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CENTRE FOR SPORT POLICY STUDIES

CENTRE FOR SPORT POLICY STUDIES POSITION PAPER SERIES

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS!: INCREASING SPORT PARTICIPATION IN CANADA AS A RESULT OF SUCCESS AT THE VANCOUVER OLYMPICS

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The Centre for Sport Policy Studies (CSPS), in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto, is engaged in empirically-based research in the service of sport policy, monitoring and evaluation studies, and education and advocacy for the two most important ambitions of Canadian sport: 'sport for all' (widespread grassroots participation) and healthy high performance in elite-level sports. The Position Papers represent an important part of the work of CSPS.

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CSPS POSITION PAPER NO. 2: Editor's Introduction

In Spring, 2008, evidence was emerging from our SSHRC-funded research on 'sport participation in Canada' which suggested strongly that there was no evidence of an automatic increase in sport participation that resulted from hosting a major sporting event, or achieving medal success in that event. Rather, the evidence suggests that it is necessary to plan and prepare for increases in participation just as we expect high performance athletes and teams to plan and prepare for competition and success.

Although it was less than two years before the Vancouver (2010) Winter Olympics, we believed that – given the widespread claims that had been made about a legacy of increased participation that would result from new participants being inspired by the pending success of Canadian athletes at those Games – it was important to let those who were responsible for such participation increases know about the evidence. In addition, we developed a plan that – although late in the day – might help to salvage a potential increase in sport participation.

Thus, this position paper was forwarded to the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC), the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC), and Sport Canada. Nothing was heard from the COC or VANOC. We heard, indirectly, that Sport Canada had shared the paper with staff at the winter (Olympic) sports National Sport Organizations (NSOs). Their response was to be expected – by that time they were so involved in planning for the Games and preparing Canadian athletes to compete successfully in their sports that there was no time to even consider what might be necessary to increase participation as a result of medal success in their sports.

In the two years since the extremely successful performances of Canadian athletes and teams at the Vancouver Olympics¹, there is no evidence in Canada of an increase in sport participation. We heard reports that there was increased interest, and possibly increased participation, in new sports such as ski cross (although we understand it is likely that most of those showing an interest were already skiers); and we heard reports that some winter sports clubs had turned away hundreds of interested and inspired young people because they lacked the capacity to accommodate so many new participants.

The research project that led to this position paper is now complete², and the final data reinforce our preliminary findings with regard to the need to plan and prepare for increased participation. If we wait for people to be 'inspired' to participate, they may well be 'inspired' by the achievements of our high performance athletes. However, if the material and structural conditions of participation, the sport development system, and the capacity of sports to accommodate new participants is still exactly the same after the Games as it was

before, then all of the claims of a legacy of increased participation become empty promises.

Currently, we appear to be losing another opportunity to increase sport participation. Despite the fact that the 2015 PanAm / Para PanAm Games were awarded to Toronto in 2009 there is still no plan (May, 2012) for increasing physical activity and sport participation in conjunction with those Games – although there are still public voices loudly proclaiming that the mere fact of hosting, and the performances of Canadian athletes in 2015, will somehow ‘magically’ inspire young people to become more active, despite the absence of any plan or provision.

Another opportunity to plan for increased participation is afforded by the pending new version of the Canadian Sport Policy (CSP 2.0). The draft policy places renewed emphasis on increased participation, thus signaling the urgent need to better connect planning to host major games with planning to increase grassroots participation in sport and physical activity. Perhaps the Federal Policy for Hosting International Sport Events (2008) could also be revised to preclude any future bid to host a major games in Canada without a sound and comprehensive plan for participation.

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Editor's Introduction, May 2012

¹ Canada finished third in the medal standings, the same position that had been achieved in Torino (2006) although with two more medals than in Torino; however, Canadian athletes and teams won a record 14 gold medals.

² Donnelly, P., Y. Nakamura, B. Kidd, M. MacNeill, J. Harvey, B. Houlihan, K. Toohey, and K.Y. Kim (2011). *Sport Participation in Canada: Evaluating Measurements and Testing Determinants of Increased Participation*. [Final report for SSHRC Standard Research Grant No: 410 2006 2405] Toronto: Centre for Sport Policy Studies, Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education, University of Toronto.

Opportunity Knocks! Increasing Sport Participation in Canada as a Result of Success at the Vancouver Olympics

A Position Paper prepared by the Centre for Sport Policy Studies (University of Toronto) as a challenge to Sport Canada, the Canadian Olympic Committee, and the Canadian winter sports community

THE PROBLEM

Despite numerous claims, there is no empirical support (other than anecdotal evidence) for the view that hosting major sports events and/or winning gold medals increases participation in sport.

In fact, in the one detailed study that we have found on this issue, the Australian Sports Commission (2001) found that the only measurable effect on participation that could be attributed to hosting the 2000 Sydney Olympics / Paralympics was an increase in sport spectatorship and television viewing.

Another report (Bauman et al., 2001) concluded that:

...there were declines in physical activity between 1997 and 1999 for adult Australians and no change in physical activity participation between 1999 and November 2000. This suggests that the Olympics had little impact upon physical activity participation overall across the adult population, although 4% of adults reported that they had done some physical activity which they attributed to the Olympics. This proportion was not large enough to influence physical activity participation overall, and indicates that the Olympics was not likely to have specifically resulted in increases in physical activity participation in the whole community.

This is not to say that there is no inspirational effect from hosting the Olympics, or from having Canadian athletes win gold medals. We argue that the inspirational and trickle-down effects of success are best realized in a sport system that is prepared to accept new participants.

This position is based on a widespread review of research literature that has been undertaken for our current SSHRC-funded project on “measuring sport participation in Canada. The best available evidence suggests that participation gains are best realized when sport organizations are prepared, and have the capacity and willingness to take in new participants. Two contrasting examples from the UK illustrate this point.

(1) The England rugby team’s World Cup victory in 2003 appears to have resulted in over 21,000 new youth players joining rugby clubs. However, Houlihan (2005) argues that the inspiration generated by the World Cup victory would have soon evaporated had the Rugby Football Union not invested in an infrastructure of child-friendly clubs and a strong network of school-club partnerships that were able to take full advantage of the surge in enthusiasm for the sport.

(2) The UK has experienced a new period of success in track and field. However, there is evidence that track and field clubs have been unable, or perhaps reluctant, to leverage this into increased participation. Initiatives encouraging track and field clubs to develop links with schools to expand the base of participants appear not to have been taken up. This is apparently because the clubs lack the capacity to deal with relatively large numbers of new young members, and may also be reluctant to devote limited resources (coaching, facility time, etc.) to those who are unlikely to achieve success.

EXPECTATIONS AND OBLIGATIONS

The Canadian Olympic Committee’s (COC) ‘Own the Podium’ initiative has led to a highly publicized claim that Canada will win 35 medals to lead the medal standings at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Given the complex preparations for, and public investment in meeting this prediction, planning for the potential consequences of success should be relatively straightforward. **It would be a**

tragedy to host an Olympics, achieve remarkable performances, a first place standing in the medal table, and a record haul of medals, and not realize any participation benefits. It would also represent a violation of public expectations, and of the policies that govern Canadian sport and the hosting of major sports events.

Public funding for 'Own the Podium', the Athlete Excellence Fund (to pay prize money to Olympic medal winners), and for hosting the 2010 Olympics is widely represented as an 'investment' with an expected return. That return includes increased participation in sport, which is intended to counter inactivity, obesity, and related chronic diseases, and to achieve various quality of life benefits. The Olympic Organizing Committee (VANOC), Canadian NSOs for the winter Olympic sports, Sport Canada / Heritage Canada, and the COC, all have obligations under established policies to achieve this return on investment in the form of increased participation.

The Federal Policy for Hosting International Sport Events (2004, 2008) is grounded, in part, in the belief that hosting major sporting events will lead to overall increases in participation levels in a population. The Policy is quite explicit in determining that such an increase should be a legacy, an outcome of hosting major events.¹ The partners who are engaged in funding and organizing the Vancouver Olympics (VANOC, the federal government, the BC government, the municipalities of Vancouver and Whistler) confirm, through their acceptance of the Hosting Policy, that public investment in the Games is to be associated, in part, with an increase in participation in sport. VANOC's *Legacies Now* initiative represents a partial attempt to meet this obligation.

The Canadian Sport Policy (CSP, 2002) assumes a relationship between excellence and participation. In fact, the Long-Term Athlete Development programme is grounded in this assumed relationship. A number of national sport organizations (NSOs -- federal funding for NSOs assumes compliance with the

Sport Funding and Accountability Framework (SFAF) and CSP) also cite the presumed effects of high performance success on increasing participation in support of requests for increased funding for their high performance programmes. Thus, NSOs that are reluctant to expand participation (for various, possibly overlapping reasons: social exclusion; lack of capacity; or because investment has been made in a high performance talent identification system that is assumed to absolve the NSO from any responsibility for grassroots participation) are in a position of non-compliance with the Canadian sport policy.²

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) followed a number of other international human rights charters in 1994 by recognizing the right to participate in sport: *'The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport in accordance with his or her needs'* (Olympic Charter, Fundamental Principles). National Olympic Committees (NOCs) are governed by the Olympic Charter; the COC is not in compliance with a Fundamental Principle of the Olympic Charter if it is not concerned with 'sport for all', which may be realized, in part, through ensuring a participation legacy from the Vancouver Olympics.

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that any increase in facilities will lead to an increase in participation (however limited that might be). For the 2012 London Olympics some of the facilities have been designed in such a way that they can be dismantled and reassembled in areas of greater need. How this will work in practice remains to be seen. And, just as it is naïve to assume that participation will increase automatically if Canadian athletes win gold medals, it would be naïve to adopt an "if you build it, they will come" strategy."

RECOMMENDATIONS: STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS FOR THE REALIZATION OF A PARTICIPATION LEGACY

The following outlines a series of steps that, based on the evidence available, has a far greater likelihood of ensuring a legacy of increased participation from the Vancouver Olympics / Paralympics than the passive strategy of waiting for spectators to be “inspired.” It may be necessary to provide financial support and / or to ‘encourage’ the various winter Olympic sport NSOs and PSOs to take these steps. However, waiting for citizens to be ‘inspired’ without mobilizing the resources necessary for them to act on that inspiration will result in a wasted opportunity, a failed investment in a major sports event, and a failure of policy.

(1) Survey NSOs and PSOs responsible for Olympic winter sports in order to determine their capacity to incorporate new participants.

The willingness of winter sport organizations to even embrace this notion may vary but, increasing sport participation in Canada depends on the willingness of the organizations to take in new members. Even the sport organizations with limited facilities (i.e., the toboggan / sliding sports, ski jumping, and long track speed skating) should be included in the survey.

(2) Develop an ‘open house’ strategy for all of the Olympic winter sports, to take place during (if possible) and immediately following the Olympics.

Clubs and facilities for **all** of the Olympic winter sports should open to the public to come and try (under appropriately controlled and safe conditions) the sport. Coaches, instructors, athletes, and Olympians (whenever possible) should be present to talk about the sport, and to take people through some basic steps.

We recognize that, for most of the sports, the Olympics will take place close to the end of their seasons – not an ideal time to register new participants. However, it is an ideal time, with the Olympics fresh in people’s minds, to provide an ‘open house’ experience with the sport, and to collect the names and contact

information of those who attend so that they can be informed about the sport and provided with information about forthcoming events, and about participating during the next season.

(3) Major target populations for recruitment include children and youth; low income individuals; aboriginal, ethnocultural and immigrant communities; and, for certain sports, persons with a disability and older individuals approaching retirement or recently retired, who may be looking for a form of physical activity in which they can participate.

Sport Canada is currently targeting aboriginal people and persons with a disability for increased participation. However, given that all Canadians have the potential to be 'inspired' by Olympic performances, and given that many Canadians in addition to aboriginal people and persons with a disability are underserved in terms of opportunities to participate in winter sports, it is important to appeal to as many Canadians as possible when attempting to increase participation.

(4) Major strides may be made toward increasing overall participation in two specific areas:

- A coalition of the skating sports (hockey, figure skating, long- and short-track speed skating) could offer basic "*learn-to-skate*" programmes as a service. The ability to skate is a basic skill required before any of these sports can recruit new participants. Skating may be considered as a fundamental skill for all Canadians, a part of our physical culture that is becoming increasingly difficult to access – schools in many parts of the country are dropping their learn-to-skate programmes, almost all municipalities charge user-fees, and ice-time is increasingly at a premium. Learn-to-skate programmes can be targeted to the populations noted in (3) above, and have a role in developing physically active youth and older populations, and in assisting immigrant communities in integration into

Canadian society. Learn-to-skate programmes not only open the door for potential new participants in several of the winter Olympic sports, but also help to achieve a more healthy active population involved in a number of non-Olympic sports (e.g., precision skating, ringette) and recreational activities (e.g., recreational skating, shinny).

- A coalition of the skiing / boarding sports (Alpine, cross-country, freestyle, ski jumping, snowboarding) could offer basic “*learn-to-ski / board*” programmes as a service. Opportunities to cross country ski are not as regularly available as opportunities to skate for most Canadians because of unreliable snow conditions in some major population centres. Also, opportunities to downhill ski are limited by topography, although there are facilities close to many major population centres. However, as with skating, this is a basic skill required before any of the sports can recruit new participants. Again, this can be considered as a fundamental skill for Canadians, a part of our physical culture that is becoming increasingly difficult to access – few schools have skiing / boarding programmes, and almost all ski / board facilities charge user-fees. However, parks are often free for cross-county skiing, and boarders are often creative in their search for places to participate. Learn-to-ski / board programmes can be targeted to the populations noted in (3) above, and have a role in developing physically active youth and older populations, and in assisting immigrant communities in integration into Canadian society. Learn-to-ski / board programmes also help to take a step towards achieving a more healthy active population involved in recreational activities (e.g., recreational downhill skiing / boarding, and cross-country skiing).

In addition to these:

- Curling is particularly suited to the target populations noted above, and could be an especially relevant and appropriate activity for women who prefer more modest dress codes.

- Bobsleigh / luge / skeleton open houses can help to recruit new participants and ensure full use of the Calgary facilities and the new BC facilities. Similarly, ski jumping at the Thunder Bay, Calgary and new BC facilities; and long track speed skating with the covered facilities in Calgary and BC, and the open-air facilities in Winnipeg could help to recruit new participants and ensure optimum use.

(5) Ensure widespread publicity for the participation initiatives.

The period leading up to the Olympics, and during the Olympics, represent an ideal opportunity to announce the “open house” and “learn-to-skate / ski” programmes. News announcements should be made to indicate that Winter sports NSOs / PSOs, clubs, and facilities across the country are “ready for a rush of new participants;” announcing the appearances of former and current Olympic team members; prominently indicating the times and dates; and making it clear that large numbers of individuals are expected to take the opportunities to try out the sports, to learn to skate / ski, and to become new participants.

Thus, instead of the “unexpected” line-ups of ‘inspired’ young people that have occurred in the past, many of whom have been turned away, and which have not resulted in any noticeable increases in participation, this planned initiative is based precisely on ensuring that capacity and opportunities are available. The news announcements will have a double impact: (a) they will contribute to any momentum in terms of increasing participation initiated by the Olympics; and (b) they will show the public that a legacy of participation is an expected result of hosting the Olympics, and that the Canadian sport system is ready and willing to receive new participants.

(6) Develop a clear subsequent use policy for Olympic facilities, one that includes grassroots participation.

Canada has a rather distorted system of constructing major sports facilities almost exclusively in association with hosting major sports events; and of choosing the site of major sports events on the basis of regional and national political interests. By 2010, Western Canada will have hosted seven major sports events in the past 80 years to Ontario's one (the British Empire Games in 1930). Some of the facilities constructed for those events have not been ideal for subsequent use, and others have been used almost exclusively for professional sports – in both cases these represent a wasted investment of public funds in terms of increasing sport participation.

New facilities should be designed and constructed with multiple uses in mind (more than one sport, if appropriate; and for various levels of participation from novice to high performance), with frequent use in mind, and with green and energy saving principles. Design, location, and future use issues should all be taken into account at the planning stage. Far too often, future use considerations have been limited to professional or high performance sport, and not to adding the facility to the bank of 'sport for all' opportunities for the community.

(7) Develop an evaluation strategy.

Under the terms of the Canadian Sport Policy (2001), and in light of the findings with regard to the Sport Participation Development Projects mentioned in Note 2, every effort should be made to determine the success of participation initiatives introduced in association with the 2010 Vancouver Olympics / Paralympics. Such evaluations become a part of determining the success of the strategies; they provide data for announcements regarding any increases in participation, and for a claimed legacy of the Olympics; they can help to determine if that legacy is lasting; and they help to determine if the strategies need to be amended for future initiatives.

CONCLUSION

There is still time (just) to plan for a legacy of increased participation in sport following the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. The planning can easily become a part of the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) system [now also being referred to as Sport for Life], and reported increases in participation may be pointed to as a successful outcome of the Games, outcomes with a far more lasting legacy than winning more medals than other countries.³ Failure to realize a legacy of increased participation or, even worse, finding as Australia did that the only participation legacy was to produce more spectators and ‘couch potatoes’, will mean that the Olympics have been a failed investment. It will serve to confirm what many Canadians already suspect – that hosting the Olympics is a huge waste of public money.

NOTES

1. Among the various aspects of the Hosting Policy that relate to increasing participation are the following:

- Demonstrated contribution to sport development, including:
 - Links between the bidding/hosting project and the relevant sport(s) Long-Term Athlete Development, strategic and operational plans;
 - Building capacity and increasing interaction for organizations eligible under the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework (SFAF), as the tool used to determine funding under the Sport Support Program;
- Promotion of social, cultural and community benefits, including enhanced voluntarism, active citizenship and civic participation, cultural programs

2. Currently, Sport Canada supports participation initiatives under Sport Participation Development Projects (SPDP). The projects are funded under the Sport Support Program and support NSOs and MSOs in their efforts to increase current participation levels, recruit new participants, and reduce the dropout rates (Sport Canada, 2008). Research results from the first study of this programme cast some doubt on the ability of NSOs to deliver participation initiatives, given their current context of focusing on high performance, and resistance to changes by some organizations (Houston, 2008).

3. See Donnelly (2009/10) and Donnelly (2010) for before and after perspectives on the Vancouver Olympics.

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