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"They Just Don't Know Where to Go, What to Do" Connecting Newcomers to Sports and Coaching Opportunities in Atlantic Canada

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Coaches have long been recognized as essential to the existence and quality of the mainstream amateur sporting experience in this country. As evidence of this, consider that in 1969 we saw the Task Force on Sport for Canadians deliver its report to the Minister of National Health and Welfare and in 1970 we saw the subsequent incorporation of the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC). With a mission "to enhance the experiences of all Canadian athletes through quality coaching," CAC moved quickly to develop and introduce the first courses in what is now known as the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) in 1974. Today, to coach mainstream sport at any level in this country, individuals must hold valid NCCP certification. CAC has revamped its programs over time into three streams (i.e. community sport, competition, instruction) while at the same time adhering to nine key strategic directions. Importantly, one of these strategic directions has been to improve opportunities for underrepresented groups within the coaching ranks, including new Canadians.

Sports and recreation play an important role in the settlement of, and in the fostering of a sense of belonging for, newcomers in Canadian society (Omidvar and Richmond 2003, Paraschak and Tirone 2008). Such participation may also

yield physical health benefits, yet the positive benefits must not be overemphasized given the multitude of barriers (e.g. language, finances, transportation) that newcomers encounter in gaining entry into the sports system (Donnelly and Nakamura 2006, Stodolska and Alexandris 2004). Indeed, recent research indicates that new Canadians have low rates of participation in coaching and playing mainstream sports (Aizlewood, Bevelander and Pendakur 2005), often opting instead to participate in sports within their ethnic community or in clubs run by ethnic organizations (Paraschak and Tirone 2007). The ethnic sporting scene provides newcomers with opportunities for participation without encountering the discrimination and racism often encountered in mainstream sport (Aizlewood et al. 2005, Tirone 2000); however, it also severely limits their available leisure options (Stodolska and Jackson 1998), including reducing the possibility for those with previous elite (i.e. regional, national) coaching experience in their home countries to contribute at a similar level in Canada.

In an effort to better understand how to attract immigrant newcomers to effectively participate in NCCP and in coaching mainstream sport, CAC recently provided financial support for

two studies, one is based in two large urban centres in Ontario and Quebec, and the other is this investigation based in the smaller urban centre of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach, one relying upon in-depth, semi-structured one-on-one and focus group interviews (Patton 2002), was used to explore the soccer, basketball and badminton coaching experiences of immigrant newcomers who settled in Halifax in the last five to ten years. We also interviewed sport key informants, including those who work or volunteer as sport leaders, coaches and administrators in the same three sports, or those who work or volunteer with service organizations such as the YMCA or local recreation departments. Our attempts to recruit new Canadian key informants proved difficult and yielded a total of six participants despite having worked with local newcomer organizations, university service departments and the local and provincial sports organizations to deliver in excess of 700 email requests for participation. In contrast, the sport key informant positions were filled (n=10) with relative ease.

Interview guides for each of the participant groups, as well as the focus group, were developed by the Co-Principal Investigators (i.e. Tirone, Livingston) based on their experience with other studies of newcomers, minority ethnic Canadians, coaches and athletes. Once each interview was completed and transcribed verbatim, members of the research team read and re-read the interviews and determined patterns in the data based on consistent messages expressed by the study participants. Establishing themes from the raw data transcripts is known as open coding (Patton 2002, Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Findings

No single reality existed relative to the patterns and themes we noticed in the data. However, three major themes materialized from the data, with a range of sub-themes emerging in each category. In general, the three themes included level of involvement within the existing Canadian sport system, inclusion in mainstream sport and communication and information flow about coaching opportunities between existing sports organizations and the newcomer community.

Level of involvement

A major theme evident in the data had to do with where newcomers fit in terms of their involvement in the existing Canadian sport system. Some newcomers seemed to know little about the sport scene in Canada prior to their arrival, not realizing that many of the sports they played in their home countries were also played in Halifax. Once these individuals found this out, some of them expected their experience would allow them to enter into sport at an elite level. However, in some cases, they were also disappointed to learn that they were not superior in talent or expertise to those already involved in the organized sport system. In contrast, sport officials had mixed perceptions related to entry level, with some assuming that newcomers would enter sport at an elite level and others perceiving that newcomers would most likely prefer entry level (i.e., community or minor sport) coaching opportunities. Another dynamic we encountered had to do with newcomers who felt they had not been given an opportunity to try out for teams even though they were experienced athletes and were interested in participating in sports. The reasons they were given by the sport organizers/organizations had to do with time of year that they arrived in Canada or for some other reason coaches had already assembled the teams and there were no options to add new players.

For all Canadians, regardless of citizenship or immigration status, involvement in sport in Canada is dependent upon personal resources and socio-economic status. In this study, we learned that this is indeed the case for new Canadians, with financial resources playing a key role in either affording or limiting their participation. Sport key informants disclosed, however, that financial barriers are often set aside for those who are highly talented. In some cases, and particularly with respect to the sport of soccer, newcomers may also be given preferential treatment and priority to coach or play sport based on their country of origin. In contrast, those who are interested but less talented have much more difficulty entering the mainstream sport system. Without invitations specifically aimed at attracting newcomers to sport-related opportunities, some newcomers may feel excluded.

Inclusion

Key informants expressed a range of ideas related to inclusion, including sub-themes on

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the importance of inclusion, how to include newcomers, barriers to inclusion and where the responsibility lies for inclusion of newcomers in sport, with particular emphasis on coaching. The inclusion of newcomers was seen to be important from two perspectives: building understanding and a sense of community amongst diverse groups and contributing to healthy lifestyles. Most participants recognized that recently arrived newcomers may not have good language skills and they may not have networks of friends to help them make contact with sport organizations, yet some felt that newcomers and newcomer organizations should take the lead in facilitating and supporting opportunities to participate as coaches in mainstream sport. Others, in contrast, explained that the onus for promoting and encouraging newcomer participation should be borne by existing sport organizations and by NCCP.

Participants recognized that in some cases newcomers face barriers that prevent or limit the extent of their participation in sport. One of the more significant barriers recognized by the key informants was the cost of participation, although many were quick to point out that financial assistance is often available through existing subsidy programs. However, they also acknowledged that it can be difficult for people to learn about these opportunities, that the requirement to prove poverty in order to qualify is a very intimidating process and that the money available for subsidies is often limited (Frisby et al. 2005). Several key informants also recognized that the participation of newcomers is often limited by a number of “competing priorities” (e.g. employment, transportation). Less involvement by newcomer women and girls in contrast to newcomer male adults, youth and children was also noted and attributed, in part, to the notion that participation by females may be more limited by cultural beliefs and values. It was also noted that administrators and coaches in existing sport organizations may not understand the needs of newcomer participants, particularly as it relates to specific cultural and religious

practices (e.g., holy days) and restrictions (e.g., dress requirements). As well, coaches and officials wishing to learn the best way to provide supports for ethnic minority players with diverse needs are unlikely to know where to go for information and direction. This lack of understanding is problematic, as was the acknowledgement of participants that issues of discrimination still affect or limit the ability of some newcomers to participate in mainstream sports and coaching. Moreover, strategies for addressing and resolving issues of discrimination are not well defined in existing policy documents.

Communication and information flow

The NCCP program is a well recognized part of the Canadian sport system, yet most saw it as a distant entity from the day-to-day happenings of sport. It was viewed as a complex system, one that is undergoing change, and that current changes are creating some complexities for those trying to understand and engage in the NCCP’s coaching programs. With that said, the recent inclusion of a community stream within the NCCP’s offerings was frequently viewed as a positive, providing newcomers with what many felt would be a more accessible and attractive option for those wanting to coach while integrating within their new communities. Much emphasis was also placed on using existing organizations (e.g. schools, community clubs, multicultural centres, local and provincial sport associations) to enhance communication flow for the purposes of connecting newcomers to mainstream sport coaching opportunities.

Many emphasized that the NCCP’s reliance on a classroom-based system of program delivery, one limited to delivery in two official languages and prone to the use of technical terminology and sport jargon, would make it difficult for newcomers to engage in and gather critical information. The time and economic cost required to engage in what some view as an intimidating formalized certification system was also thought to contribute to the choice of some not to participate. A modified approach for

experienced newcomers, perhaps in the general form of a hands-on apprenticeship with a mentor coach, was suggested as a viable alternative. However, emphasis was also placed on the need to educate Canadians currently within the coaching ranks on cultural practices (e.g. religious rites, clothing requirements) to accommodate newcomer coaches, athletes and sports officials.

Summary and conclusions

As investigators and authors, it is important to acknowledge the encouragement we received from our key informants for engaging in this study. We were pleased to see that many of the sport key informants we interviewed had given careful consideration to the inclusion of minority group participants in sport. Some told us about research they conducted to learn about cultural traditions as they prepared to engage in activities with individuals from cultures with which they were unfamiliar. Many also told us that they had a keen desire to find ways to include newcomers in their sport organizations but had little idea of how to go about recruiting and meeting the needs of this population. Our optimism in this regard, however, is tempered by the fact that some of our newcomer key informants continued to express frustration about some sports associations that have failed to meet their needs and by their observations that those with elite level qualifications receive preferential treatment. We are concerned about those wishing to enter coaching at the grass roots and introductory levels who may not know how to connect to sports teams or organizations.

As Donnelly and Nakamura (2006) have previously raised, another concern for us is that there is little in the way of procedural guidelines and policies that pertain to sport and how sport organizations and coaches can develop an understanding of the needs and interests of newcomers or the special considerations that may be required to enable newcomers to more readily participate. It was from this perspective that we have recommended a series of actions to assist sports organizations to meet the needs of newcomers interested in engaging in mainstream sport coaching. Perhaps most importantly, we have recommended to CAC that they, along with Sport Canada, develop guidelines and directions for sports organization to follow in developing policies and incentives for inclusion of newcomers in mainstream sport and coaching. More specifically, these need to address and

support (1) the inclusion of newcomers in coaching, (2) the training of administrative staff, coaches and volunteers on the importance of inclusion and (3) fee assistance for newcomers. We have also recommended that NCCP explore alternative modes of entry into coaching for newcomers (e.g. hands-on apprenticeship with mentors), entry points that would allow individuals to acclimate to the Canadian mainstream sport environment. With a clearly identified strategic direction to include newcomers in coaching, the results and recommendations of this investigation, as well as those of Coté et al. (2007) and the new NCCP model of three streams of entry and training, we are hopeful that newcomers will find it easier to access coaching opportunities in mainstream Canadian sport. Time will tell.

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