A Comparative Study of Girls Flag American Football in England and the USA

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Increasing sport opportunities for girls and women remains a significant challenge for sport managers and practitioners. While the benefits of sport participation are well-documented, the development of attractive, widely-accessible, and sustainable sport programs remains elusive. According to sport development theorists, understanding and comparing sport delivery systems at the macro socio-cultural and structural levels may aid in the design and delivery of such programs (See Green, 2008). The purpose of this study, following Green’s sport development model, is to provide a preliminary cross-country analysis of girls flag football programs in the US and UK to examine the similarities and differences that promote and hinder the development of this particular sport for girls. The results will inform practice and theory in both countries.

In England, the UK Government statistics for 2009/10 revealed that in secondary (high) schools certain sports (soccer, dance, athletics, gymnastics, cricket, rounders, swimming, tennis and netball) dominated the schools offer. Additionally, the sports of cheerleading, netball and field hockey were almost exclusively offered to girls, whilst rugby and softball were offered exclusively to boys (Quick et al, 2010). The Youth Sport Trust (YST), a British charitable trust which aims to support the education and development of young people through physical education, advised that schools which deliver Physical Education well, offer a wider variety of sports and physical activity that make girls feel included (Campbell, 2012). Thus, the lack of choice for girls, due to the embedded (stereotyped) nature of traditional sports, may well be causal in the low participation and retention rates.

Green and Dixon (2012) identified the difficulties new sport programs face in gaining a foothold in the American school sport marketplace and pointed out that much of the new sport development in the USA occurs outside of the school system in club teams. It is a scenario that is now being replicated in England, UK, where a network of local agencies (known as County Sports Partnerships – CSPs) are committed to working together to increase the number of people taking part in sport and physical activity outside of the school curriculum. They gain their funding and mandate from Sport England, a non-departmental public body under Her Majesty’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

Sport programs offered in this hybrid or partnership model have much promise for broader provision of sport in many countries (Casey & Eime, 2015). For example, USA Football, in partnership with the NFL, has worked to develop flag football as a high school and hybrid sport for girls in the USA. Green and Dixon (2012) examined four diverse hybrid programs across the USA (Austin, TX; New Orleans, LA, Chicago, IL and Harrisburg, PA). They found that providing flag through this hybrid model could take on various structural formats that gave flexibility to providers in terms of numbers of participants, facilities, and timing of the games. This hybrid format in many ways was preferable to the rigid school-based formats and governance structures.

In England, flag football is the fastest growing format of the sport in Great Britain, encompassing schools, colleges, universities and in the community. Adult leagues are predominantly mixed gender, for people aged 16 or over. There is however an all-female format called the Opal Series, which is mainly populated by University teams. At Under 17 level (Junior) and Under 12 level (Cadet) teams are mixed gender (with approximately 10-15% females). No female only competition exists in this age group; however, BAFA have appointed a school coordinator with the potential for single-sex competition being developed in 2016.

A pilot program for all-Girls Flag Football exists in Coventry and Warwickshire (an area in central England, 100 miles north of London). Replicating the methodology employed by Green and Dixon (2012), data has been collected from key stakeholders (parents, coaches and players) of three programs (Woodlands, Kenilworth and Tudor Grange) within this club-based structure through focus groups, interviews and observations to assess the flag football environment with relation to important structural and socio-cultural elements. Whilst coaches in England indicated
that it is not easy to acquire the requisite coaching certification, there was agreement (again in alignment with the USA findings) that the game requires relatively few resources compared with other female orientated team sports (netball and hockey).

Preliminary results regarding sport structures in the UK are somewhat consistent with the findings of Green and Dixon. In both settings, the game for girls is structured to be highly inclusive, whereby every girl will play on a team regardless of ability. The only requirement is to attend training and have fun. The ethos of the organizations is based on creating a friendly environment, where girls learn skills, and feel valued, safe and free to express themselves. As a result, both settings demonstrate high levels of interest and excitement for the sport together with welcome ancillary benefits such as previously inactive girls finding a niche to play sport, and the transfer of newly acquired self-efficacy into other areas of their lives. In addition, from a structural standpoint, data from both countries suggest that flag is easy to implement and requires relatively few resources.

Interestingly, while most of the programs in the US were based on a weekly league structure, the UK was based on a model of female-only tournament structures rather than weekly competitive league schedules. The evidence suggests that females are put off by the rigidity of regular competitions and skill based training, preferring less formal sport that emphasises game play over drills. This model is in line with the findings of the Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF, 2011) and has contributed to the excellent retention figures in the Pink Panthers programme.

Additional differences were found when examining socio-cultural influences on participation. The American girls often faced strong socio-cultural barriers. They reported that many parents felt that girls should not play football, whereas their male peers did not perceive flag as “real football.” Thus, while internal cohesion and passion for the sport was high, they had to overcome a barrage of negative perceptions in choosing to participate. Socio-cultural perceptions of the sport were markedly different in England compared to those in the USA. In fact, none of the UK girls interviewed had encountered Flag American Football at any level prior to the introduction of this club program and they did not consume the NFL as a product. As a result, they regarded the sport as gender neutral (which provides huge leverage potential within the British market). Conversely, the girls often held very entrenched views on both soccer and rugby in terms of the hyper-masculinised centricity of these sports. One Kenilworth student’s views reflected this position: “The boys play football (soccer) and the girl’s netball. Even though I don’t like it. And they always get the best pitch. I’d never play rugby with the boys. It’s too rough and they wouldn’t pass the ball to me anyway.” Furthermore, British boys and their parents are still inclined to disparage American Football, as one parent said: “Men play rugby. Girls wear pads”.

In conclusion, as identified in the USA findings, flag football appears to be a promising avenue for new sport development in British secondary schools and extra-curricular clubs. It is attractive to girls and it is flexible in its implementation, making it effective across a wide array of contexts. BAFA has the opportunity to create programs that replicate elements of the Pink Panthers program and incorporate the WSFF findings, particularly around informal sport offerings, that differentiate flag football in a congested marketplace. A cross-cultural analysis examining the USA and UK milieu is ongoing and the implications for cross-fertilization of best practices will be a fundamental output of this research.