The (in)Congruence of Helmet Use Policies within Sport and Resort Management: Implications for Recreational Youth Sport

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Sport managers are increasingly concerned with safety and risk management within a variety of sport contexts around the world (Friedman, Parent, & Mason, 2004). Specifically, resorts that offer risk-based sport endeavors such as skiing, snowboarding, downhill mountain biking and challenge course elements must be aware of the complex risk factors involved, while simultaneously respecting participant autonomy and preferences in order to retain consumers and market share. Within sport and recreational facilities, the highest number of lawsuits an organization will receive are related to negligence liability with respect to a sport and recreation organization’s risk management policies (Van Der Smissen, 2003). A report produced by the University of Houston Law School in 1997 outlined that negligence lawsuits related to safety within a sport and/or recreation facility typically average over 1.5 million dollars (Appenzeller, 2005). Thus, managing safety and risk are paramount to an organization’s overall sustainability.

A specific safety management issue gaining attention in both sport and resort management domains is helmet use among sport participants and instructional staff. Research has shown that helmet use can reduce head injuries in youth by 35% within skiing and snowboarding (Russell, Christie, & Hagel, 2010), which are the leading winter sports in terms of head injuries in Canada (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2012). Further, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), participation in sport and recreation is cited as the cause of “at least one of every five hospital visits to an emergency department” (CDC, 2002, pg. 27). Despite these statistics, there appears to be a lack of consistent policy regarding helmet use among sport governing bodies such as the Canadian Snowsports Association and related instructor alliances as well as within the instructional schools of four-season resorts that offer opportunities for mass participation in these sports at a recreational level. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to compare helmet use policies and procedures in one prominent Canadian four-season resort with those of related sport governing bodies in order to assess the congruence of helmet use regulations among these sport management environments. A secondary purpose of the study is to examine managers’ and front line employees’ perceived importance of and commitment to helmet use within instructional youth risk-based sporting activities.

The study is framed within strategic risk management which can be defined as a strategic business process, whereby management must assess whether a “company’s business activities are consistent with its stated strategic objectives, and how risk management is linked to investment and growth decisions” (Clarke & Varma, 1999, p. 415). As such, an organization can assess risk-based returns and exposures, avoid surprises, and engender good governance (Clarke & Varma, 1999). Within this approach, Martin, Seidler and Scott (2007) proposed a model of strategic risk management within the sport and recreation industry. Martin et al.’s (2007) model presents four ‘root causes’ of risk linked to the safety culture of an organization, recognizing that the causes behind risk and the response of managers shape and are shaped by an organization’s priorities and values. Potential root causes include: (1) technical causes of risk, such as the malfunction of equipment (e.g. Wiegmann & Shappell, 2001); (2) human error, such as a personal or operator error (e.g. Rochlin & Von Meier, 1994; Coquelle, Cura, & Fourest, 1995); (3) a combination of equipment failure and human error, such as changes within the industry to equipment and accreditation courses (e.g., changes in lifeguarding standards or CPR procedures) (e.g. Wiegmann et al., 2002); and (4) minimal value placed on safety within the sport or recreation facility culture or management, such as how employees perform their duty as part of a coordinated whole (e.g. Wiegmann et al., 2002). This model enables organizations to evaluate their safety culture and position their risk management policy and interventions within the broader strategic direction of the organization, ensuring that risk is managed relative to the attainment of organizational goals (Martin et al., 2007).
In order to address the primary purpose of the current study, organizational documents are currently being collected and analyzed in order to determine the congruence of policies and procedures related to helmet use between the sport governing bodies (Alpine Canada, Canada Snowboard, Cycling Canada, Challenges Unlimited), instructional alliances (Canadian Ski and Snowboard Professionals, Professional Mountain Biking, Challenge Course Practitioners), and the corresponding instructional departments within one large four-season resort in Ontario, Canada offering these sporting activities. Document analysis of background information, website documents, strategic plans, research and annual reports, and policy documents provides a detailed understanding of the existing policies and standards currently within the sport industry (Babiak & Thibault, 2008).

The secondary purpose of the research will be addressed using an instrumental case study (Stake, 2003) of the large four-season resort previously noted. Semi-structured interviews (N=13) will be conducted with; (a) eight front-line employees (instructors) including two employees within each sport discipline offered at the resort (snowboarding, skiing, mountain biking, and challenge courses); and (b) one interview with each program director of each sport discipline; and (c) an interview with the executive director who oversees all sporting disciplines and related policy. Interviews will be transcribed verbatim and analyzed using inductive thematic coding within the broader categories of risk identified in Martin et al’s (2007) model in order to identify particular causes of risk and the congruence between safety cultures within the instructional areas and resort management.

The study will contribute to the body of knowledge in sport management by providing new evidence of the (in)congruence of helmet use policy between sport-based resorts, sport governing bodies, and instructional alliances. Further, through highlighting the perspectives of managers and front-line employees, the study will reveal important considerations for the planning and implementation of helmet use policies. The poster will also outline several practical implications of the research related to recreational youth sport and provide a forum for discussion of risk management with a focus on the importance of helmets for youth and instructors taking part in high-risk sports and further considerations for organizational culture related to safety.

Selected References
