An Exploration of Community-Orientated Practice by Professional Sport Teams

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Over the past decade, professional sport organizations, predominantly clubs and teams, have been engaging in activities which could be described as forms of ‘community-oriented practice’. Emphasis has typically been placed on developing and delivering community programs and on establishing partnerships with community organizations in an effort to deliver community-driven outcomes. Typically teams target a number of causes or outcomes through a range of diverse and often interrelated programs. These approaches can be classified or grouped by drawing on sport-for-development literature where established categories in the Journal of Sport for Development, as discussed by Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe (In Press), provide a frame. Thus, community-orientated practice in the context of professional sport can be defined as “a range of programs and activities spanning (but not limited to) sport, education and leadership, health, livelihood and social cohesion, branded or delivered by (or in partnership with) professional sport teams that have specific, targeted benefits of positively impacting aspects or groups of a community”.

The approaches discussed above are most commonly characterized by and framed under corporate citizenship or corporate social responsibility (CSR) approaches which refer to efforts made by an organization to maximize impact on stakeholders across its community and broader society. Yet, as demonstrated above, these activities also appear to link with sport-for-development approaches where sport is used as a vehicle to achieve community development outcomes. And to further complicate matters, some observed examples of community-orientated practice appear to be strategically aligned with commercially driven outcomes, with community functions structured within commercial departments or aligned with broader fan engagement frameworks. Such a diverse array of approaches suggests the existence of a complex paradigm that requires structures and strategies where outcomes of the team as well as business and community benefits can be achieved in unison (Briethbarth et al. 2011).

In the case of professional sport, the enhanced focus on community program delivery has led to modifications being made to organizational structures, including increases in their complexity and the establishment of new roles (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014) as well as increased academic interest in CSR and related approaches. Research into the strategic use of corporate citizenship and CSR (Trendafilova & Babiak, 2013; Walters & Chadwick, 2009), decision making involved in programs (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014) and measurement (Breitbarth et al., 2011; Inoue & Kent, 2013) have represented lines of enquiry that describe and position the importance of community and social initiatives as a pillar of a sport organization’s operations. However, emergent change and divergent ways of delivering community programs necessitates ongoing approaches to analyze the motivations, methods of delivery and outcomes of such efforts. In considering the many approaches taken by professional sport clubs with respect to community-orientated practice, it is apparent that numerous potential models and structures exist, particularly when global cases are analyzed and compared. For example, within team structures, community-orientated practice can be aligned with internal business to business, business to consumer, or specific community departments or external structures such as charities or foundations. Further, clubs use existing resources (e.g., staff, facilities and partnerships) and rely on a range of inter-organizational relationships with governments, community groups or charities to co-brand or deliver programs.

The abovementioned observations lead to the need to better understand how and why professional sport teams engage in community-oriented practices through a comprehensive investigation of the organizational parameters and models employed by professional sport teams. Initially, this warrants a globally comparative, descriptive analysis of how organizations are committing resources to such programs, strategies used and outcomes delivered by professional sport teams. Further value can then be gained by developing frameworks which provide strategic guidance to managers and researchers as they build and refine their community activities.
To advance this understanding, the aim of this research is to examine how and why professional sport organizations engage in community-oriented practice and the perceived outcomes they receive as a consequence. Specific questions to guide this project include:

1) How and why do professional sport clubs engage in community-oriented practices?
2) What models of community-oriented practice exist in professional sport teams?
3) What perceived benefits do professional sport teams receive from engaging in community-oriented practice?

Data collection involved the development of ongoing case studies structured to describe and analyze community-orientated practices within professional sport teams. The research was structured in multiple stages. Initially, public information (from documents and websites) was collated to develop detailed case summaries with respect to professional sport teams and their community-oriented practices. The investigation spanned six leagues in six different sports in three geographic regions and sought to initially categorize and describe the activities, strategies and structures relevant to community orientated practice. Following this, a sample of relevant cases was selected and each of these cases further developed by conducting semi-structured interviews with managers responsible for community-oriented practice strategies across multiple regions.

Following the interviews, embedded case study analysis (Yin, 2003), whereby each league contains a series of embedded cases (teams), was undertaken. Within-case and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989) was then used to identify similarities and differences in approaches taken by teams, leagues and regions. As a result, models were developed to represent variant approaches to community-oriented practice in professional sport. Models describe the philosophy or approach of each team, the organizational structures designed to deliver community-orientated practice outcomes, how a team uses and leverages its capabilities, resources and facilities to assist in delivery, and the perceived benefits professional sport teams receive from engaging in community-oriented practices.

Overall, results show evidence of divergent strategies and operational components with respect to community-orientated practice across variables. Practically, research findings seek to provide professional sport teams within different markets with insight into current approaches being implemented locally and globally. The ability to appraise practices in a global context presents opportunities to consider appropriate strategic refinements or adjustments and develop synergies between community-orientated programs and other operational activities. Theoretically, this research presents a model and clear rationale for professional sport teams to consider in strategically developing and expanding on their community-oriented practices. It also offers a guide to consider in efforts to develop and assess the impact and efficiencies delivered by professional sport teams in this complex context.