Understanding the Role of Private Hockey Schools in Canada’s Hockey Development System

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Organizations in the Canadian hockey system create and implement elite level player development programs that increase the opportunities for hockey players to reach higher levels of competition such as the National Hockey League (NHL), Canadian Hockey League (CHL), or National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Club hockey organizations are the dominant entity within this system, providing teams for players wanting to compete at the elite level. However, a unique organization that exists within the Canadian sport development system and has yet to be explored within the area of sport management, is private hockey schools. These schools compete directly with club hockey organizations for the most talented hockey players and are a viable option for players to reach higher levels of competition. Therefore the research questions were: what recruitment practices and features are used by private hockey schools to attract elite level hockey players?; and what role do private hockey schools have in Canada’s elite level hockey development system?

Hockey is one of the few sports in Canada where attending a private school is a second option for youth players with the financial means of receiving elite level training integrated with academic instruction is made available. This training consists of on and off-ice training and elite level competition. In some cases, these schools have teams that compete in the same leagues or tournaments as club hockey teams. Comparatively, a club hockey program only focuses on player development and not on academics.

The management literature has extensively discussed recruitment within the context of employee recruitment (e.g., Barber, 1998; Breaugh, 1992; Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Windolf, 1986): “Recruitment performs the essential function of drawing an important resource – human capital – into the organization” (Barber, 1998, p.1). Thus, the term recruitment has been defined by Barber (1998) as “those practices and activities carried on by the organization with the primary purpose of identifying and attracting potential employees” (p. 5). For the purpose of this study recruitment is understood to be those practices and features of a private hockey school that are implemented by management to attract athletes, which is based on Barber’s (1998) definition of recruitment.

The sport of hockey has been extensively research (e.g., Curtis & Birch, 1987; Elliot & Maguire, 2008; Gruneau & Whitson; Mason, 2002; Mason, Buist, Edwards, & Duquette, 2007; Ramshaw & Hinch, 2006; Stevens, 2006); yet, there has been limited research that has specifically explored private hockey schools from a recruitment, organization, sport management, and systems perspective. This is also the case for previous research that has examined private or preparatory school sports in general. It is for this reason that exploring these institutions is unique to the current literature in the field of sport management.

A case studies methodology was adopted (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003) to examine private hockey schools reputational signals, and their recruitment practices. Reputation is an intangible asset that can be managed by organization (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Washington 1999). The term reputation is based on the perceptions of the organization (e.g., Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Whetten & Mackay, 2002). Thus, reputation is a signal of the future actions and performance of an organization, which is based on past performances and indicators (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Podolny, 2005; Rindova et al., 2005). These indicators have been found to be prominence of the organization and the organization’s ability to produce of a quality product (Rindova et al., 2005)

Phone interviews were conducted with presidents, hockey directors, and employees of six private hockey schools. A second set of interviews were conducted with executive board members, employees, presidents, and hockey directors of 10 club hockey organizations and three governing bodies (i.e., Hockey Canada, Hockey Alberta, and Edmonton Minor Hockey). Participants from the second set of interviews provided the external perceptions on the emergence of private hockey schools within the Canadian hockey system. Furthermore, the participants interviewed
have substantial knowledge about the recruitment practices and features of the institution. Secondary sources of
data originated from the institutions’ websites and documents retrieved from the private hockey schools. Over 100
pages of data was collected pertaining to descriptions of the hockey program, facilities, mission statement,
background on coaches, fees, and other information pertaining to the private hockey schools. These secondary data
sources were used to augment and verify interview data. Interviews were transcribed, and, through an inductive
approach, themes that emerged from the interviews and secondary data sources were identified and coded as
practices and features. Five stages, based on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) and discussed in Edwards and
Skinner (2009), were used to analyze the data.

Preliminary findings have suggested that representatives of the club hockey organizations are threatened by the
success of private hockey schools. Also, show-case tournaments, player success, the private hockey school or
academy experience, on and off-ice facilities, and the instructor’s background were used in the recruitment of hockey
players. In understanding the role of private hockey schools within Canada’s sport system, these institutions were
found to draw players away from the grassroots club hockey organizations, while having the freedom to recruit
players from all over the world. Club hockey organizations are challenged with restrictive residential boundary
regulations that prevent the recruiting of players outside a predetermined geographical region. Due to these
regulations private hockey schools have a competitive advantage for recruiting players over the club hockey
programs.

Due to the fact that private hockey schools are not restricted by the same boundary regulations as club hockey
organizations, management of these institutions must create a strong development program that can be used to
establish a strong reputation to attract the most talented players. The attractiveness and prestige acquired through
playing at one of these hockey schools can provide an experience not attainable through club level hockey. In one
aspect private hockey schools have a competitive advantage regarding players, in another aspect management of
these institutions have to develop a program that creates a reputation that attracts players to the program. While
this may be the case, an understanding of the role in which these organizations play within Canada’s hockey
development system is unclear. Thus, the contribution that this study makes to the field of sport management is an
understanding of the role of private schools in a club sport organization dominated environment, within an elite
level sport development system. Another contribution that this study makes is that it provides a foundation for
studying other sport systems where private sport schools offer elite level training.