Managing a Sport by Managing Its Culture: Lessons from USA Rugby

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Numerous sport management studies have examined organizational culture, and the implications of organizational culture for effective management practices (Schein, 2010). Organizational culture has been shown to affect worker satisfaction, leader effectiveness, innovation, and productivity. Organizational culture also plays a role in the experiences that sport participants obtain both on-field and off (Pink, Saunders, & Stynes, 2015). The subcultures associated with particular sports and particular sporting groups can have profound effects on the recruitment and retention of participants (Green, 2005). Subculture has been shown to be effective in the marketing of sport (Green, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), but the specifics of organizational culture and sport subculture for the management of sport have been less thoroughly examined.

This symposium draws lessons from a large, multi-method study of past and present USA Rugby members to illuminate three core components of rugby subculture that significantly impact management of the sport. The first paper examines the culture of physicality, and provides suggestions for managing physicality in ways that sustain involvement in the sport. The second paper explores camaraderie as a core element of the subculture, and probes its effects within programs and clubs, and beyond. Strategies to leverage players’ sense of community and shared identity as rugby players are suggested. The third paper focuses on two core managerial tasks: retention and transition of athletes. Points of loss are identified, and methods suggested by the data to minimize loss by leveraging subculture early in players’ experiences are discussed. The session concludes with a discussion of the overarching lessons for leveraging subculture to manage a sport. Lessons from rugby that have potential for application in other sports are considered.

The data reported in this symposium were collected as part of a nation-wide study of current and former players and administrators. Four types of data inform this symposium: Skype interviews with leaders of geographic unions, interviews (phone and face-to-face) with current and former rugby players, web-based surveys of current and former players, and an analysis of the U.S.A. Rugby member database from 2005 to 2012.

The member database consisted of 44,852 individuals with an email address. Members’ playing division (youth, university, club) was noted each year. The majority of players had stopped playing sometime between 2005 and 2012; 3491 players had made a successful transition from one level to another. Players were categorized into Leavers, Stayers, and Movers and matched samples were selected for interviews. Forty-five phone interviews and 74 in person interviews were conducted (n=119). A stratified random sample of 10,000 emails was generated from the database, and a link to an online survey was sent to those email addresses. Seventy-three percent of those opening the survey completed the survey (N=2,264). In addition, six Skype interviews were conducted with geographic union leaders.

Culture of Physicality

As a contact sport, rugby enjoys a culture of physicality. This attracts players to the sport, plays a key role in players’ identity as a rugby player, constrains participation at particular life stages, and can end players’ careers in the sport. Survey results showed that current rugby players were significantly (p<.001) less concerned about injury (M=2.87, SD=1.4) than were former rugby players (M=4.0, SD=2.1). Interviews revealed that both groups felt that rugby is comparatively safer than other contact sports, but that injuries nonetheless played a pivotal role in many former players’ decisions to discontinue playing. Although this included significant injury (e.g., damage to a joint), it also
included minor injuries (e.g., cuts and abrasions) that took days or weeks to heal, and which made completion of other life tasks, such as work and parenting, challenging. The centrality of physicality in the rugby subculture, and the push-pull nature of physicality are key challenges in growing the sport. These challenges are not unique to rugby, as they may occur in other contact sports. The duality of physicality, with emphasis on minimizing the negative effects while maintaining its positive appeal, is discussed.

Camaraderie

Men, women, and youth spoke extensively and without prompting of the camaraderie they found in the sport. In many cases, the camaraderie found in rugby was contrasted with that found (or not found) in other sports. Most admitted to feeling camaraderie within their team in nearly every sport they played. However, players highlighted the unique sense of community they felt with the broader rugby community (i.e., beyond their club or team). In particular, players appreciated the connections they felt with their on-field opponents, and happily provided examples of post-match socializing with other teams and clubs. The structure of rugby competitions, unlike most other sports in the U.S., has institutionalized the cross-team camaraderie. The traditions and strength of the rugby culture was also credited with building a sense of camaraderie, friendship, and support for rugby players traveling (or relocating) to other areas of the country and overseas. Lastly, camaraderie was, by far, the element of participation most strongly missed when players ended their playing careers, which is why many sought other ways to remain involved (e.g., via administration or refereeing). Ways to build, support, and socialize players into rugby community with particular emphasis on using camaraderie and community to maintain involvement beyond the active playing career are discussed; extension of those means into other sports are considered.

Retention and Transition

Like most sports (cf. Green, 2005), USA Rugby experiences significant declines in membership at key transition points. Whenever players must make a change in team, club, or playing context, some loss in membership occurs. This presentation compares the profiles of players who do and do not make successful transitions to new playing contexts. The relationship between sport and life transitions seems to exacerbate the difficulty in transitioning, particularly from youth or university to club rugby. Gender current player transition MANOVAs were conducted for each context (youth, university, club) with the following dependent variables: intellectual, social, mastery, and escape motives; perceived competence; fit with rugby subculture; importance of social infrastructure; sense of community in rugby; commitment to rugby club; friends in rugby; and family in rugby. All were significant (p<.05). Although there is some variability in the impacts across settings, three overall conclusions could be drawn. (1) Retention requires a start that brings people into the subculture early on. (2) Participation in multiple contexts provides a sense of perspective that facilitates long-term commitment. (3) Coordination and linkages among rugby clubs, contexts, and coaches is critical to successful transitions, and thus long-term player retention. Specific challenges to manage transition points are discussed and recommendations for management strategies to create a sustainable membership are provided.