Facilitating Sport Participation Legacies from Olympic and Paralympic Games: The Case of Whistler Adaptive Sports and Vancouver 2010

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Sport Development - Sport Development (Disability Sport)  
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One of the ‘offers’ to host communities from the conduct of mega sport-events such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games is that following the event there would be increased participation in sport and physical activity. For Paralympic events, under the auspices of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) there is the further hope that there will be a legacy of increased participation and social inclusion of people with disabilities as the result of hosting the event. Using a contextualist approach, this research explored the reliability of these claims by exploring the case of Whistler Adaptive Sports (WAS) in the lead up to and following the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (Vancouver 2010) that were held in the city of Vancouver and the Resort Municipality of Whistler in British Columbia, Canada. WAS has evolved to leverage off the Vancouver 2010 infrastructure and social development.

During the last twenty years, many Western countries have adopted their own disability discrimination legislation, which includes the right to a cultural life. This is reinforced by the United Nations’ (2006, 2008) Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by over 145 nations. Yet, people with disability still have lower participation rates in all forms of cultural life than the general population (Cozzillio & Hayman, 2005; Darcy, 2002; Rimmer, Rubin, & Braddock, 2000). An area where the contrast is stark is that of sport and active recreation where people with disability participate at some 20% less than the general population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, 2012). If access to sport and active recreation is constrained, inhibited or denied then the benefits of involvement in these activities cannot be realized (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Y. D. Liu, 2009). Current sport and active recreation practices for people with disability reflect the historical contexts and issues faced by people with disability (Aitchison, 2003; Darcy, 2001) and research reinforces that people with disability participate at a significantly lower rate in sport and active recreation than the rest of the population (Garber, Allsworth, Marcus, Hesser, & Lapane, 2008; Murphy & Carbone, 2008; Vanner, Block, Christodoulou, Horowitz, & Krupp, 2008).

Participation rates of people with disability in sport and active recreation are significantly lower than that of the general population. In Canada in the lead up to Vancouver 2010 only 1% of memberships of national sporting organizations were people with disabilities (Government of Canada, 2006). At that time it was acknowledged that, 'Barriers to the sport participation of persons with a disability are also rooted in the values, structures and "built environments" of society. Building designs, roads, sidewalks, transportation, people’s attitudes, institutional policies, and other systems and behaviours interact with each other to create multiple obstacles that prevent persons with a disability from fully participating in sport. These and other barriers impose lifetime limitations on sport participation' (Government of Canada, 2006).

Research demonstrates that the lower levels of participation are not by choice or an outcome of their impairment but brought about through systematic discrimination against people with disability concerning access to sport and recreation goods and services both in Australia (Darcy & Taylor, 2009; Sherry, 2000) and internationally (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 2010). Academic analysis has shown that this discrimination constrains the citizenship of the group.

Sport development processes seek to attract, retain and nurture athletes through a series of processes, from grassroots to elite competition. Sport for people with disability has been historically segregated from mainstream sport with changes over time moving to integration, inclusion and mainstreaming. Recent calls for sport management to be more inclusive of social approaches to disability have identified the “Inclusion Spectrum” as an important tool to assist with sport development pathways for people with disability (Misener & Darcy, 2014).
Using a case study approach, this study accessed multiple data sources including semi-structured interviews with the CEO/Executive Director, Chelsey Walker in October 2009, September 2010 and October 2012 (Walker, 2009, 2010, 2012), to explore the planning for and delivery of a sport participation legacy. Additional background information and participation data was also obtained via the website (http://whistleradaptive.com) and AGM Reports (2010-2015) available on the website. One of the authors was also able to observe the involvement of volunteers ‘in the field of play’ during the Vancouver 2010 Paralympic Winter Games.

This case study demonstrates that achieving a sport participation legacy from the Olympic and Paralympic Games is possible, what is required is vision, planning and action. From the instigation of VANOC there was a concerted effort to improve all aspects of inclusion organizationally, environmentally, bureaucratically and from an attitudinal perspective. Yet the transitory nature of VANOC meant that even with all best intentions including a high level of strategic planning, another organization would need to take on board the legacy considerations for an inclusive winter and summer sporting precinct that had a vision, strategy and resources for life beyond the games. The nature of the mixed economy within which WAS operates, the improvements in accessibility of infrastructure, environment, processes and attitude of the Alpine region provided a platform for summer and winter sport delivery for people with disability. While many local Vancouver and Whistler residents may see snow and Alpine activities as free from government involvement, the environment is usually maintained by local government, in this case the Resort Municipality of Whistler and the Whistler Blackcomb resort, who provide the underlying infrastructure improved accessibility (e.g. accessible transport, improved accessible accommodation room capacity, continuous pathway of travel, accessible car parking, toilets and showers), ongoing maintenance, regulate allowable activity and undertake sustainable environmental works. Yet, this does not get people with disability with support needs engaged in sport participation. Another level of organizational provision, i.e. Whistler Adaptive Sport, under the guidance of a visionary management and board, was required to facilitate specialist equipment, train volunteers and schedule skill development of the activities to be undertaken.

References are available upon request.