Leveraging Sport Participation Impacts of the Olympics: A Qualitative Case Study Analysis of Getting Started Leagues for Curling

Simon Barrick, University of Waterloo
Heather Mair (Advisor), University of Waterloo
Luke Potwarka (Advisor), University of Waterloo

Introduction
Limited research exists exploring the influences of mega-sport events on the growth of Canadian sport and physical activity (Potwarka & McCarville, 2010). Despite this lack of relevant empirical data, scholars argue that increased activity levels are more likely to result from leveraging efforts. Leveraging efforts refer to the combined impact of staging the event and implementation of sport and physical activity-related interventions (Coalter, 2004; Potwarka & Snelgrove, 2013). Furthermore, leveraging mega-sport events may take different forms including: nationally-sanctioned health or physical activity policies, initiatives tied to specific mega-sport events, or neighbourhood-led projects engaging in mega-sport event-themed leveraging (Smith, 2014). For this study, leveraging occurs when relevant sport stakeholders combine the media attention surrounding mega-sport events with infrastructural improvements, program implementation, and/or financial investment to increase sport and physical activity participation rates (Veal, Toohey, & Frawley, 2012).

In this study, we explore one potential intervention – a curling-specific new sport program called the Getting Started League (GSL). Although positioned as a leveraging initiative connected to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, little is known about the nature and extent of this relationship. GSLs are designed for individuals new to the sport of curling. In these leagues, participants receive instruction and support from experienced curling instructors and participate exclusively among other new curlers. These leagues typically run for an entire season (October to April) and conclude with an end-of-season tournament and celebration (Canadian Curling Association, 2014). The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to uncover the nature of GSLs as a leveraging initiative tied to the Olympics; and (2) to unpack the experiences of GSL participants. Furthermore, two research sites are used in this study. These research sites involve two separate GSLs housed in urban curling clubs in eastern Ontario.

Methods
For this study, a qualitative case study methodology is implemented to unpack the richness and diversity of the GSL experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Multiple research methods – semi-structured, qualitative interviews, observation, and discourse analysis – are used to achieve the aims of our study. Furthermore, study participants include curling administrators and GSL organizers, instructors, and participants. In the following section, we present preliminary data from this investigation.

Findings
Preliminary data analysis reveals two prevalent themes: (1) the social nature of GSL participants’ experiences and (2) how individuals view the connection between GSLs and leveraging differently. Specifically, various GSL participants discussed the strong friendships they developed with other new curlers in these leagues as a major contributing factor to their overwhelmingly positive league experience. Also, differing viewpoints exist regarding the relationship between GSLs and leveraging. Overall, curling administrators (belonging to the Canadian Curling Association – the Canadian national curling administrative body) espoused the direct connection between GSLs and leveraging the Canadian elite curling successes from the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Comparatively, many GSL organizers, instructors, and participants view GSLs as providing them a sense of community within their respective curling clubs. However and perhaps most importantly, league organizers, instructors, and participants did not explicitly connect GSLs and leveraging during their interviews. Thus, a fractured view towards leveraging GSLs is emerging among different stakeholders. Such fractures contribute to our understanding of leveraging as a fluid concept that is viewed differently, in part, based on the background of the individual.
Conclusion
This study offers insights into the nature of the leveraging experience, as well as the sport of curling, and may speak to the efforts of other sports engaging in programs targeting new sport participants. For instance, this study provides best practices for sport administrators looking to design and implement effective programs across different sports. These best practices include designing a social atmosphere within new sport programs and using paid, knowledge instructors in the program delivery. Also, we provide a thoughtful analysis of the experiences of new sport participants. Sport administrators, policy makers, and sport program developers can use this information to better construct new sport programs to enhance the experiences of new participants. Furthermore, our findings suggest how leveraging may be viewed differently based, in part, on the individual's experience and position within the GSL. These perspectives might influence the effectiveness and sustainability of GSLs. Also, this study provides scholars with valuable insights directly from individuals who have taken-up a new sport. Insights into their motivations, thought processes, and intentions to continue participating in curling will enrich our understanding of new athletes. Overall, the insights presented in this paper broaden our understanding of the leveraging experience in general.