Creating and Sustaining New Sport Programs: A multi-site study of Girls High School Flag Football

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New sport programs face significant competition for participants, both from other sports and from other activities. It is particularly difficult for a sport to gain a foothold in the American sports marketplace unless it is included as a school sport (Sparvaro, Chalip, & Green, 2008). However, it is exceptionally difficult to add a sport to the school sport calendar. As a consequence, much new sport development in the US occurs outside the school system and begins long before the high school years. Outside of the schools, girls’ and boys’ sport participation rates are fairly even up until middle school, with girls’ participation declining through middle school and into high school (Trost, 2008). The girls that remain active in high school sport are most likely those that have trained in their sport from a young age. Increasingly, girls must also play for a club team outside of school to be competitive for a position on the school team. However, club teams for this age group tend to require intensive financial and time commitments. This scenario leaves many girls without an opportunity to participate in sport at the high school level. One potential solution is to develop new high school sport opportunities. At a time when school budgets (and school athletic budgets) are being slashed, adding sports is a hard sell. Three components seem necessary to facilitate the development of a new sport for high school girls: (1) a champion for the program, (2) demand for the sport, and (3) a low or no cost structure.

USA Football, in partnership with the NFL, has worked to develop flag football as a high school sport for girls. The program has been wildly successful in Florida where it is a full-fledged varsity sport culminating in a state championship (Thomas, 2010). While it is played at the club level in a number of states, it is has had difficulty making the leap to varsity status. This research examines four programs throughout the US striving to offer the sport to high school girls. None of the programs has yet to establish itself as an official varsity sport, yet each has shown significant demand for the sport. The four sites selected are: (1) Austin, TX; (2) New Orleans, LA; (3) Chicago, IL, and (4) Harrisburg, PA. The four sites are vastly different in the girls they serve and the socio-cultural milieu in which they exist.

Data collection at each site consisted of interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., administrators, coaches, players, sponsors, parents), observation at games, and surveys of current players. Interviews with administrators, sponsors, and coaches assessed not only the structure and organization of the programs, but also intended goals, participant base and noted outcomes to date. Interviews with participants and parents assessed their pathways to involvement, the place of sport in their lives, barriers to participation, desired outcomes, and perceptions of program effectiveness. Surveys assessed the place of participation relative to other forms of involvement with the sport of football, their sport participation patterns since childhood, and perceived support from significant others (e.g., parents, peers) to their participation in flag football.

Data analysis, which is currently in progress, consists of open coding of the interview transcripts and triangulation with the survey patterns and field notes in a comparative case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach builds a comprehensive picture of each site, then compares across sites for key similarities and differences that provide insight into the process of developing new sport programs.

Preliminary results reveal high levels of interest and excitement for the sport. Further, although there is some overlap with existing high school sports, flag football does not appear to draw its participants from the existing pool of high school athletes. Instead, it is attracting non-participants. Girls report being drawn to flag for the game itself (e.g., speed, outdoors), for the match between their perceived skills and the skills required, and for the reduced commitment levels found at most of the sites studied (i.e., most programs practice 1-2 times/week and play 1/week). Administrators and coaches indicate that while coordination is difficult, the resources needed to implement the sport are surprisingly low compared to other high school sport opportunities. They also report that previously inactive girls are finding a niche in flag football, and that it has been effective for improving the social
climate at their high schools. This is particularly true in those cases where girls of various ages (freshman through seniors) play on the same team. Data regarding particular structural necessities, participant and school outcomes, entry pathways, and retention mechanisms are still being explored.

In sum, flag football appears to be a promising avenue for new sport development in American high schools. It is attractive to girls (even to those with little previous exposure to the sport), and it is flexible in its implementation, making it effective across a wide array of contexts. Implications for the feasibility, design, and implementation of new sport programs for girls will be discussed.