Sport and Recreation: Bridging the Gap for a more Inclusive Sport Development Model

Brianna Newland, University of Delaware
Pamm Phillips, Deakin University

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In recent years, a focus on success at elite levels of sport performance by both sport organizations and governments alike has led to sport development systems that are becoming more isomorphic and insular (De Bosscher et al., 2009; Phillips & Newland, 2013). Interestingly, they have become heavily centered on increasing participation and performance specific to elite sport competition within the sports themselves. Rarely do they include other sports, or other sport and recreation activities as part of their development pathways. Typically sports require early specialization and as a result often discourage informal and/or outside sport participation. Such high-performance focused sport development systems are developing in ways that cause sport organizations, governing bodies, and sport policy-makers to focus so highly on funding and development of the high performance aspects of their sport to the possible detriment of other activities that might contribute to both mass participation and high performance.

What has been largely ignored in research and practice is the link between recreational and leisure activities with organized sports, and the way in which they might co-exist in sport development systems. Phillips and Newland (2013) and Newland and Kellett (2012) have started to explore new models of sport development, of which this issue is an example. In sport management theory and practice, we still have much to learn about sport development programming, management and delivery in order to enhance accessibility, skill development, and meeting consumer expectations (such as competition, mastery, social, enjoyment/fun or a combination of the like). Researchers have spent considerable time illustrating how sport development pathways enable the ability to participate; yet, examples of practice suggest that all the possible machinations of sport development have yet to be explored. This conceptual paper aims to illuminate the current sport development theory as it relates to development pathways and to explore current examples in sport that, in practice, include recreation and leisure activities as part of the sport delivery processes.

Research thus far in sport development has been very useful for identifying stakeholders, strategies, processes and pathways for youth and junior and (to a more limited extent) adult sport development (e.g., Green, 2005; Lim et al., 2012; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008). However, in all cases, programs that have been investigated tend to be more formal in nature, part of the organized sport’s development system, and highly focused on competition (albeit social in nature in some cases). Rarely do sport organizations offer or promote opportunities for informal sport play, recreation, or leisure, especially for children. Instead, organized sport development models focus on pathways for performance and competition. Modified offerings with a higher recreational and/or learning focus tend to be disparaged and considered inferior to competitive programs despite positive outcomes to participation (Green, 1997).

For children, the sport focus has shifted from the skill-based, fun-oriented, youth-organized structure to an emphasis on high performance with movement toward elite pathways (Ewing, Seefeld, & Brown 1996; Russell & Limle, 2013). There is a growing opinion that elite performance requires early specialization and the increased frequency and duration of practice is likely to lead to greater proficiency (Ward, et al., 2004). This belief perpetuates despite research that sport expertise can be acquired through sport practice (through diverse sport participation) without the need for early specialization (Baker, Cote, & Abernathy, 2003). Furthermore, early specialization has been shown to lead to increased risk of injury (Kaleth & Mikesky, 2010), early withdrawal from sport and burnout (Gould, 2010), and stress from high expectations (Wiersma, 2000). Additionally, as the child ages, late entry into a sport becomes difficult as the level of play and competition grows more intensive, which creates an additional barrier to participation.

Similarly, much of the development programming for adults in most organized sports relies heavily on social competition (Stempel, 2006). In essence, individuals need to have some semblance of skills in the sport, as well as knowledge of the rules in order to participate and be a valued member of the team (c.f., Palm, 1991). To further
complicate adult sport participation, adults with lower socioeconomic status and education have limited access and opportunity to sport (Stempel, 2006).

Current Models of Sport Development

There are three prevailing models for the development of sport. The most inclusive model of the three is the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model (Canadian Sport for Life, 2012). This seven-stage model initially emphasizes physical literacy (fundamental movement and skills) and then progresses to excellence in sport through a systematic progression of various stages that center on training and competition. The LTAD is a comprehensive model that promotes athletic development throughout the lifespan (Canadian Sport for Life, 2012). The Pyramid Model of Sport Development (PMSD) (Green, 2005) illustrates the pathway from beginner to elite sport. By developing a foundation of mass-participation (the base of the pyramid), potential athletes can be identified, recruited, and trained to be competitive as they advance up the pyramid, eventually reaching the apex: elite status. Eady’s (1993) sport development pyramid moves beyond the relationship between mass and elite sport participation in an attempt to capture the dynamic continuum of sport development and provide an environment for participants to progress to a level of performance best suited to the individual. This model, while still performance focused, allows the individual to leave and reenter the sport at his or her level of choosing.

While all three of these models allow for and depend on a strong foundation of mass participation for success, the assumption that all make is that the elite level is the pinnacle of sport participation and, therefore, the optimal goal of the athlete. With that focus, is it no surprise that our sport policies, governance, and funding is so heavily concerned with developing elite sport. However, in order to develop a more inclusive model for sport participation over the lifespan, the pinnacle cannot be elite. The elite focus, although not intended, engenders exclusion because pathways for recreational participation that offers social, leisure, or semi-competitive play are not supported nor are they well-developed. Despite this, there are some opportunities do exist and they are flourishing. Take for instance, triathlon. This sport is thriving because it welcomes former athletes from sports that no longer provide opportunity. Triathlon is enticing because it allows for the newcomer to elite or recreational participant to professional to coexist in one environment – any participant of any level or experience can race. A similar example can be found in Crossfit. Like triathlon, any participant of any level can participate and compete within the same environment.

Proposed Model for Sport Development

Like Eady (1993), we believe sport participation lies on a continuum. However, we argue that sport participation should move away from a model that emphasizes competition as the pinnacle of participation. For sport development to be truly inclusive of both mass participation and elite sport, skill foundation must exist on a continuum with skill mastery and recreation must exist on a continuum with competition, creating four dimensions of athlete. Competitive athletes interested in elite sport and/or high level of performance would develop into the pathways concentrated in the Competition-Mastery quadrant. Athletes driven by skill mastery, but do not require fierce competition, would develop into the pathways concentrated in the Recreation-Mastery quadrant. The social athletes that participate in sport for fun and to engage with others would pursue pathways concentrated in the Foundation-Recreation quadrant. These athletes engage in sport for fun and the opportunity to share an activity with like-minded people. Finally, the Foundation-Competition quadrant allows opportunities for athletes that enjoy building a foundation of sport knowledge and have the opportunity to compete, but not at the elite level.

This conceptual model allows for multiple entry and reentry points at every level (beginner to elite) as well as an equal opportunity for skill development that allows for easy transition across quadrants. In this way, the traditional sport development models where the foundation is built by attracting youth participants and shuttling them up to a pinnacle of sport performance is challenged with a strong foundation in each quadrant. Implications for sport development theory, practice, and education will be discussed.