Management of Sport for Public Health: Defining the Field

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The connection between sport and public health has been well recognized (e.g., Chalip, 2006; Chelladurai, 1992; Henderson, 2009). Chelladurai (1992) explained that the provision of participant sport for health and fitness purposes constitutes a major segment of the sport industry. Chalip (2006) identified health promotion as one of the five research areas that provide the opportunity to develop unique theories grounded in sport phenomena and further allow sport researchers to engage in interdisciplinary research efforts. Despite the apparent connection between sport and public health, research on the role of sport in the public health agenda has been lacking in the sport management literature (Henderson, 2009; Inoue, Berg, & Chelladurai, 2014). Henderson (2009) reviewed research articles published in Sport Management Review between 1998 and 2007, and found that only 6% of the articles addressed topics that may have implications for public health, such as active sport participation for the general population. In addition, although a recent review identified 135 empirical studies on spectator sport and public health issues between 1990 and 2013, less than 10% of the studies (n = 11) were published in sport management journals (Inoue et al., 2014). The purpose of this symposium is to promote research on the management of sport for public health as an important field of study within the sport management discipline. To this end, this symposium will consist of three sections: (a) defining the field, (b) illustrating research programs examining the intersection between sport management and public health, and (c) discussing future research opportunities and challenges.

Defining the Field

Winslow’s (1920) classic definition suggested that public health is “the science and the art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts” (p. 33). This definition is still used today (Novick & Morriow, 2008), although the meaning of health has been expanded from merely physical health to “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being” (World Health Organization, 2003, para. 1). Having this broad meaning of health in mind, Levinton, Rhodes, and Chang (2011) defined public health as “organized community efforts aimed at the prevention of diseases and promotion of health that focus on society as a whole” (p. 103). As this definition indicates, public health efforts are directed to the public in the aggregate rather than to the individual (Detels, 2011; Novick & Morriow, 2008). In addition, the central goal of public health is to achieve both prevention of disease and injury and holistic health promotion (Detels, 2011; Levinton et al., 2011; Novick & Morriow, 2008).

Given the aforementioned discussion, a key question for sport management research is how sport can be used to help accomplish the central goal of public health. Specifically, Chelladurai and Anderson (in press) employed Chelladurai’s (2012) decomposition of sport into three categories, or manifestations, in understanding their relationships with health: egalitarian, elite, and entertainment sport. First, egalitarian sport, which is closely associated with the notion of play, entails participation in sport regardless of one’s ability for the pleasure inherent in the activity. Berg, Warner, and Das (2014) recently illustrated how such hedonic rewards, along with social interaction, were the most sought benefits by participants in programs using egalitarian sport to promote public health. Second, elite sport involves progressively challenging and serious competitions in which only people with high ability and a determination to excel can participate. Third, entertainment sport refers to viewing sporting excellence in action to
experience the entertainment value of the activity (Chelladurai & Anderson, in press). Based on these manifestations of sport, the management of sport for public health is defined as a field of study broadly concerned with the role of egalitarian, elite, and entertainment sport in promoting the physical, mental, and social well-being of the general public while contributing to the prevention of disease and injury in and through sport.

Illustration of Research Programs

Presenters of this symposium have conducted research programs in relation to the management of sport for public health as defined above. The presenters have focused on different aspects of the relationship between sport and public health, and have used diverse theoretical and methodological approaches to their investigation. Specific agendas of their research programs include:

- Sociocultural and historical trends that have shaped sport and physical activity for children over time and the impact that these trends have had in terms of both public health outcomes and elite athlete development.
- Quantitative assessment of the impact of sport-related environmental determinants on community-level physically active leisure and the consequent health related outcomes.
- The relationship between participation in sport as spectators and health and well-being outcomes and psychological pathways underlying this relationship.
- Qualitative evaluation of how sport is utilized and promoted as a local policy tool to develop a community’s public health through increases in physical activity.
- Participant sport events as an environmental resource that may influence both individual (e.g., life satisfaction, happiness) and collective well-being (e.g., community health, community well-being).
- Understanding and managing the factors necessary to building community in such a way that positive outcomes (e.g., improved health, social and emotional well-being) are achieved.
- Addressing the intersections of health and student engagement through professional sports corporate social responsibility initiatives by engaging in community-based participatory research.

In the second section of the symposium, each presenter will provide an overview of his or her research program in terms of (a) the overall research question addressed, (b) the aspects of sport and public health investigated, (c) theoretical or conceptual frameworks applied to the investigation, (d) methodologies adopted, and (e) key findings of the research program and their implications. A particular emphasis will be placed on identifying connections among the research programs.

Future Opportunities and Challenges

This symposium will conclude with a discussion of future opportunities and challenges in conducting further investigations into the management of sport for public health. This discussion will be centered on such issues as the application and development of theories, identification of data sources for future research, interdisciplinary collaborations, and securing of research funding. In this final section of the symposium, the dialog between the presenters and the audience will be encouraged.