Is Talent Transfer an Effective Option for Rugby Sevens Athlete Development?

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Changes to the Modern Olympic Games Program have occurred consistently throughout the years, with many sports vying to be involved in the world’s largest global sporting event. As such, in 2002 the IOC capped the number of summer sports to 28, with an agreement to review the Olympic Program every four years (International Olympic Committee, 2002). A recent change to the Olympic program for 2016 and 2020 is the inclusion of men’s and women’s Rugby Sevens. While men’s Rugby Sevens has been included in the Commonwealth Games since 1998 (women join the program in 2018), Rio 2016 will be its Olympic debut. The international governing body, World Rugby, will learn the fate of Rugby Sevens as an Olympic sport in 2017, when the IOC determines whether or not the sport continues permanently in the Olympic program (World Rugby, 2015).

This paper examines the impact of the inclusion of Rugby Sevens in the Olympic program on athlete recruitment, athlete development and talent transfer. The research compared various athlete development models (Bayli & Hamilton, 2004; Abbott & Collins, 2004; Gulbin, Crosser, Morley, & Weissensteiner, 2013) in order determine the effectiveness of talent transfer as a means of producing successful Rugby Sevens athletes. Surveys and interviews were conducted with athletes, coaches and program managers representing 34 nations who competed in Rugby Sevens tournaments in 2015. The data collection took place at tournaments in Wellington, Hong Kong, London and Amsterdam, where the research team collected over 410 surveys and conducted 34 interviews.

The findings identified an initial influx of funding to most national rugby programs with the aim of rapidly developing talent in the sport of Rugby Sevens in preparation for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. In addition, many nations received substantial funding (from World Rugby, government and/or Olympic Committees) to implement a women’s Rugby Sevens program, thus the importance of successful talent transfer leading into the Rio 2016 Olympic Games was apparent. Athletes had predominantly been recruited from other sports such as Rugby 15s, touch football and track and field. However, through a systematic series of studies examining competition and athlete physical demands, Higham (2013) concludes that the demands for international rugby sevens competition are distinct from rugby 15s, and that Rugby Sevens athletes are shorter, lighter and leaner than their rugby 15s counterparts. Hence concluding that talent transfer from rugby 15s may not be an effective strategy moving forward.

Data collected indicated that very few nations have allocated funding for long term athlete development, talent identification or national competition structures. A key factor contributing to this finding is the uncertainty of Rugby Sevens maintaining its place in the Olympic program post 2020. Many nations fear the loss of funding if Rugby Sevens is removed from the Olympic program after 2020, with nations conceding the programs would most likely collapse. As such, the results highlight talent transfer as a cost effective means to develop Rugby Sevens athletes within a limited timeframe and with limited resources.

References
