An Investigation of the Benefits of Sport to Facilitate Community Recovery after Disasters

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Background and Purpose of the Study: Sport organizations have engaged in activities that aim to help community recovery after disasters. For example, Major League Baseball (MLB) and its players association (MLBPA) respectively donated $5 million to a relief fund for victims of September 11 attacks (New York Times, 2001). In just two weeks after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Japan Football Association (JFA) held a charity match, raising a total of over $2 million in donations for disaster relief efforts (JFA, 2011). Despite such substantial efforts exerted by sport organizations in post-disaster recovery, the extant literature has provided little insight into what benefits these organizations may provide to help communities recover from disasters. As an exception, Baade and Matheson (2008) investigated the extent to which professional sport organizations have helped the economic recovery of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. However, the rest of the work examining the linkage between sport and disasters focused exclusively on examining the negative function of sport in the post-disaster period (e.g., Butterworth, 2005; Kutz, 2007; Scherer & Koch, 2010). Butterworth (2005), for example, analyzed discourses surrounding baseball after September 11, concluding that the sports served as “a ritualized vehicle for a belligerent patriotism” (p.107). Furthermore, while a growing body of the sport management literature has examined corporate social responsibility (CSR) of sport organizations (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006, 2009; Walker & Kent, 2009), no studies explicitly explained what responsibilities and roles these organizations may assume for communities in the aftermath of disasters.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand how sport organizations may contribute to the rebuilding of communities affected by disasters. Specifically, given the lack of existing empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks on this topic, this study seeks to identify types of benefits that sport organizations provide to facilitate community recovery through an inductive approach.

The study collected newspaper and magazine articles that described the benefits of sport organizations following various disasters by searching electronic databases, such as LexisNexis Academic, and online archives of major news publications and sport-related magazines. In searching these databases, the keywords such as sport and disaster, disaster relief and professional sports, Haiti earthquake, Hurricane Katrina, Japan earthquake and tsunami, 9/11, and terrorist attacks were used in retrieving data. The search results yielded various data sources including Street and Smiths Sports Business Journal, The New York Times, The New York Daily News, USA Today, and Sports Illustrated. The data collection from these various sources resulted in a total of 41 articles that dealt with sport and disasters. The content analysis of these articles was conducted to identify types of benefits that sport organizations have the potential to provide after disasters.

The results of the content analysis of the 41 total articles identified four types of benefits provided by sport organizations in the post-disaster period: (1) physical support for individual victims, (2) psychological support for individual victims, (3) contribution to the economic redevelopment of the community, and (4) a symbol of the recovery for the community. The sum of the number of benefits reported in the articles exceeds the total number of the articles analyzed because some articles provided information on multiple benefits.

The first benefit, physical support for individual victims, refers to sport organizations’ disaster relief activities that aim to improve the living conditions of community residents affected by a disaster, such as monetary donations, fundraising, and volunteer efforts. Among the 41 articles analyzed, 23 (56%) provided information on this type of benefit. For example, the National Football League (NFL) donated $2 million to the Red Cross for disaster relief in the wake of the 2010 Haiti earthquake (Science Weekly, 2010).
The second benefit, psychological support for individual victims, refers to the capacity of sport organizations and their events to provide psychological benefits, such as positive emotions, sense of social connectedness, and self-esteem, that allow community residents to reduce mental stress from a disaster. Among the 41 articles analyzed, 18 (46%) provided information on this type of benefit. An example of this benefit is seen one week following Hurricane Katrina as the New Orleans Saints won their season opening game which evoked positive emotions for fans and New Orleans residents displaced by the devastation (Silver, 2005).

The third benefit, contribution to the economic redevelopment of the community, addresses the use of sporting events to bring tourists back to the community in order to revive the local economy. Among the 41 articles analyzed, five (12%) provided information on this type of benefit. In one example, the National Basketball Association (NBA) held its 2008 All-Star Game in New Orleans that attracted a number of tourists to the city three years after Hurricane Katrina (Beck, 2008).

Finally, the fourth benefit, a symbol of the recovery for the community, asserts that the success of sport teams enhances community pride and the sense of community among residents, in turn facilitating recovery and reconstruction activities in the community. Among the 41 articles analyzed, 14 (34%) provided information on this benefit. A recent example of this benefit can be seen in Japan winning the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup just months after Japan was struck by the Great East Japan Earthquake. A USA Today article detailed how the team’s win helped to provide a welcome distraction from dealing with the devastation, and how the team became a source of national pride and a symbol of recovery for the nation (Kaplan, 2011).

Through the content analysis of newspaper and magazine articles, this study identified the four distinctive benefits that sport organizations may provide for post-disaster recovery. The findings of this study should provide novel insight into the sport management literature and especially add knowledge to the body of work that aims to understand the CSR of sport organizations (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006, 2009; Walker & Kent, 2009). In addition, the information presented here can better prepare a sport organization for its response to a disaster, including the formation of a disaster relief response plan. It could further allow the sport organization to act in a targeted strategic manner in effectively investing its resources so that it can maximize the desired positive benefits for both the sport organization and the community in which it exists.