The Development of Athletes in the United States and Europe: A Contrast in Sport Governance

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Relevance/significance to sport management

The recent controversy surrounding the NCAA, Amateurism and the status of Student-Athletes on college campuses has served as a vehicle to critically examine the broader issue of how athletes are developed in America. In stark contrast to European countries, and most of the rest of the world, we tend to train, coach and nurture athletic development through our educational system. In the absence of any centralized Ministry of Sport, present in almost every other country, High Schools, Colleges and Universities have filled the governance void with a patchwork of local, regional and national organizations. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which serves as the primary governing body for intercollegiate athletics, has presided over a de-facto professional development model for basketball and football for years. This model has served the financial interests of professional sports by providing inexpensive player development for professional basketball and football teams, in lieu of more costly minor leagues, while providing major Division I intercollegiate programs with a major source of revenue by selling the commercial television and merchandising rights to games, championships and trademarked sporting apparel. This mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship has come under heavy criticism lately because of the increasing conflicts between commercial and educational goals and the decline of the concept of amateurism within high visibility, revenue generating sports.

In stark contrast to the educational based American model for sport skill development, most European countries develop their athletes through sports clubs that sponsor and nurture sport development through the full spectrum of skill levels. Young athletes wishing to develop their athletic talents join junior teams associated with these clubs and they in turn serve as a feeder to the more elite levels. Rules, policies and structure usually emanate from centralized ministries of sport and filter down to the regional and local levels. Rather than focusing on performance and outcome goals local sports clubs promote skill development, recognizing the physical and psychological growth and change in young adults.

Literature Review

Organized collegiate sports in America

The first organized sports on college campuses appeared in 1853 and the first intercollegiate football game was played between Rutgers and Princeton in 1869. (Gems, et al, 2008) Due to the violent nature of football and the relatively few rules pertaining to safety frequent injuries and deaths prompted president Theodore Roosevelt to convene a meeting of college and university presidents in 1905 to curb football violence on college campuses. This resulted in the formation of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS) in 1906 that later became the National Collegiate Athletic Association in 1910 (Smith, 2000, Watterson, 2000). It’s original mission was to reform and change the rules of football to reduce the rate of serious injuries but it later became the governing body for all intercollegiate athletics. The conflict between commercial and educational goals was identified as early as the late 19th century but had reached a level of national concern when a research report commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation in 1929 found rampant corruption and ethical lapses in the recruitment and retention of student athletes (Savage, 1929). Similar tension and conflict of values between sport entertainment and educational values have followed intercollegiate sports throughout the twentieth century and has fueled the current debate about the sustainability of the amateur model in big-time revenue producing intercollegiate sports (Zimbalist, 1999).

Organized sport development model in Europe

Sport development in Europe has largely revolved around community based clubs that date back to the early 1800’s. In England, football (soccer) clubs such as Manchester United and Leeds have over 150 years of history. Today,
these clubs form the foundation of what is known as the Pyramid Structure that feed into Regional, National and European Sports Federations (European Commission, 1999, Nafziger 2008). These clubs operate at the grassroots community levels and they function as a feeder system to higher levels of competition. They often have junior programs that serve as the equivalent to interscholastic athletic programs in the United States. The key difference is that elite athletic sport development and competition is not associated with schools, colleges and universities but instead is closely aligned with the club/federations model. This model fosters strong local, regional and national fan identity and has been idealized as perpetuating a “sport for all” ideology; however negative consequences have included the rise of ultra-nationalism which in some cases has resulted in racism and intolerance. On the local level this extreme club identification has led to hooliganism and fan violence.

Clarity of purpose/objectives/timelines

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the historical and philosophical foundations of sport skill development in the United States and Europe with the goal of proposing a hybrid model that draws from the best aspects of both. The primary objective is to develop a conceptual model that can help guide decision makers within intercollegiate athletics and help resolve some of the current problems and conflicts between big-time commercial intercollegiate sports, academic missions and amateur values. In addition to comparing and contrasting American and European models, athletes who have developed their sports skills in America and Europe will be interviewed and their perspectives included in this analysis.

Quality of theoretical/conceptual framework

By presenting a comprehensive examination of sport skill development models in both Europe and the United States and gaining insights from athletes who have experienced both, recommendations will be grounded in the best practices and values associated with each model.

Discussion/implications/future directions

Intercollegiate sport has reached a critical junction in America. Many have questioned the sustainability of the current Amateur model of athletic participation in a highly commercialized, revenue generating enterprise. The Olympic movement recognized this problem over 25 years ago and moved away from Amateurism as a governing principle. As the governing body for intercollegiate athletics the NCAA would be wise to examine its current policies and practices to recognize the systemic problems of trying to reconcile often contradictory values.

Contribution to the body of knowledge.

Few direct comparisons have been made of European and American sport skill development models with the goal of creating a set of recommendations to improve current problems associated with both. It is hoped that this paper will serve as an impetus for future research that systematically examines cross-cultural sport skill development.

References:


Watterson, John S (2000), The gridiron crises of 1905: was it really a crisis? Journal of Sport History, 27 (2).
