Athlete Involvement in the Governance of National Sport Federations

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The International Olympic Committee 2000 Commission report (1999, p. 13) declared “athletes should be well represented at all levels of the sports movement: IOC [International Olympic Committee], IFs [International Sport Federations], NOCs [National Olympic Committees], and NFs [National Sport Federations].” Since this report, there is growing evidence that athletes are increasingly recognized as a central stakeholder and involved in policy and decision making of sport governing bodies (Thibault, Kihl, & Babiak, 2010). Thibault et al. (2010) found that a large percentage of IFs (i.e., international sport federations governing winter and summer Olympic sports) had instituted athletes’ committees, thus creating a space for athletes’ interests and concerns to be voiced. Despite the inclusion of athletes in international sport governance, the role of athletes in the governance of national federations may vary by country.

Building on the work on legitimate athlete representation in IFs (Thibault et al., 2010), this study examined the extent to which athletes have a voice in the governance of national sport federations (NFs) of various countries. This study was framed using deliberative democratic theory (Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1996) and the principle of representation (Birch, 1971; Parkinson, 2006). Deliberative democracy is a form of governance that maintains that collective decisions should involve all those affected by a decision. Individuals (and their representatives) engage in a deliberative process where decisions are justified based on mutually acceptable reasons (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Legitimate representation contends that who is represented, what process is used to determine selection, and what stakeholders are represented will vary according to the purpose of the deliberative body (Parkinson, 2006). To address this study’s purpose, we posed the following research questions: 1) what NFs have established athletes’ committees that have the ability to influence decisions that affect them? 2) what is the level of athlete participation in core decisional structures (i.e., boards of directors, executive committees, and other committees)? and 3) what impact athletes have on these NFs’ decisions?

A multi-case study design (Yin, 2014) was used to examine the extent to which athletes’ have a voice in the governance of NFs in four countries (i.e., Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States (US)). Case selection was based on three criteria: 1) countries with a developed sport system; 2) countries with a strong tradition of Olympic and international sport participation; and 3) countries where information about their NFs’ structure, rules and procedures, and policies were available in English. Primary data collection was performed by accessing public documents and websites. Data collection occurred in two stages. First, NFs in each of these countries were identified and then governance information was compiled from the NFs websites including bylaws, constitutions, or acts of incorporation which define and characterize the main governance structures were collected, as well as annual reports which can reflect athletes’ engagement in core organizational decisions. Second, where data were incomplete, top paid staff of NFs were contacted via electronic mail to request data and verify (or confirm) governance information available online.

The initial analysis was carried out on 47 sport federations, both Olympic and non-Olympic, winter and summer sports, governed by 173 federations (43 in Australia, 48 in Canada, 35 in Great Britain, and 47 in the US). A total of 129 bylaws, constitutions, or acts of incorporation were retrieved (35 in Australia, 37 in Canada, 13 in Great Britain, and 44 in the US), as well as 74 annual reports (36 in Australia, 20 in Canada, 14 in Great Britain, and 14 in the US). Of these federations for which bylaws were available, 61 (47.2%) federations had an athletes’ committee or council (17 (48.5%) in Australia, 9 (45%) in Canada, 3 (23%) in Great Britain, and 32 (72.7%) in the USA). Once the second stage is completed, it will become possible to compare across sport federations not only between nations, and between national and international sport federations, which will help determine whether the recommendations from the IOC 2000 Commission report (IOC, 1999) and the international sport federations’ efforts toward athletes’ participation in decision making and governance (Thibault et al., 2010) has had an impact on NFs.
Based on the initial analysis, there are important differences in terms of commitment to athletes’ participation between nations, suggesting that national particularities may play a role. The impact of federal legislation requiring athlete representation influenced the level of participation in decision making in NFs. For example, in the US, the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act (1998) require representation of athletes at every decision level in NFs. As a result, all NFs bylaws mandate the presence of athlete representation on boards of governance and 42 (95.5%) further require the presence of athletes on other committees. Comparatively, the percentages of bylaws that require the presence of athletes' representatives on boards of directors and on other committees in the three other countries respectively were 31.4% and 0% in Australia, 62.1% and 21.6% in Canada, and 7.7% and 15.4% in Great Britain. The analysis of the annual reports of the US NFs provided no mention of the impact of athletes on the organizational structure, policies, and decisions, while there were four such examples in Australian NFs and two in Canadian NFs. Legislating representation may not necessarily lead to athletes having impact on organizational decisions. Future research requires interviewing organizational leaders and athletes to determine their impact on decision making in NFs.

We argue that a broader attitude toward athletes’ participation might exist, which perceives a democratic model as ultimately incompatible with effective operations of NFs. Crawford and Carter (2011) and Arbib (2012) argued that the interest of athletes are often in conflict with the interest of the organization as a whole, calling for an end to the representative model of governance and for a board composed of only independent directors. Regardless of these arguments, the central position that athletes occupy in sport should allow them the right to be involved in making important decisions regarding their participation in sport.

We will conclude this presentation by discussing theoretical and practical implications for the role of athletes in the governance of NFs as well as questions for future research.