

**An Empirical Feasibility Study on NCAA Recognition of Wheelchair Basketball**

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Introduction

Collegiate wheelchair basketball began in 1977 under the umbrella of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA). In order to fit the collegiate model the Central Intercollegiate Conference (CIC) was formed, however, just one of the seven CIC universities is currently housed in the university athletic department. Fay (2012) notes the efforts to explore the recognition of wheelchair basketball as an NCAA emerging sport, however it was not discussed whether these efforts were effective or appropriate. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the feasibility of recognizing wheelchair basketball as an NCAA emerging sport.

Literature Review

While literature on disability sport is limited, Hardin & Hardin (2003) and Hardin & Hardin (2004) noted the tendency for disabled athletes to be presented as inspirations rather than legitimate athletes, while noting the frustration of such a presentation for some. Byon et al. (2011) and Cottingham, Carroll, Phillips, and Hall (2012) looked at wheelchair basketball as a spectator sport, noting the primary motive for consumption as the degree to which consumers are informed on the sport. Logic dictates that more substantial promotion will occur with the backing and legitimacy of the NCAA moniker.

Literature on emerging sports generally focuses on new sports as an adaptation of existing sports or activities. This is evidenced by case studies on parkour (Atkinson, 2009) and snowboarding (Humphries, 1997). Four factors common amongst recent emerging sports include the aforementioned adaptation of existing sport, the impact of media on growth of the consumer market (Heino, 2001; Humphries, 1997; Pickert, 2009), the establishment of leagues and formal associations (Dunning, 1993; Humphries, 1997), and sponsorship of the sport and participants (Heino, 2000). An emerging sport is defined as a sport recognized by the NCAA with the intention to provide additional athletics opportunities to female student-athletes (Emerging Sports for Women, 2012). The NCAA looks for growth as well as injury and risk statistics in their evaluation (Hosick, 2011).

Literature on NCAA sports identifies the increased exposure associated with emerging sport status, the presence of a championship prior to gaining championship status, and the removal of barriers that prevent institutions from sponsoring the sport as common factors among sports recently taking the step from “emerging” to NCAA recognition. The exemplification of these ideals by women’s rowing (Hosick, 2007a; Rosner, 2001), water polo (Mckindra, 2005), and ice hockey (Hosick, 2007a; Mckindra, 2005) enabled these sports to move from emerging sport to championship status.

Methods

The purpose of this study is to examine the feasibility of recognizing wheelchair basketball as an NCAA emerging sport. An examination of current CIC policies, procedures, and statuses of the CIC schools was conducted. Relevant bylaws related to NCAA status were then reviewed and the constant comparative method was utilized.

Primary Findings

The following concerns were noted.

1. Number of teams - The CIC is well short of the requisite 20 varsity and/or club teams to be considered for emerging sport status (Hosick, 2011). Having established no more than eleven men’s teams and four women’s teams in its 30 year history, it is unlikely that the CIC will reach this requirement anytime in the near future. For this reason the NCAA would need to waive the 20 team minimum for emerging sport status.

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2. Divisional alignment – Currently, CIC teams are represented in all divisions. According to NCAA policy, if representation is lacking at a given level the NCAA may provide a waiver to allow the team to play at another level (Pat Coleman, personal communication, September 27, 2012). This might seemingly put some teams at a disadvantage as Division III teams do not provide grant in aid, while teams of Division I and II do. Although many schools currently provide grant in aid through their club sports, The University of Wisconsin Whitewater does not, and yet it has still captured more national championships in the last 10 years than any other team.

3. Academic eligibility - Currently all CIC teams meet all academic eligibility requirements of their institutions and the NCAA, save one. CIC teams allow their athletes five years of on court eligibility rather than the four allowed by the NCAA (University of Alabama, 2012). The NCAA could allow for a 5th year of on court eligibility; in fact the NCAA already allows for an exemption for Brigham Young University (BYU) and its eligibility requirements (Crain, 2005). Still, we would not recommend this as it not an issue of religion as in the case of BYU; in addition it would set a poor precedent for future emerging sports and might lower the value of NCAA status for wheelchair basketball. The primary reason that wheelchair basketball might not want to limit eligibility is a concern over the number of athletes. An examination of the CIC teams' rosters on university websites would suggest that at least 15% of players on the teams are international athletes. In addition, over 120 youth wheelchair basketball teams are currently rostered with the NWBA. Coupled with a steady stream of newly injured veterans from international conflicts, this suggests there are plenty of athletes which could be recruited domestically and internationally to not only sustain, but to supplement the current number of teams, even if eligibility is limited to four years.

4. Institutional recognition - Institutional recognition will be a primary issue. Currently, there are 328 collegiate wrestling programs (Cook, 2012), but while many are club, only 222 schools have NCAA wrestling teams (College Sports Scholarships, 2012). The number of NCAA wrestling teams has declined by 475 since 1972 (Cook, 2012). Furthermore, NCAA recognition of a sport does not signify that an institution recognizes the sport. In reality, NCAA recognition might actually shrink the size of the CIC rather than increase it. If, for example, only four of the institutions which currently have men's CIC teams were to include wheelchair basketball as part of the athletic department, then the CIC would have to determine if trading conference size for NCAA status is an appropriate exchange.

5. Title IX status – Achieving Title IX status will perhaps be of greatest concern. We are currently examining all CIC schools to see if there have been any issues of Title IX compliance of late. Rarely does a university need to add men's teams in order to become Title IX compliant, but adding women's teams is more common and necessary. The CIC might have to determine if it would be appropriate to add just women's wheelchair basketball to the NCAA and if that would benefit the sport as a whole.