Recruitment and Retention of Adult Sport Participants: The Challenge of Player Ratings

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National Governing Bodies (NGBs) in the U.S. are charged with developing both participation and competitive excellence in their respective sports (Sparvero, Chalip, & Green, 20). For many sports, the vast majority of participation efforts are focused on the recruitment of young people into the game, and retention of players throughout their youth and into adulthood (Green, 2005). Adults are seldom the focus of recruitment efforts, although their sheer numbers suggest the importance of adult participants in developing and maintaining clubs and organizations to promote sport participation. Tennis, golf, and triathlon are a few of the sports where it is common to begin participation as an adult. Consequently, these types of sport offer interesting lessons for the recruitment and retention of adult participants. Adult participants are not subject to the wide variability in development that is common with youth participants, and often seek a variety of playing experiences ranging from ultra-competitive to extremely social (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). Thus, adult leagues have designed structures, policies, and social elements to attract a variety of potential players.

Yet, one of the most challenging aspects of adult play is determining a fair, but simple system for matching players. The United States Tennis Association’s (USTA) adult league program and rating system have been designed to address this challenge in order to draw more tennis players to league play. The USTA is currently the only organization in the United States that has installed a league whereby adults of all standards can compete in local leagues starting with an opportunity to progress to national level play. As an individual sport, it is quite challenging to rate each individual player. All new players wishing to participate in competitive play must assess their own ability and award themselves a rating that best represents their current playing level when registering for a membership. Therefore, new members are required to give themselves a rating with the knowledge that by awarding themselves a higher rating, they are harming their chances of progressing through to regional or national level competition. This research examines the opinions of current USTA members as well as current players who participate in tennis activities but do not compete in USTA programs.

Forty adult players completed semi-structured interviews (60% male; 40% female). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 58, with the majority between the ages of 18 and 40. They reported ratings from 2.5 to 6 on the USTA scale, with four reporting no rating. Interviews were transcribed and coded by theme (e.g., Creswell, 2007). Three themes were derived from the data. Participants discussed their (a) dissatisfaction with the rating scheme, (b) ethical transgressions related to the rating scheme, and (c) suggestions for improving the rating scheme. Players’ perceptions of and experience with the use of the self-rating scheme recognized the positive intentions of the scheme to match players, but also acknowledged the difficulty for beginners to self-rate as well as the temptation for more experienced players to underrate their play. Recommendations for recruitment and retention of adult players in tennis are discussed, and potential generalizations to other sports are considered.