Securing a League's Future: Examining the Challenges Facing National Wheelchair Basketball Association Teams Through a Sport Development Lens

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Wheelchair basketball is a growing sport among people with disabilities and is played by more than 100,000 people in more than 80 countries (Hutzler, Barda, Mintz, & Hayosh, 2016). While the sport has grown drastically since its inception in 1946 in the United States, an aging population in specific communities with small populations, geographic limits, and participation rules present challenges for the longevity of the sport (Hutzler et al., 2016).

The National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) serves as the governing body of elite, competitive wheelchair basketball in the United States, with eight divisions: Junior Division-Prep, Junior Division-Varsity, Division I, Division II, Division III, Intercollegiate Men’s, Intercollegiate Women’s, and Women’s (nwba.org, n.d.). Despite general growth of the sport since the NWBA’s inception, the league and sport overall still lack general awareness and acceptance within society at large.

As Green (2005) argues, sport development systems have two objectives: To increase participants and enhance quality. The NWBA is doing neither, according to the challenges identified by Hutzler et al. (2016). Using theory of sport development as a lens, this study sought to explore challenges teams at the highest level of competition face in order to better understand longevity concerns for the sport’s growth and the development of the NWBA more than 70 years into its existence. Green (2005) suggested the pyramid model of sport development requires athlete recruitment, athlete retention, and athlete transitions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to examine the challenges NWBA programs in the United States face; and (2) examine their approach to recruiting athletes with disabilities to play.

The NWBA included 139 teams across five divisions according to its website, www.nwba.org as of September 2017. Each program’s team representative was contacted via e-mail with an invitation to participate in the study. E-mails were sent to 120 total contacts due to several teams having the same contact person (e.g., a college program with multiple teams but one primary contact). Seven e-mails were returned as undeliverable, leaving 113 e-mail invitations that were successfully sent.

The open-ended questionnaire was developed based on the desire to address the purpose of the current study. A pilot questionnaire was sent to a disability advocate and nine-year wheelchair basketball program director for feedback. The questionnaire was adapted based on information received from the feedback and finalized for the study. Participants were invited to complete the online questionnaire focused on the profile of their wheelchair basketball program, the challenges their program faced, and recruitment and retaining of athletes.

Data analysis began with open coding of the data, searching for basic concepts and categories within the data. Open coding was performed by highlighting similar text with the same color and assigning the group a code that best defined the concepts and categories. Analysis continued with axial coding where the researcher re-read the text to confirm open codes were accurate and examined how concepts were related. Similar concepts were grouped together and assigned an axial code that best described the grouped concept. From there, data were again examined to construct themes. Data were analyzed by one researcher, an approach supported by scholars who argue qualitative research is distinct and cannot be compared to qualitative analysis techniques (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hruschka et al., 2004; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000).

There were 28 people who completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 24.8%. Respondents were head coaches (12), managers/coordinators (8), assistant coaches (2), and players (2), and respondents had been affiliated with the team for an average of 7.63 years with a range of 1 year to 41 years. Respondents primarily held a bachelor’s
(40.74%) or master’s (44.44%) degree. A majority of the respondents (66.67%) identified with having a disability.

Analysis is under way for this study and expected to be completed by February 2018. The researcher anticipates that findings from this study can further advance sport development theory by using elite, competitive wheelchair basketball in the United States as a context. The NWBA presents a unique case of sport development in that its teams and the league lack in public awareness and support despite a lengthy history of the sport and league within the United States. Additionally, practical implications for this study include gaining a better understanding of how to develop wheelchair basketball in the United States by combating challenges, identifying successful recruiting strategies, and potentially developing a more stable infrastructure for the sport’s longevity.