Female Hockey Development In Canada: An Analysis of Players, Pathways, and Pressures

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Introduction

The lack of competition within international women’s hockey has placed the sport in a precarious position, particularly in the Olympic program (Brophy, 2013; Brady, 2013; Spencer, 2010; 2013). The concern generates debate over how countries may better develop elite female hockey players and improve their women’s national team programs. In response to the criticism, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) initiated a four-year, $2.1 million women’s hockey project, called “To Sochi and Beyond”, in 2011 (Hockey Canada, 2013). As a leading hockey nation, Canada’s player development programs serve as a valuable model. Hockey Canada, the national hockey federation, created a men’s Program of Excellence (POE) in 1981 that reflected the male high performance hockey player pathway from youth to senior levels. In 1997, the male hockey POE template was applied to women’s hockey in preparation for the 1998 Winter Olympic Games.

The Hockey Canada POE and the IIHF mentorship project raise interesting questions about female hockey player development. What advice is best to help countries build female hockey programs? Canada’s international women’s hockey success suggests its development program is a preferred model but very little is understood about the pathway Canadian female hockey players actually take as they move from grassroots to high-performance levels. Consequently, the purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and analyze the development pathway of Canadian female hockey players. A greater understanding of the nature and dynamics of the female hockey development pathway will not only improve its effectiveness for Canadian players, but also provide development recommendations to other countries.

Review of Literature

Shilbury, Sotiriadou, and Green (2008) argued “there is much to be studied in relation to the systems and pathways designed to attract, maintain and nurture participants” (p. 219). Player development research primarily focuses upon athlete physical, technical and psychological performance (Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2005) and coaching practices (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Further, the sport development model predominantly depicted within the literature as a three-leveled pyramid that builds from mass-participation to competitive to high-performance competition (Green, 2005). However, Shilbury et al. (2008) contended the pyramid model does “not capture the increasing sophisticated nature of the sport systems” (p. 219) and argues athletes follow multiple entry and exit, and transitions points as they move along a development pathway. It is also argued that player development is a process whereby opportunities and processes enable individuals or particular groups to be involved in sport and to achieve the performance level they desire (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008; Eady, 1993).

Given this, an institutional theory (IT) approach situates the analysis of the female hockey player development pathway at a system as opposed to individual level. IT embraces concepts such as legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995) enduring beliefs and logics (Scott, 2008), institutional pressures and isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and strategic institutional responses (Oliver, 1982). The dynamics of female hockey player development pathways can be interpreted using these concepts in order to map the nature of the pathways, and to explain why and how the pathways may be similar or different from the dominant player development model of both men’s hockey and elite sport in Canada.

Research Methods

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with open ended questions. A total of 21 (n=21) female hockey leaders, including national, provincial and university coaches, minor hockey executive volunteers, and elite players across four regions – West (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia), Ontario, Quebec, and East (Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia) in Canada participated. Over 210 pages of transcripts
were analyzed to determine the type and dynamics of player development pathways. The data were examined according to a priori sensitizing themes to guide open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Specifically, the initial analysis focused upon mapping player development pathways and identifying various dynamics such as competition forums, transition points, key actors, barriers, and enablers. Subsequent analysis applied the dynamics factors of the pathways to IT concepts in order to draw conclusions and comparisons of female hockey development within the broader institutional high-performance sport and hockey contexts.

Findings, Discussion and Implications

Participants described 56 women’s hockey development pathways which were clustered into similar types by region. Each pathway consisted of early, mid and late stages and included consistent transition points, namely age 14 for early to mid-stage transition and age 17 for mid to late stage transition. The number of options within each stage and consequently, the total possible player pathways within each region varied. Specifically, the East included 12 pathways, Quebec six pathways, Ontario nine pathways, and the West eight pathways. The options within each stage included: girls’ only hockey, boy’s hockey, and ringette for the early-stage; high-school, college, Canadian and American private school, hockey academy, and elite club teams for mid-stage; Canadian university and American collegiate teams, provincial teams, and elite senior club teams for late-stage. Overall, participants indicated the number of elite female hockey player development pathways and the key age at which a player needed to enter the elite level of a pathway in order to become a high-performance athlete had both declined over time. Participants also revealed a player’s progress along a pathway was strongly influenced by key actors. These actors operate within the male and female hockey systems and include elite club coaches, provincial team coaches, minor and provincial hockey leaders, scouts and recruiters, personal trainers, power skating and skill instructors, parents, and the players themselves.

An IT interpretation of these findings suggests women’s hockey development in Canada reflects tensions as various pressures, such as regulatory changes to POE programs and normative male hockey practices of key actors, impact the established female player development system. The finding that pathway diversity had decreased over time suggests pathway isomorphism; however, the variety of pathway options reveals residual development structures persist and a shift to a dominant elite player pathway is not universal in female hockey. At this time, female hockey reflects greater player pathway heterogeneity than male hockey but movement towards homogeneity exists (Edwards, Mason, & Washington, 2009). Dual logics and beliefs - namely excellence and development - act within the female hockey system in Canada (Adams & Stevens, 2009; Stevens, 2000) and as such, different actors across regions demonstrate different strategic responses to this ambiguity (Oliver, 1991; 1992).

This system-based analysis raises important implications for female hockey leaders both within Canada and abroad. Questions about movement towards one dominant female hockey player development pathway, which is the normative practice within elite sport development programs and models (Green, 2005) appears to be the trend in Canadian female hockey. But is it the best option for the future global development of the female game? Careful consideration is needed about the development system best suited for each country. Canada’s international success emerged from a system with multiple player pathways. Would a shift to one dominant pathway be in the best interest of the female game?