Combining Community and Sport Development: The Stakeholders’ Perspective

Richard Buning, University of Florida
Shannon Kerwin (Advisor), University of Florida
Matthew Walker (Advisor), University of Southern Mississippi

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The decline in modern sport participation in the United States and other countries is a well-documented concern among both scholars and practitioners (e.g., SGMA, 2009; Telama & Zang, 2000). Additionally, the health epidemic, due largely to inactivity, exemplifies the need for empirical robustness to guide policy and decision-making for increased sport and recreation participation (Center for Disease Control, 2011; Pate et al., 1995). As such, researchers have suggested that linking the development of communities with the development of sport may be a solution to declining rates of sport participation and increased inactivity (e.g., Frisby & Millar, 2002; Green, 2005; Pedlar, 1996; Vail, 2007). For example, Vail (2007) found that a community development approach to increasing sport participation consisted of three main elements; (1) identifying a community champion, (2) developing collaborative partnership, and (3) delivering quality programs. Within Vail’s (2007) framework, the population was selected based on education on community champions and partnerships within pre-established contexts for community development. The current study extends the work of Vail (2007) by exploring the process community champion identification and community partnerships where sport development is occurring organically (i.e., without the aid or guidance of state/national associations). The purpose of this study was to explore the community development strategy to increase sport and recreation participation by uncovering multiple stakeholder perspectives of identifying ‘champions’ and managing key partnerships.

According to Vail (2007) “...even if a community is ready for change, a catalyst from within the community is needed to spark action” (2007, p. 575). The author further identified a proficient community development catalyst as an individual(s) titled a ‘community champion’. Community champions are described as passionate individuals that are well connected to a variety of community leaders in a particular city. When connecting community to sport development, it is necessary to employ Green’s (2005) sport development model, which examines athlete entrance, retention, and advancement. In order to catalyze sport development, it is assumed that a community requires an individual that is not only a community champion, but also a ‘sport and recreation champion’. This individual should be cognizant that the community is ready for change, and subsequently advocates and supports sport and recreation to facilitate that change. The sport and recreation and community champions could be one in the same - in that - a single individual uses positive community development to bring athletes into the sport system (or vice versa).

Recreation and health sector individuals are typically successful in employing community development approaches (e.g., Frisby & Millar, 2002; Hutchison & Nogradi, 1996; Kang, 1995; Stormann, 1996). Given this finding in the literature uncovering a ‘champion’ should enhance the process of combined community and sport development processes. Vail (2007) noted that, partnership building may be an issue for individuals who are strictly focused on community development, as they are often accustomed to working in isolation within their communities. Therefore, assessing successful attempts to build partnership in communities around sport and recreation development may shed light on Vail’s (2007) call to explore the nature of partnerships within these development contexts.

The sample community was a small rural town located in the southeast United States. At the time of data collection, the community housed a newly constructed indoor and outdoor sport and recreation facility that was used primarily for community programming and secondarily used for sport tourism stimulation. Further, a separate 16 field outdoor sports facility was recently approved and is currently under construction. Data were collected via five in-person semi-structured interviews and observations at three town hall meetings. The interviewees included two local city government representatives, the city sport and recreation program manager, and two corporate sponsor representatives (i.e., the sponsor of the newly constructed indoor/outdoor facility). The interviews and observations were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo 8.0 data management software. The data were coded via a priori (e.g., identified community champion(s)) and emergent (e.g., evolving/changing community and sport champions) codes based on the process outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Interview data were confirmed and contrasted with observation data, and three independent coders reviewed the coding scheme for consistency.
The findings revealed three main themes from the data. First, both community and sport/recreational champions were identified within this community and were deemed essential to the sport development process. This finding extends Vail’s (2007) work and also underpins Green’s (2005) suggestion that an advocate for sport and recreation participation must be present in order to stimulate sport participation. Second, the stakeholders each identified that their ‘champion’ (or leader) was constantly influx. Each of the interviewees could be seen as a champion for sport and community development, however, they discussed (in detail) the changing of the ‘guard’ over the course of the six year development initiatives and how each one of them played a key role in championing the movement. Finally, when discussing how stakeholder relations were managed, participants cited a thorough and detailed description of the community pattern and the politics needed to gain both community and stakeholder support. The idea of consistent relationship management was noted by all interviewees. This finding buttressed previous work on partnership building (e.g., Frisby & Millar, 2002; Hutchison & Nogradi, 1996; Kang, 1995; Stormann, 1996; Vail, 2007) and provides a systematic overview of the connections and communication needed to foster a successful community and sport development project.

Sport participation development programs have been fraught with short term change and long term instability (Vail, 2007). We examine a small community that has successfully combined sport and community development by garnering the support of a number of key community and national stakeholders. The findings shed light on the various stakeholders’ perspectives regarding the community and sport/recreation champions required to sustain development in the community, and the management of relationships required between stakeholders with multiple (and sometimes competing) interests. Future research on stakeholder processes with similar sport and community development projects in larger metropolitan cities is suggested in order to further unravel the complexities of these processes. A number of recommendations for future research and practice will be discussed.