

TEAM CLUB SPORTS CLUBS FOR ADULTS: A MODEL

Steve Gray
California State University Sacramento

Sports clubs, activity centers that enable and encourage members (particularly adults) to participate in various sports by providing such things as locker rooms, facilities for training and game playing, sponsorship of team and individual sports, and facilities for social activities, are an integral part of the leisure delivery system in many foreign countries. However, in the United States there is a relative lack of these kinds of opportunities (i.e. facilities, team sponsorship, and social amenities) for adults; especially for those interested in participating in team sports. A review of sports clubs in New Zealand and Australia reveals insights into their traditions and operation procedures, with special emphasis on rugby clubs. These clubs are usually affordable to the average citizen and play an important role in meeting the leisure needs of adult users. Research indicates a need for, as well as a potential for significant increases in team sports participation by American adults. A model for team sports clubs in the United States that is influenced by international practices will be discussed.

Introduction

Physical activity is critical to preserving the quality of life in the United States. However, in recent years physical activity rates among Americans, particularly young Americans, have declined. Unfortunately, this increasingly sedentary lifestyle is having a significant impact on the health and welfare of Americans. For example, approximately 15% of American youth are at risk for Type 2 diabetes, which is related to obesity (Langone, 2004). From 1960 to 2000, obesity rates among U.S. adults, ages 20 to 74, have more than doubled, rising from 13.3 percent to 30.9 percent (Poirot, 2004).

This paper will discuss reasons for the low physical activity levels in the United States as related to the relative absence of team sports clubs in this country. This will be contrasted with the team sport club system in many foreign countries, particularly New Zealand and Australia. Suggestions for the introduction of team sports clubs modeled on the kind of clubs seen in New Zealand and Australia will be examined.

The United States is a sedentary country. The problem starts with our children. As noted in "Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General 2004":

- Nearly half of American youths aged 12-21 years are not vigorously active on a regular basis.
- Participation in all types of physical activity declines strikingly as age or grade in school increases.
- Only 19 percent of all high school students are physically active for 20 minutes or more, five days a week, in physical education classes.
- Daily enrollment in physical education classes dropped from 42 percent to 25 percent among high school students between 1991 and 1995.

This decline in physical education in our school system is only one part of the problem. Our sports system is also at fault. For young children (ages 6-12), numbers of participants is at an all time high (Reed, 2004). Team sports apparently have much appeal to young Americans. However, by age 13 the drop out rate grows significantly. Beginning at this age in most communities, the emphasis switches from participation for all to a focus on making elite teams which are typically school based. The sports system is based on a funnel approach in which initially large numbers of children participate and then fewer and fewer athletes are chosen to represent their school as children progress through the school system. Typically, several junior highs, each with their own team, feed into one high school, which fields only one team, allowing, therefore, fewer players the opportunity to make the school team. This narrowing process is significantly increased as students leave high school and move on to colleges and universities. While many students recall their team sport experiences with great fondness and

would love to continue to compete in this area, only a select few are able to make varsity teams at this level. Resources are mainly directed towards this elite core of athletes. Money spent for stadiums, coaches, travel, scholarships, trainers, playing fields leaves relatively little for the needs of intramural and club sport programs on most campuses nationwide (Reed, 2004).

Not only are the financial resources for team sport participation limited at the university level but there are psychological barriers to participation. The focus on the elite athlete/team is pervasive. The media in the United States provides extensive coverage to a university's varsity teams but little if any to team sport participation. Players who once represented their high school or even just played AYSO soccer have little encouragement to play a team sport. Publicity regarding opportunities to play is limited. In the era of multi-million dollar contracts, turning up for one's intramural team is not given much emphasis. Studying, partying and/or exercising in the gym are all more viable options for most university students. Team sports require coordination, including developing a team and finding a playing field (a major problem at most universities), opponents, and referees.

Once Americans leave the school system, there are even fewer formal avenues available to encourage team sports participation. Commercial health and fitness clubs provide fitness opportunities but little focus on sports participation per se. There are tennis and golf facilities but little in the way of sport clubs that promote team sports competition. Community recreation programs do offer some sports leagues but give little support other than the provision of fields and scheduling.

Another trend in America today which limits team sport participation relates to changing play patterns. Increasingly, youth sports programs are more focused on better performance. Childhood has less emphasis on freedom and exploration as adults expect to prepare and control their children's environment. Connected with these changing expectations is the fact that organized sports have become more privatized and commercial (Coakley, 2001, pp.112-116). Parents now want and expect their children to perform at a higher level and will pay to see that this occurs. They hire coaches for elite teams, as well as private trainers to maximize abilities. Play for play's sake is being forgotten. As a result, fewer children today play "pick-up" games of baseball, football, and basketball, particularly in middle and upper class neighborhoods. In the 1960's through the 1970's, children often would meet after school, pick teams and play sports in parks and streets. The trends towards performance maximization and privatization combined with the rise of safety concerns has resulted in children now either going to supervised after-school programs, playing on organized teams, or going home to sit in front of a computer or television set. As children get older and the organized team sport opportunities decrease as mentioned above, their ability and/or desire to play team sports on their own is negligible.

As Americans enter adulthood, most still proclaim a deep and abiding love for team sports. Many boys grow up getting tremendous enjoyment from playing team sports and watching their heroes on television and in person. With Title IX, increasing numbers of women have had similar opportunities to participate in and enjoy team sports. Given the chance, many young people, who hate the thought of going to the gym for exercise, will run for hours with great pleasure as part of a game or practice. For the majority of Americans, however, participation in team sports virtually ends once they leave the educational system and reach adulthood. Coakley (2001) notes competitive team sports tend to be exclusive, not inclusive (pp. 120-130). For most American adults, therefore, participation in team sports is confined to being a spectator of professional sports and the occasional neighborhood ball game.

In comparison, it is apparent that team sports clubs are an integral component of the leisure delivery system in many countries of the world, particularly in Australia and New Zealand. As an example, in the New Zealand Sport and Physical Activity Surveys (SPARC 2003), it is noted that many New Zealanders aged 18 and over belonged and were active members of sports clubs. This popularity may have historical roots in New Zealand culture. Mallard (2001) notes that "the concept of mateship in the twenty-first century, in sports such as rugby and rugby league, is seen as having its roots in the frontier society of nineteenth century New Zealand. Frontier life was also characterized by unattached males, the telling of yarns and informal physical recreation such as

picnic events, hunting, local competition, drinking, and local rules in games." The team sports clubs of today apparently help carry on this tradition of social camaraderie so important to New Zealand society. While there is no one definition of a sports club, Allison (2001) notes that the most common view of a sports club in these countries is an organization that promotes sports participation for their members in one or more specific sports (p.4). Most of these clubs are amateur in nature and rely on volunteers to operate the clubs. The majority provide activity in a single sport but some offer multiple sports opportunities.

Sports clubs focusing on team sports often offer a wide variety of amenities. North's QUT Rugby Club in Brisbane is a typical Australian rugby club. The club has 4 rugby pitches or fields, one with a small grandstand. It also has changing rooms, as well as a clubhouse with a bar and dining area. The social aspects of rugby are particularly well known and a highly valued tradition that serves to heighten the appeal of the game to many adults. The club also supplies coaches and trainers for each of the four adult men sides, one woman's team, and one colt or junior side that it fields. These teams play competitive rugby in a league format against other teams in the Brisbane area. New Zealand has similar rugby club structures throughout both the North and South Islands.

These clubs provide a transition from school boy rugby to competitive men's leagues. Junior players are assimilated into the club structure, getting to know the coaches and adult players in the club. Not only do they train at the same facility and watch the older players but they are indoctrinated into the social atmosphere of the club. Rugby traditions including the post match function in which both teams socialize together are emphasized. As noted in SPRC's report "Sport and Recreation New Zealand" (2003), individuals with high levels of social support were more than twice as likely to be physically active as those who perceived low levels of social support (Eyler 2002, Neumark-Sztainer and Zabinski 2003). While there is no question that competition is important to rugby club participants, enjoyment is the most important value for members. As noted by Allison (2001), "Although competition is important to clubs and for 12% of clubs was the most important value, it generally came second place to enjoyment which was the most important value for 65%"(p.5). To garner long years of commitment to a team sports club, the participant typically must enjoy the experience. Realizing that the vast majority of participants are amateurs gives credence to this assertion.

A key reason that members make extensive/lengthy commitments to these team sports clubs is their diversity of options. Allison (2001) notes that this diversity includes club functions, structures, resources, values, and ideologies (p.4). This provision of a wide range of sports participation options serves to tie players in to their club for many years. For instance, top players on club sides are often intensely competitive, often desiring to play on regional and perhaps international representative sides. They train accordingly and the club may provide them with resources to help them reach this goal (i.e., personal trainers, video analysis, etc.). At the other end of the spectrum are social players who may not even train with the team but come for a run with the old boy's team on Saturday afternoon and a drink afterwards. The club only need provide such a player with a jersey and a team to play with. As noted by Allison (2001), "it should not be assumed that only those interested in competitive sport join clubs-many whose sole involvement is recreational sport can and do join."

Having such a club system for team sports in the United States could potentially help to alleviate the problem of participants dropping out of team sports after finishing their schooling. An emphasis on adults playing for enjoyment, yet having a diversity of competitive levels available as per the clubs overseas might attract significant numbers of participants. The recognition that high levels of social support are key ingredients in getting people to enjoy and continue to participate in team sports is important to keep in mind.

While most adults in the United States stop their team sport participation as adults, one example of the appeal of such activities for older Americans is seen in the rising popularity of rugby. While relatively popular at the turn of the century and during the 1920s (the USA won gold medals in the sport during the 1920 and 1924 Olympics), the game virtually disappeared once the sport was dropped from the Olympics. However, renewed interest in the game began in the 1960s. The United States of America Rugby Football was formed in 1975 and the now has

over 50,000 members (USA Rugby, 2004). This growth is remarkable given this relatively short span of time.

The traditions of rugby clubs in the United States are based on those of clubs overseas. The game is played competitively featuring league play that leads to national championships, as well as representative or all-star teams. The social traditions of the sport are also emphasized. After-match functions with the opposing team is a standard to which most teams adhere. Clubs typically have a set spot for after match functions (usually a bar or restaurant but some now have small clubhouses). Most clubs also support a second team (or more depending on the size of the club) for more social players. Growing number of clubs also support an "old boys" side for players over 35. The social support network for more social and/or older players seems to be instrumental in retaining players as they get older.

The club structure is also similar to that found in traditional clubs overseas. Knight (2003) notes that in New Zealand most clubs are amateur sporting organizations which usually means volunteer management. Because revenue is low (most come from player fees) expenditures must be kept to a minimum. Most have only two or three elected club members (i.e., president, treasurer, etc.) who run the club. Allison (2001) notes that in Scotland these officers are not paid but usually think of themselves as officials and not volunteers per se (p.7). Most clubs have written constitutions but the actual running of the clubs is based on past practice that has been passed down through the years. Most clubs in the United States operate in a similar fashion. Revenue is even more limited typically, requiring the volunteer structure outlined above to be the norm. One of the appeals to players, however, may in fact be that rather than just hiring outside people to run things they assume an "ownership" of the club because it is theirs and they operate the entity.

The rugby model may be one that has potential for other team sports in this country. Developing basketball, football, and baseball clubs with multiple teams for youth and adults based on a similar social ethic and structure may be worth pursuing. Municipal recreation districts could provide valuable assistance in helping formulate such clubs. Recreation professionals could be trained in how to initiate and provide on-going support for such clubs, as well as provide playing fields and facilities. Commercial organizations might also be able to offer such services as part of their operations.

Americans love team sports. We grow up playing baseball, basketball, football, and are becoming more involved with "new" team sports such as soccer and volleyball. There are apparently great joys associated with playing a team sport. However, as Americans enter and eventually leave the educational system, they increasingly switch from being participants to spectators. With the increasing problems with obesity related to inactivity in the United States, it's tragic that this love for team sports may eventually lead many Americans from an active lifestyle in their youth to one of being the spectator as an adult. Being a spectator of professional sports can be an engaging experience but the physical and mental benefits of participation are far superior. Developing a functional club sport model based on the ones operating in New Zealand and Australia may help Americans of all ages, but particularly adults, obtain these benefits.

References

- Aldridge, F. (2002). *Sport-A leap into learning: a study of participation in sport and fitness activities in Great Britain*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Alison, M. (2001). *Sports Clubs in Scotland*. Edinburgh: SportsScotland.
- Eyler, A. (2002). .Environmental policy and cultural factors related to physical activity in a diverse sample of women., *Women and Health*, 36(2):123-134.
- Hyland, D. (1990) *Philosophy and Sport*, New York, Paragon House Publishers.
- Knight, L. (2003) *The Clubs Celebrating The Grassroots of New Zealand Rugby*, Auckland, Penguin Books.
- Langone, J. (2004) "The Riddle of Obesity", New York, New York Times.
- Mallard, T. (2001) *Report of The Sport, Fitness, & Leisure Ministerial Task Force*. Wellington: SPARC.
- Neumark-Sztainer D. (2003). .Factors associated with changes in physical activity: a cohort study. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 157:803-810.
- Otago Rugby Football Union (2003) *Secondary Schools Teenage/Youth Rugby*. Dunedin: Otago Rugby Football Union.
- "Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General 2004 U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Pittsburg.
- Poirot, C. (2004) "Healthy Living: We must win obesity battle - for our kids' sake" *Knight Ridder Newspapers*.
- Reed, K. (2004) "Back Talk; Elitism in Youth Sports Yields Physical Fatness" February 1, 2004, New York: New York Times.
- SPRC (2003) "Sport and Recreation New Zealand." [On-line]. Available: <http://www.sparc.org.nz/.htm>
- Sport and Recreation New Zealand (1997-2001). *Trends in Participation in Sport and Active Leisure*. Wellington: SPARC.
- Sport and Recreation New Zealand. (2003). *SPARC Facts, Results of the New Zealand Sport and Physical Activity Surveys (1997-2001)*. Wellington: SPARC.
- Statistics New Zealand. (1996). *Census 1996*. Wellington: New Zealand.
- USA Rugby (2004) "History of USA Rugby Football". [On-line]. Available: <http://www.usarugby.org/about/history.html>.
- Zabinski, M.F., et .al. (2003). .Overweight children's barriers to and support for physical activity., *Obesity Research*, 11 (2): 238-246.