Sport Development Through National Governing Body Member Retention

Richard Buning, The University of Memphis
Daniel Larson, University of Oklahoma

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Officially recognized by an international sport federation and a national Olympic committee, national governing bodies (NGBs) are primarily responsible for promoting the development of a particular sport in an individual country (Chen & Yu, 2012). According to Collins, sport development is considered a process focused on creating opportunities, procedures, systems, and structures that enable and encourage individuals to participate in sport either for recreation or to improve performance (as cited in Eady, 1993, p. 8). Although, the definition of sport development is debated the current study focused on what is considered the development of sport, which is concerned with the mission of sport organizations related to attracting and nurturing participants to progress through a system aimed at elite competition (Shilbury, Sotiriadou, & Green, 2008). Traditionally, the sport development process is depicted as a pyramid where the bottom is focused on the general procurement of basic movement skills and the top is high level achievement in a specific sport (Eady, 1993; Houlihan, 2003). However, Green (2005) argues the pyramid model lacks a complete explanation of the sophisticated process, and effective sport development is tasked with athlete recruitment, athlete retention, and athlete transitions. Similarly, through the analysis of national sport organization reports, Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick (2008) discovered the Australian system is comprised of sport development stakeholders that initiate and implement strategies focused on three similar processes: attraction, retention/transition, and nurturing.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine factors associated with the retention process of NGB members. Specifically, new members of USA Cycling (USAC), the NGB for the sport of cycling, served as the research context and the factors investigated included demographics cycling discipline, participation experiences, recreational specialization, and competitiveness. Cycling has received considerable scholarly attention in sport management often focused on tourism and event participation (e.g., Getz & McConnell, 2011; Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2008). Recently, research by Sotiriadou, Wicker, and Quick (2014) investigated cycling sport development amongst a sample of Australian cycling club representatives. The authors found that the attraction and retention processes are interconnected as successful attraction creates preconditions that facilitate member retention which is related to a variety of factors: promotions, events and competitions, organizational administrative work, facilities, membership size, member culture, access to volunteers, and financial resources. Other researchers investigating grassroots sports participation have examined recreational specialization among the entry levels of cycling competitions, i.e. the early stages of the development process (Larson & Won, 2011). The authors found significant associations between cycling event participants’ recreation specialization and their event preferences. Recreation specialization suggests participants in outdoor recreation can be positioned on a continuum ranging from general interest and low involvement to specialized interest and high involvement, which ultimately affects their associated behaviors related to the activity (Bryan, 1977, p.18).

As part of a larger study, the complete USAC membership of 74,516 members was solicited in mid 2012 to participate in a broad annual membership survey via direct email and through an open website link on USAC’s website. Concurrently, 19,975 former USAC members with valid email addresses, whose memberships had lapsed for at least one year, were asked to participate in a shorter follow-up survey. Descriptive statistics for all non-renewed members were examined to describe the profile of individuals at membership cessation and a cohort dataset was compiled based on current and non-renewed respondents who had an initial membership year of 2010 (sub-population of 8,804) and using questionnaire items that were identical across the two surveys. The final complete dataset (N = 648, 7.4% response rate) included 389 non-renewed members, and 259 current members. Logit regression coefficients were estimated using the binary dependent variable of renew (1) v. non-renewed (0), and 19 explanatory variables: age, gender, region (SE, NE, W, NW), cycling discipline (Mountain v. Road), eight measures of participation experiences, recreational specialization (affective and cognitive scales), and competitiveness (ego and task...
orientation scales). While the recreation specialization and competitiveness scales were adopted and/or adapted from previous literature (e.g. McFarlane, 2004; Needham, Sprouse, & Grimm 2009; Won, Bang, & Shonk, 2009; Larson & Won, 2011; Duda, 1989; Chi & Duda, 1995), the individual participation experience and constraint items were developed with editorial feedback from a panel of cycling and NGB experts (n = 6) to assure face and content validity.

The results indicated the logit model estimation had a statistically significant fit (LR Chi-square (19) = 128.89, p <.001) and a pseudo R-sq = .229. The statistically significant coefficients (p< .05), reported here as odds ratios (OR), included: Age (OR = 1.03), Northeast region(OR = 1.89), Southeast region (OR = 2.04), Affective recreation specialization (OR = 1.17), enough events (OR = 1.87), average distance traveled to events (OR = 1.00), connected with cyclists in my area (OR = .73), became more of a fan of cycling (OR = 1.65), found local event info (OR = 1.29), and total events attended (OR = 1.09). The estimated odds ratios for the statistically significant variables indicate the change in the likelihood of renewal provided a one unit change in that explanatory variable, ceteris paribus.

The results suggest that new members who more easily find information about events that are closer, more frequent, and generally accessible, are more likely to renew with USAC. Additionally, new members that reported higher emotional involvement levels, i.e. affective recreation specialization and increased fan activity, are more likely to have renewed their memberships. Two USAC governance regions, the Northeast and Southeast, also appeared to have outperformed the reference region (Central - USAC headquarters), in terms of new member retention. Gender, cycling disciplines, competitiveness, and cognitive recreation specialization were not clearly associated with the likelihood of renewal. Originating from these findings several implications for stakeholders of NGBs are apparent: (1) continue to develop the overall accessibility of events (information, number, and density), perhaps utilize geographic data analysis techniques to address travel distance concerns, (2) further explore the relationship between emotional involvement and renewal, and (3) evaluate region specific membership policies and event practices to identify differential “best practices”.