Harry Potter franchise, quidditch was founded in 2005 at Middlebury College. Currently, over 350 colleges, high schools and community teams have formed around the world with over 1000 more teams in formation. The governing body, the International Quidditch Association (IQA), currently touts this mandatory co-ed sport as one of the most inclusive, socially engaging and competitive in the world. Due to the rare nature of quidditch being a full contact, co-ed sport and the paucity of existing research on co-ed sport, this context could provide a unique opportunity to investigate gender issues and equality. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to evaluate the impact of the co-ed nature of a non-traditional sport on participants and determine if participating on a quidditch team has an overall effect on gender perceptions.

While studies have shown that there are many benefits of participation in team sport, such as fitness, bonding, structure, and social development (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Sabo, Melinek, & Vanfossen, 1993; Silliker & Quirk, 1997), there has been far less research on the impact and benefits of co-ed sport. Research conducted in physical education (PE) classrooms has suggested that co-ed PE provides equal opportunities for participation and allows males and females to socially interact (Colgate, 1999; Griffin, 1984; Knoppers, 1988). Migliaccio and Berg (2007) also suggest that women benefit from participating in traditionally male dominated sports by being able to use their bodies and minds in a new way. Messner (2002) describes the potential of sport being made available to all athletes through co-ed offerings, “leveling the playing field and simultaneously changing the rules of the game to make the world more just, equitable, and healthy for all” (p. 166.).

In an effort to prevent dropout, Riewald (2003) suggests sport organizers should “purposefully incorporate FUN into the training environment . . . integrate social interaction . . . and mandate variety” (pp. 24-26). Others have also researched factors for participating in sport such as fun, health, competitiveness, and appearance (Coakley, 2001; Skill & Osteras, 2011). Although traditional sport participation still has a strong impact in the school systems, Riewald (2003) advances that new age ideas and non-traditional sports and activities can achieve success as well by reaching out to participants who normally would not join a team. The more potential avenues that can get people involved with extracurricular activities, the more people that will be drawn in and receive the benefits of team sports.

A grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was chosen due to the lack of existing research on co-ed sport and the sport of quidditch in general. The exploratory nature of grounded theory allows for full immersion within the data in an effort to determine if impact is occurring (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As part of the grounded theory approach, open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990) will be utilized to achieve the development of categories and finalize the dimensions that represent the results of the data. Through a partnership with the IQA, the first stage of data collection involved the distribution of an online qualitative survey to participants of the sport which received 343 responses. In regards to the co-ed component of the sport, the survey consisted of open-ended questions such as: a) “After playing quidditch, has your perception of co-ed sports or athletes of the opposite gender changed?” and b) “Do you feel that the co-ed component hurts or helps the game?” “Yes” or “no” questions asking about their previous experiences with co-ed sports and their current perceptions were also utilized. Respondents were given two weeks to fill out the online survey before it was closed.

Initial open coding of the data from the survey revealed raw data themes which assisted in developing further questions that will be utilized in focus group settings of 5-8 participants of the sport (Krueger & Casey, 2009). It is estimated that 4-6 focus groups will be required in an effort to reach data saturation. To further remove researcher bias and increase trustworthiness of the study, triangulation of methods will be employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This will include observing local teams and traveling to the annual Quidditch World Cup which involves over 100 teams from around the world. Additionally, online sources such as Facebook, Twitter, the IQA homepage, and newspaper articles will be tracked in an effort to fully engage the sport and its participants. The initial data for this
The study was collected in September 2011. Additional focus groups and observations will be conducted between November and December 2011. The full results will be available for presentation during the 2012 NASSM conference.

Initial analysis of the data acquired by surveys has shown significant impact of the co-ed sport of quidditch on its participants. Common themes discovered from the open coding process thus far suggest:

1. Increased respect and appreciation for the opposite gender (i.e., “I've come to realize that girls can compete with guys if given the opportunity. I respect women athletes even more than I did before.”).

2. A shift in perceptions of physicality of the opposite gender (i.e., “At first I was a little hesitant about playing aggressive against girls, but after that, no mercy! After playing for awhile now, I truly appreciate co-ed sports because these girls are tough! Some are tougher then I will ever be!”).

3. Quidditch shifted opinions in ways traditional sports did not (i.e., “Before quidditch, I didn't think that co-ed sports could really be successful, because men are naturally stronger than females. Since my first tournament, my opinion has changed drastically.”)

These themes will continue to be probed in additional focus groups and further coding of existing data along with the observations taking place at live events. In addition, 64% of the survey respondents stated they would participate on a co-ed team in the future, 33% stated "maybe", while only 4% responded with "no."

Due to the fact that quidditch, and co-ed sport in general, have been subject to limited research endeavors, it is believed this study makes a unique contribution to the field of sport management. Initial results have shown significant impact on gender perceptions of the players involved which can lead towards recommendations for additional co-ed sport implementation within school systems and further acceptance of non-traditional activities. This would build on suggestions from previous researchers who have called for co-ed sports to be used in an effort to minimize gender biases and increase equality (Messner, 2002; Migliaccio & Berg, 2007). Future research directions will also be explored.