

Research Agenda for Team Sports

A Brief to accompany “Full Team Ahead: The Benefits of Team Sport to Canadian Sport”, a report prepared for the Canadian Team Sports Coalition

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This brief accompanies the report *Full Team Ahead – The Benefits of Team Sport to Canadian Sport*. The purpose of this brief is to outline the gaps in the literature that were revealed during the research and writing of the *Full Team Ahead* report.

Participation

In 2005, while writing for the Conference Board of Canada, Bloom, Grant and Watt produced a report titled *Strengthening Canada: The Socio-economic Benefits of Sport Participation in Canada*.¹ In 2008, Ifedi produced a report titled *Sport Participation in Canada, 2005*,² which expanded and updated previous Statistics Canada reports about sport participation in 1994³, 1998⁴, and 2003.⁵

Chiefly, the Ifedi and Bloom reports listed participation data for every sport in Canada. While useful on the surface, this data is too general to form many relevant conclusions about sport participation in Canada. Though it is useful to know that, for example, soccer participation is trending upward, it would be more useful to know why this is occurring. Academic research can help to explain these trends.

Ifedi noted that “nearly three times as many girls played ice hockey in 2005 as in 1998”.⁶ Why is this? Could this increase be a result of a groundswell of national pride brought about by the international success of Canadian women’s hockey teams? Or could the increase be a result of Hockey Canada’s initiatives to reach out to young girls? Perhaps the trend to participate in ice hockey and soccer is part of a broad societal trend to gravitate toward team sports?

Ifedi hinted at possible reasons for the sport participation numbers but does not provide researched explanations for them. There are occasions in the report where the data was couched with phrases such as “it is possible”⁷ and “may explain”.⁸ Researchers need to prove or disprove these guesses.

¹ Bloom, M., Grant, M. and Watt, D. (2005). *Strengthening Canada: The Socio-economic Benefits of Sport Participation in Canada*. The Conference Board of Canada, Ottawa, ON.

² Ifedi, F. (2008). *Sport Participation in Canada, 2005*. Statistics Canada.

³ *Sport Participation in Canada by Statistics Canada for Sport Canada, 1994*. Retrieved September 8, 2009 from <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/sc/pubs/status-eng.cfm>

⁴ *Sport Participation in Canada, 1998*. Retrieved September 8, 2009 from <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/sc/info-fact/1998-psc-spc/pdf/SPINC-all.pdf>

⁵ *Reconnecting Government with Youth Survey, 2003*. Retrieved September 8, 2009 from <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/sc/info-fact/youth-eng.cfm>

⁶ Ifedi, p. 31.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 33, p. 36.

Even the Bloom report encountered a lack of established academic research. Bloom et al. (2005) used phrases like “another plausible factor”⁹ and made recommendations for future research such as: “*It would be invaluable in future to develop independent empirical data about impacts and benefits [of sport participation] to confirm or modify the survey findings*”.¹⁰ Academia needs to answer this call.

Reports on sport participation in Canada seem to be published every four or five years. Regardless of whether academic researchers take up the call to explain the sport participation numbers, the next published report needs to make more distinctions between team and individual sports. The Bloom and Ifedi reports revealed disparate numbers with regard to participating in team and individual sports and showed that team sports are more popular. Why, without speculating or guessing, is this the case?

The questions deserving of research under the topic of sport participation are:

- Why are team sports more popular than individual sports?
- Are there any cultural, social, or economic reasons for participating in team sports rather than individual sports?
- Why are there upward participation trends in certain team sports?

Athlete Development

In *Full Team Ahead*, we presume, based on information gained through surveys and interviews that team sports are the point of entry for most children getting involved in sport. On the surface, this seems like a plausible presumption. Parents naturally want their child to feel the sense of community and to use teamwork to achieve a mutual goal. But if this is so, then what is the impetus for a child to get involved with an individual sport?

Presuming that team sports are the entry point to sports for almost all Canadian athletes, how and why are there individual sport athletes? Is there something in team sports that turns away some children and pushes them into individual sports? Or is there something in team sports that encourages children to want to test their individual limitations and compete as an individual?

One study¹¹ illustrated that even children who have personalities that are more attuned to individualism are still able to compete successfully in team sports. Researchers who are concerned with raising the profile of the benefits of team sports should investigate the links between starting in a team sport at an early age and succeeding at an individual sport as a young adult.

Are individual sport athletes at a disadvantage because they are not gaining the perceived benefits from being a member of a team? Perhaps successful individual athletes also participate, recreationally, in team sports? Or, alternatively, perhaps they prefer to avoid team settings and choose not to participate in team sports. How do individual sport athletes behave in the ‘team’ settings that occur in some individual sports?

⁹ Bloom, p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 12.

¹¹ McCutcheon, L.E., and Ashe, D. (1999). Can individualists find satisfaction participating in interactive team sports?, *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 22(4): 570-577.

(for example racquet sports, gymnastics, cycling and cross country are examples of individual sports that may involve teams competing against each other).

Elite team sport athletes are often adept at more than one team sport (Steve Nash – basketball and lacrosse; Michael Jordan – basketball and baseball; Wayne Gretzky – hockey and baseball), which may indicate that skills learned in one team sport are easily transferable to another team sport. A recent approach to instructing sports, Teaching Games For Understanding (TGfU), collapses all sports into four groups – categorizing the common skill sets used in each group.¹² Further research in this area would help us understand how athletes develop into team or individual sport athletes.

Literature exists^{13, 14} that explains why and when children and teenagers drop away from participating in sports. This phenomenon is in opposition with the ideals of Canadian Sport For Life (CS4L), a national initiative aimed at increasing the physical literacy and lifelong involvement of Canadians in sport. CS4L recommends that children be encouraged to continue their sport participation throughout their entire life, even if that participation becomes only recreational or in the capacity of a volunteer, coach, or official.¹⁵

Team sport researchers should focus on how to maintain team sport participation from childhood into adulthood. Longitudinal studies could be used to examine why (and when) children drop out of team sports and whether (and why) they re-enter team sports at an older age. Understanding the motivations for participation can help team sport stakeholders develop and refine the delivery of their programs.

Some possible research questions under the topic of team sports and athlete development are:

- Do parents prefer to use a team sport as a sporting entry point for their child? Why?
- What makes a child decide to become an individual sport athlete? Do they completely turn away from team sports?
- Do elite individual athletes also participate in team sports? What do they gain from participating or not participating?
- Are team sport athletes more likely to participate in more than one team sport than individual sport athletes are to participate in more than one individual sport?
- Are skills acquired in one team sport transferable to another team sport?
- Are there differences between dropout rates for team sports and individual sports?

¹² *PlaySport – Philosophy of TGfU*. (2007). Retrieved September 17, 2009 from <http://www.ophea.net/Ophea/PlaySport/philosophy.cfm>

¹³ Ullrich-French, S., and Smith, A. L. (2009). Social and motivational predictors of continued youth sport participation. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10: 87-95

¹⁴ Vanden Auweele, Y., De Martelaer, K., Rzewnicki, R., De Knop, P., and Wylleman, P. (2004). Parents and coaches: A help or harm? Affective outcomes for children in sport. In Y. Vanden Auweele (Ed.), *Ethics in Youth Sport: Analyses and Recommendations* (pp. 179-193). Leuven, Belgium: Lannoo Campus.

¹⁵ *Active For Life – Any Age*. (2008). Retrieved September 9, 2009 from the Canadian Sport For Life website <http://www.canadiansportforlife.ca/default.aspx?PageID=1008&LangID=en>

Psychological, Social, and Leadership Development

We know how often Canadians are participating in each sport and we know the sports in which they prefer to participate. We know that participating in sports brings many benefits – primarily the physical, social and mental health benefits to an individual that result from being active in a sport. However, the differences in these benefits between participants in team sports and individual sports are significantly understudied.

Unlike their individual sport counterparts, team sport athletes are proven to have increased communication skills,¹⁶ peer leadership abilities,¹⁷ strategy-observation skills,¹⁸ higher self-esteem,¹⁹ and a higher social character index (based on the characteristics of teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, work ethic, and perseverance).²⁰

With the smattering of academic literature showing the benefits of team sports over individual sports, it seems that there should be greater interest by researchers to explain why this is the case.

Further, given the benefits brought about by participating in team sports, how are these benefits applied to other life situations? Are team sport athletes, with their strategy-observation skills, better coaches? Are team sport athletes, with their high social character index, more valued co-workers in the business world? If a businessperson participates with the company softball team – does that mean that he or she is more interesting, sociable, loyal, or hard-working than the employee who does not participate?

Back in 1977, a book titled *The Gamesman: The New Corporate Leaders* explained how participating in team sport contributed to the development of successful businessmen.²¹ It was apparent that team sport athletes were shown to have advantages in business careers, and were in fact more frequently hired by employers. Current research needs to update this thirty-year-old literature.²²

One academic study revealed that residents of a retirement home experienced social and mental health benefits from participating with a chair volleyball team²³. The seniors worked together and enjoyed feeling valued as part of a group – which led to increased self-esteem and positive well-being. More studies like this one could revolutionize retirement homes and bring increased attention (and funding) to developing team sport programs for people of all ages.

¹⁶ Dupuis, M., Bloom, G., and Lougheed, T. (2006). Team captains' perceptions of athlete leadership. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 29(1): 60-78.

¹⁷ Lougheed, T.M., Hardy, J., and Eys, M. A. (2006). The nature of athlete leadership. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 29(2): 142-158.

¹⁸ Wesch, N., Law, B., and Hall, C. R. (2007). The use of observational learning by athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 30(2): 219-231

¹⁹ Slutzky, C. B., and Simpkins, S. D. (2009). The link between children's sport participation and self-esteem: Exploring the mediating role of sport self-concept. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10: 381-389

²⁰ Rudd, A., & Stoll, S. (2004). What type of character do athletes possess? An empirical examination of college athletes versus college non-athletes with the RSBH value judgment inventory. *The Sport Journal*, 7(2): 1-10.

²¹ Maccoby, M. (1977). *The Gamesman: The New corporate Leaders*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

²² Ingham Berlage, G. (1982). Are children's competitive team sports socializing agents for corporate America? In A.O. Dunleavy, A. W. Miracle, and C.R. Rees (Eds.), *Studies in the sociology of sport: Refereed proceedings of the 2nd annual conference of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, Fort Worth, Texas, Nov. 1981* (pp. 309-324). Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press.

²³ Cedergren, A., King, K. A., Wagner, D. I., and Wegley, S. (2008). Perceived social health benefits among participants in a countywide senior chair volleyball program. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 31(4): 23-36.

The questions deserving of further research under this topic are:

- Are there any personality characteristics unique to team sport athletes or to individual sport athletes?
- Are there any psychological, mental or social health differences between team sport and individual sport athletes?
- Do team sport athletes succeed in the real world more so than individual athletes?
- What skills or abilities learned in a team sport translate to the real world – and in what contexts?
- In what specific ways do team sports create a sense of belonging and positive well-being?

Economic Development

Studying the economic impact of hosting major games and events is a common research agenda for many sport economics researchers. There is often concern with whether the hosting of a major event or tournament is actually financially (or otherwise) beneficial for the host city. Within the discussion of whether hosting a major event is financially viable, there is considerable room for researchers to determine differences between hosting a team sport event and an individual sport event.

Cities would be very interested in knowing whether, for example, hosting the World Aquatics Championships would have greater impact than hosting the FIFA 17U soccer tournament. On the surface, it seems plausible that the soccer tournament would bring far more participants and thus have a greater economic impact. The sheer number of people involved with managing a team sport (more officials, more coaches, more participants, and more families/spectators to watch the participants) seems to indicate that a city should choose to host a team sport event over an individual sport event, all other things being equal. But are there unique economic benefits that accrue to a city from hosting an individual sport event?

For major Games that include both individual and team sport events, how many people attend the event to only to watch the team sports? How many spectators watching the Olympics are watching the team sport competitions instead of the individual sport competitions? Are individual sports more fun to watch on TV – and team sports more fun to attend in person? Answers to these questions would affect television networks' delivery of major Games, and event promoters' marketing of major Games.

Questions deserving of more research under the topic of economic development are:

- Do team sport events have more economic impact than individual sport events?
- In multi-sport Games events, which sports have the most spectator interest?
- What is the *team* sport economic impact to Canada's GDP?

National Pride and Civic Engagement

In *Full Team Ahead*, one respondent stated: “When an individual athlete does well on the international level, I’m proud they are Canadian. When a Canadian team does well internationally, it makes me proud to be a Canadian.” How pervasive is this mindset? Researchers suggest that *identifying* with a team (not merely supporting a team) has great psychological and self-esteem benefits²⁴. A person who identifies with a team becomes a member of a group and *belongs*. When a Canadian individual athlete wins a medal, typically only the athlete (and possibly the coach and parents) can say: “We did it”. When a Canadian team wins a medal, the sense of nationalism and group membership is high enough so that fans who identify with the team (or even identify with being a Canadian) can say: “We did it”.

Team sports are presumed to be the first point of entry to sport for new immigrants. Participating in a team sport allows new Canadians to make friends and connections and helps them bridge the gap between their heritage and their new culture. Team sport researchers could examine new Canadians to understand if sport-related participation or team identification has eased their transition into their new country.

Participating in team sports also appears to bring about a loyalty to the team and a sense of giving back. In *Full Team Ahead*, interview results revealed that many athletes continued their involvement by coaching, volunteering, officiating, or working in sport. Why and how often does this happen? Do team and individual sport athletes have different inclinations to ‘give back’ to their sport? Since many athletes began their careers in team sports, is there a special fondness for returning to the team sport setting later in life?

Some possible research questions relating to the links between team sport and national pride are:

- Do citizens identify more with a team sport athlete than an individual sport athlete?
- How do citizens view a Canadian team winning a medal in comparison to a Canadian individual winning a medal?
- What is the role of team sports in an immigrant’s integration into Canadian society?
- Are team sport athletes more likely to remain involved with their sport than individual sport athletes?

Conclusion

Academic research has often focused on the benefits of sport. Differences between individual and team sports are rarely investigated. Differences by sport are even more rarely investigated.²⁵ It would be fascinating to understand whether, for example, a retired baseball player is more or less likely to become a coach than a retired swimmer. But before sport-specific studies can be launched with any veracity, there first needs to be a movement to separate team and individual sports. Perhaps all team sport athletes would be more likely to become coaches than all individual sport athletes?

²⁴ Wann, D. L. (2006). Examining the potential causal relationship between sport team identification and psychological well-being. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 29: 79-95

²⁵ Mondello, M. J., and Rishe, P. (2004). Comparative economic impact analyses: Differences across cities, events, and demographics. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 18(4): 331-342.

In *Full Team Ahead*, we showed how team sports are more popular, foster higher people engagement, and contribute disproportionately to the many benefits that are derived from sport. But there is still work to be done. There is a deep void of relevant and timely research on the differences between team sports and individual sports. We need to highlight specific economic benefits, detailed reasons for the participation disparity, and the greater role for team sport as a pillar of Canada's sporting landscape.