Perception of Athletic Identity: A Case Study of Club Quidditch

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Organized quidditch is an emerging form of competition among young adults throughout the world. Quidditch has become increasingly popular among college students, resulting in the formation of an organized club sport within campus recreation departments. While much research has examined athletic identity, few have attempted to investigate its relationship with quidditch participants. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the perceived athletic identities of club sport quidditch participants.

Athletic identity is understood to be the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role and looks to others for acknowledgement of that role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Athletic Identity is a construct that is formed and reformed throughout an individuals’ life. This concept has been well established in the setting of traditional sports but has made no forays into alternative forms of sport. By gaining a better understanding of the Athletic Identity of quidditch participants, we will be able to make initial inferences as to how they perceive themselves and their surroundings. Thus, the purpose for this study will be addressed with the following research questions:

RQ1: How do quidditch participants perceive themselves within the realm of their athletic identity?
RQ2: How do quidditch participants perceive the game of quidditch in the context of conventional sports?
RQ3: How do the spectators, and fans of quidditch, perceive the athletic identity of the participants and the sport of quidditch itself?

Quidditch is a modern version of an alternative sport. The game combines athleticism, imagination, creativity, and silliness, which makes the participants of quidditch a different demographic when compared to traditional sports (Cohen et. al., 2012). One of the most unique aspects of quidditch is that it is a co-ed full contact sport; the mandatory gender ratio for each quidditch team is five to two (five males and two females, or vice versa). When asked to give descriptive adjectives of themselves, quidditch participants provided both common traits of athletes (athletic, dedicated, & competitive) as well as other non-traditional traits (nerdy, quirky, & creative). The five most identified factors of quidditch participation were found to be identification with Harry Potter, camaraderie and friendship, desire to have fun, desire to try something new, and desire to get in shape. Most of these factors can also be the same for traditional sports, as are the found benefits of the game of quidditch: leadership skills, social gains, self-confidence/pride, and a positive sport experience (Cohen & Peachey, 2015).

In this phenomenological study we seek to understand how quidditch participants ascribe meaning to their athletic identity. In this attempt, we consider constructivist theory which argues the importance of understanding that each individual interviewed has prior experiences, knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs (Hein, 1999) that impact the way in which they construct meaning from a situation, in this case, their own participation. Thus, it is essential to determine which, if any, of these aforementioned ideas influence their decision to participate in quidditch. Constructivism delves further into the idea of meaning making and considers it a desirable outcome with the propensity to enhance learning. For many decade’s educators have sought to improve education based on a constructivist paradigm (Iran-Nejad, 2001). Now, we as sport managers, will utilize a constructivist approach to consider how we may encourage and embrace the meaning of athletic identity and its many components.

The participants used in this case study were members of a club sport quidditch team in the Mountain West. Twenty-three members of the team were interviewed via a semi-structured design, with a total of seven questions that pertained to the individuals’ perception of athletic identity. Each interview lasted roughly five minutes with responses ranging from one word to open-ended thoughts. The second phase of the research design required the researchers to attend the NoCo Cup VI, an organized club sport quidditch tournament at a Mountain West campus.
The tournament consisted of seven club sport teams from around the region competing against one another. Surveys were distributed and completed by 101 spectators. Participants responded to a mixture of open-ended and scale type questions.

Responses from interviewees will be transcribed and coded for reoccurring themes. This will aid us in addressing our research questions and coming to conclusions regarding the perception of athletic identity among the participants. Surveys will be examined separately from the interviewee responses to gain a better understanding of the conclusions that those not directly involved in the competition have regarding the athletic identity of the participants. Assertions will be made regarding the case data and themes will be studied allowing us to make inferences on the perception of athletic identity of quidditch participants and spectators.