The Institutionalization of Paralympic Sport Governance: The Case of the United States Olympic Committee

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The governance of world sport has become an increasingly popular area of inquiry in our field (e.g., Chappelet & Kubler-Mabbott, 2008; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Hums & MacLean, 2013). Governance is considered the collection of processes and structures used to steer a group of actors towards collective and consensus based decision-making (Rhodes, 2007). More specifically within sport organizations, “it influences how the objectives of the organization are set and achieved, spells out the rules and procedures for making organizational decisions, and determines the means of optimizing and monitoring performance, including how risk is monitored and assessed” (Australian Sport Commission (ASC), 2012, p. 2). Investigating sport governance structures allows researchers the opportunity to examine the intricacies of their organizational makeup and the impact they have on major stakeholders, sponsors, coaches and athletes. One of the more complex systems within the field is amateur sport. While the extant research has facilitated a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the organization of the Olympic Games and Olympic sport (e.g., Chappelet & Kubler-Mabbott, 2008; Leopkey & Parent, 2015), the same has not been seen with respect to disability sport and, in particular, the Paralympic sport.

The unique and complex relationship between Paralympic and Olympic sport in the United States serves as the foundation for this research. In 1995, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) became the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) for the United States, transferring the governing responsibility from the existing disability sport organizations to a formalized structure within the USOC. This meant that the rules and regulations governing Olympic sport, as determined by the IOC, began to serve as the benchmark for the regulations that determine Paralympic sport in the country. Interestingly, the US represents one of only a few countries of the 170 who have established NPCs that fall under the jurisdiction of the National Olympic Committee (NOC) (IPC, n.d.). In most cases they remain as distinct organizations. Moreover, little is known about how US Paralympic sport operates in practice.

The norms and standards that have emerged over time in relation to the governance of Paralympic sport in the United States are related to the notion of institutionalization. As such, for the purpose of this research, institutional theory is applied to the US case to better understand how and why the governance of Paralympic and Olympic sport has come to exist under the guise of the USOC. Institutionalization is the process by which a practice or structure becomes an embedded social aspect of an organization (Berger & Luckmann, 1997). Organizations need to adopt the successful practices of other organizations in order to remain competitive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The Olympic Games have served as a benchmark for the best practice of Paralympic organization, evident in their interconnected existence of event organization, sponsorships, growing media attention, and hosting contracts. These changes in structure can occur as a result of pressures from competition and/or powerful actors and the fight for survival within a particular field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

As such, the purpose of this research project is to understand the underlying organizational structure of Paralympic sport in the United States. More specifically, the authors seek to explain how this structure came into being as well as the ongoing relationship between Olympic and Paralympic sport structures in the United States. We aim to do so by examining the processes through which the structures, schemes, rules, norms and routines became established (Scott, 2005).

A case study is currently being built on the US Paralympic governance system. A combination of interviews and archival material are the main sources of data for this portion of the research. A total of six interviews lasting between 35 mins and 70 mins from a variety of Paralympic stakeholders (e.g., coaches, team managers, athletes) were conducted during this phase of the research. Archival documents included policy documents, organizational reports,
newspaper clippings, and related websites. Both were converted into electronic form when necessary and inputted into ATLAS.ti for analysis. ATLAS.ti facilitated the coding and retrieval of the data by allowing the researchers to highlight findings and emergent themes. Preliminary findings are highlighted below.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Initial results suggest the influence of institutional forces on the governing structures of Paralympic sport in the United States. The implementation of the USOC as the formal governing structure has led to increased support at the various levels of competition, ranging from elite competition to Paralympic development programs. In addition, subjects have observed policy and leadership changes. Within Paralympic sport in the United States, there is no singular model of organization and differential structures have developed depending on the financial strength of the NPC and perceived potential for elite sporting success. In some cases, NPCs on weaker financial footing have traded economic security for autonomy, while in others financially secure NOCs have been less than eager to incorporate Paralympic sport into its structure. In addition, discussion surrounding the involvement of outside organizations has emerged in the management of day-to-day operations of Paralympic sport thus compensating for a historical lack of involvement by National Governing Bodies (NGBs).

The results from this study will be viewed in conjunction with the current state of knowledge about the USOC and IOC to facilitate guidance for future planning and organization of events, thus strengthening the overall governance of NPCs and NOCs. Moreover it will facilitate dialogue surrounding governance structure, partnerships, communication and organization within Paralympic sport including the planning and organization of mega-sporting events, the direct and indirect support of athletes and coaches, the consideration of major stakeholders, and aid in the acquirement of sponsors and other support. Through the examination of the governance structures currently in place and the ways by which this restructuring has furthered the Paralympic movement, we can evaluate the existing structures and provide recommendations to both the USOC and other NOCs.