Structural and Cultural Roots of Ethical and Development Failures in U.S. Sport Governance: An Ethnographic Analysis

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Recent media attention to ethical abuses in American Olympic sports have made the deficiencies of American sport governance salient to the American public. Yet, ethical problems with American sport governance have been a problem for decades, and have been known to sports governing bodies, including the USOC (cf. Ryan, 1995). Those ethical challenges have been complemented by trenchant critiques of the American sport development system (e.g., Bowers, Chalip, & Green, 2010; Prouty, 1989; Ridpath, 2018). The ethical revelations and the sport development criticisms share the insight that American sport governance treats athlete development and well-being as if it were strictly in service to the governing organizations, rather than the governing organizations being there to develop and protect athletes (cf. MacDonald, 2005; Meier & Garcia, 2015).

The structural and cultural sources of these problems are examined using ethnographic methods based on the author’s 3 years working for the USOC, 8 years on the executive staff for 2 different NGBs, and experience managing a successful U.S. Olympic program. Data come from personal notes and reflections over those years, analysis of contemporary popular media, and conversations with persons who continue to have roles in national sport organizations.

Analyses of these data suggest key structural and cultural sources of current governance failures based on the legislation that created and oversees the US amateur sport development system. In 1978, at the height of the Cold War, Congress passed the Amateur Sports Act (ASA) that established the USOC as the nation’s highest sport organization. The ASA defined the USOC structure, objectives, responsibilities and key procedural systems. During the congressional approval process, all government funding for the USOC and amateur sport development in the United States was eliminated from the ASA. The rationale was that any government funding would reflect a “socialist” approach to national sport development, and that was politically unacceptable at the height of the Cold War.

The resulting unfunded mandate of the Amateur Sports Act has several ramifications:

1. The focus of USOC executives is raising money and “protecting” the Rings; they only report to the USOC board.
2. USOC Executive compensation is based on revenue generated and medal production.
3. Sponsorship and fundraising are dependant on winning medals.
4. Financial support of NGBs is based on medal production and impact on revenue generation.
5. There are no metrics for Congress to evaluate the USOC’s compliance with the ASA.
6. Long-term programming and sport development initiatives were discontinued or severely curtailed.
7. Nine of the fourteen purposes of the USOC outlined in the ASA are ignored.

The analysis suggests that problems of USOC and NGB governance are not due simply to negligence or malevolence, as media reports typically assert. Rather, they are grounded in the structure and systems that have formed, enabled, and sustained those problems. Implications for reform of USOC and NGB governance are described.