

Running Head: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The Nature and Context of Civic Engagement in Sport

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### Abstract

Community-based sport is an important context for voluntary activity in Canada. Sport volunteerism is a form of social citizenship that contributes to the development of strong communities. This paper provides insight into the nature and context of civic engagement in sport by first presenting a profile of community sport volunteers that was derived from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP). Second, the paper reports the results of interviews with 90 community sport volunteers regarding their perceptions of the club environment, and specific issues and challenges with regard to volunteerism. The findings revealed a profile of a “typical” sport volunteer that is fairly unique in comparison to Canadian volunteers in general. Interview participants were concerned about there being too few volunteers to do the work required to sustain or grow their club, and noted the particular challenges in recruiting coaches and executive volunteers. However, they also noted the positive environment for volunteers within the club, including an atmosphere of mutual support.

### The Nature and Context of Civic Engagement in Sport

Volunteerism is an important thread in the social fabric of Canadian society. In 2000, 6.5 million Canadians (27% of the population) gave their time to nonprofit and voluntary organizations (Hall, McKeown, & Roberts, 2001). They contributed over one billion hours, or the equivalent of 549,000 full-time jobs (Hall et al., 2001). Volunteers make possible many of the programs, services, and events we enjoy in our communities. The social benefits of volunteerism include the development of social capital and community cohesion (e.g., Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006). Volunteering is a form of “social citizenship” that involves “active participation in the life of a city” (Body-Gendrot & Gitell, 2003, p. ix). The social capital it engenders refers to “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). The essence of social capital is that we are, individually and collectively, “made more productive by social ties” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Social networks, such as those inherent in organizational volunteering, are defined by and enhance an individual and group sense of mutual obligation, give-and-take, and trust. Strong communities are characterized by strong networks that are nurtured and developed (e.g., Bloom, Grant, & Watt, 2005). According to Bowen (2004), the collective action that is inherent in volunteerism shapes the society in which we live. Indeed, Canadians have a high level of trust in volunteers, and feel that volunteering is “one of the best ways they could improve their community” (Hall, McKechnie, Davidman, & Leslie, 2001, p. 6).

Community-based sport is an important context for voluntary activity in Canada. The local soccer club, the peewee baseball league, the minor hockey association, and so on, are a substantial part of sport and recreation organizations that comprise 21% of all nonprofit and voluntary organizations in Canada; the highest percentage of any volunteer-based sector (Hall et

al., 2004). Community sport organizations are membership-based, nonprofit organizations that have a mandate to provide their members with opportunities to participate in recreational and competitive sport. They are governed by volunteer executive committees or boards that may be elected or appointed. A 2003 roundtable hosted by The Sport Matters Group and the Public Policy Forum concluded that “sport, citizenship and active communities are inexorably linked” (Bowen, 2004, p. 1). Bowen further noted that civic engagement through volunteering in sport nurtures active involvement, governance, and democracy; it may be a model for collective action, especially given the size of the voluntary sport sector and the efficiency with which sport is delivered in communities across the country. It is important, then, to understand the nature and context of this invaluable form of citizen participation. (Sport event volunteerism is another important form of civic engagement in sport, however the focus of the current paper is limited to volunteers involved in formal community sport organizations.)

The purpose of this paper is to present a profile of community sport volunteers in Canada and to describe the perceived issues and challenges that community sport organizations face with regard to volunteerism. It is based on the results of a two-phase study undertaken for Parks and Recreation Ontario and the Sport Alliance of Ontario. The intent of the study was to gain a better understanding of community sport volunteerism in order to ensure effective policies, strategies, and programs are designed to develop and support these individuals who are the backbone of community sport. The long term goal of the project is to sustain, and ultimately increase, the number of volunteers in community sport, thus ensuring the capacity of those organizations to serve their members and communities. Several research questions framed the study: Who volunteers in sport and what do they do? How do sport volunteers become involved, and why? What are barriers to their further involvement? What are volunteers’

perceptions of community sport organization practices and needs with regard to volunteer management?

## Method

### *Phase 1*

In Phase 1 of the study, a profile of sport volunteers was developed based on data extracted from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP). Reports emanating from the 2000 NSGVP have been delimited to the presentation of the broad category of culture and recreation organization volunteers, which includes sport volunteers (e.g., Hall et al., 2001; Lasby & McIver, 2004). However, the 2000 NSGVP asked participants about their involvement in specific types of organizations (e.g., performing arts, historical societies, museums, service clubs, and amateur sport organizations). Thus, it was possible to extract sociodemographic and psychographic data for individuals who indicated they volunteered for at least one *sport* organization in the previous 12-month period. Use of the 2000 NSGVP also permitted a direct comparison between sport volunteers and volunteers in general. The study was somewhat limited because the 2000 NSGVP did not discern individuals who volunteered at the community, provincial or national sport level. Yet, with 71% of all nonprofit sport organizations operating at the community level (Hall et al., 2004) it is reasonable to suggest that the extracted profile of sport volunteers is representative of those at the community level.

### *Phase 2*

In Phase 2 of the study, telephone interviews were conducted with community sport volunteers to determine their perceptions of issues and challenges with regard to volunteerism in sport clubs. This phase was designed to generate a stratified sample of participants that represented some of the diversity in community sport, volunteers, and clubs across Ontario. Key

factors were type of sport (individual and team), size and location of community (small and large, rural and metropolitan, across the province, as determined by current Census Metropolitan Area data from Statistics Canada), and volunteer role (coach, executive/board member, and administrative or other supporting role). The selection of sports was further based on the inclusion of those with a relatively high participation rate (cf. Sport Canada, 1998), sports with clubs in small and large communities across the province, a balance of sports played by males and females, and sports that rely primarily if not exclusively on volunteers. Eight sports were included on this basis: badminton, basketball, curling, hockey, soccer, track and field, and volleyball. Using the stratified sampling framework, a list of potential telephone interview participants was developed. Sport clubs were identified through their provincial sport organization and the internet. The contact person for each club was approached by e-mail or telephone and asked to provide a list of club volunteers, noting their role(s) in the club. Typically, the club contact person asked each volunteer about their willingness to be involved, and then provided those names and telephone contact information.

The final interview sample comprised 90 volunteers representing 49 clubs in the 8 sports, from 19 small and large communities across Ontario. Most of the interview participants were executive or board volunteers (42%, n=38), 14.5% (n=13) were coaches, 14.5% (n=13) were club administrators, and 29% (n=26) were both executive volunteers and coaches. Together, 43.5% of the interview participants were coaches, and 71% were executive volunteers, with several serving both roles.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed for the study to measure their perceptions about what their club does, and should do, for volunteer recruitment, training, support, evaluation, recognition, and retention. With the participants' permission, each of the

interviews was audio-recorded. Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were reviewed in full, and responses were grouped and tallied according to a priori categories or themes based on volunteer management practices and needs. The focus of this paper is the particular issues and challenges in the context of civic engagement in sport. These findings are presented along with supporting quotes from the interview participants.

## Findings

### *Sport Volunteer Profile*

From the 2000 NSGVP it is estimated that 1.17 million Canadians volunteered in organized sport. That represents 1 in 20 Canadians or 5% of the population, and 18% of the 6.5 million Canadians who volunteered in formal organizations. This makes sport one of the largest voluntary sectors in Canada (cf. Hall et al., 2001). A profile of the “typical” sport volunteer emerged from the 2000 NSGVP data, based on a relatively large proportion of individuals with certain demographic characteristics. The Canadian sport volunteer is most likely male (64%), 35-44 years old (41%, average 38 years), a college or university graduate (53%), and married (73%), with dependents under the age of 18 living at home (62%). He is most likely engaged in the labour force (84%), on a full time basis (82%), with a household income of \$60,000-99,000 (43%, average \$73,000). In comparison to sport volunteers, Canadian volunteers in general are more likely to be female (56%), older (42% are 45 years or older), less likely to be employed (67%), and have a lower household income (39% less than \$40,000) (Hall et al., 2001).

Most sport volunteers (62%) are involved in two or more organizations, in both the sport and non-sport setting. On average, each sport volunteer contributes 189 hours per year to the various organizations with which he or she is involved and, on average, 143 hours per year to

sport. This equates to 167 million hours, or 87,000 full-time positions in sport based on a 40 hour work week for 48 weeks (Hall et al., 2001). In contrast, most Canadian volunteers in general (59%) are involved in only one organization. Not surprisingly, then, they contribute fewer hours than sport volunteers overall, averaging 162 hours per year (Hall et al., 2001). Sport volunteers are most likely engaged in organizing and supervising activities and events (71%), and teaching or coaching (60%). Just less than half are involved in a committee or board role (46%) or in fundraising activities (45%). Most sport volunteers take on multiple roles including, in addition to these activities, administrative work (32%), driving (27%), and “other” (16%). Similar proportions of volunteers in general are involved in committee work (41%) and fundraising (40%), however fewer are involved in supervising activities and events (57%) and teaching or coaching (27%) (Hall et al., 2001).

The psychographic profile of sport volunteers that emerged from the 2000 NSGVP revealed that most sport volunteers are involved to help a cause in which they believe (94%), to use their skills and experiences to help the organization’s cause (87%), and because someone they know, such as a child or partner, is personally affected by the organization or its activities (76%). Relatively smaller proportions of sport volunteers are involved to explore their own strengths (57%), because they have friends who volunteer (30%), and to improve job opportunities (24%). Sport volunteers are quite similar to volunteers in general with regard to reasons for being involved, with the exception that a slightly smaller proportion of the latter group are involved because someone they know is personally affected (69%). This difference may be explained by the observation that, when asked how they first became involved in volunteering, the most common reason for sport volunteers was because their children were

involved in the sport (40%). In contrast, only 12% of volunteers in general indicated that they first became involved through their children (Hall et al., 2001).

The 2000 NSGVP also asked volunteers what keeps them from doing more. For sport volunteers, the most common barrier to increased involvement was lack of time (82%). The next most common, but far less salient, barriers were feeling like they had already contributed enough (33%) and not wanting to make a year round commitment (30%). A further one-fifth of sport volunteers (20%) indicated they give money instead of extra time. The only notable difference between sport volunteers and volunteers in general was lack of extra time, which was a barrier for a slightly lesser proportion of that latter group (76%) (Hall et al., 2001).

#### *The Context of Civic Engagement in Sport*

Through the interviews, community sport volunteers described the environment of sport volunteerism. At the outset they consistently indicated that there are not enough volunteers for the work to be done (60%). Of those who said their club does have enough volunteers, many conveyed that, “we could always do with more.” There was also a sense that, “there’s enough volunteers. Do they do enough or volunteer enough? That’s another story.” It was consistently noted that a lot of the work is being done by a few individuals. Not only is this “draining on people,” it means that the clubs are struggling just to meet their obligations and are restricted from doing more or different things (including fundraising) because of limited volunteer resources. Interview participants particularly noted a lack of executive or board volunteers (42%):

“You can get people to do odds and ends, but getting someone to step in and take on a planning role for a couple years is hard to get. That is the critical part that really keeps the organization going in the right direction.”

Also in demand are coaches (29%) and volunteers with specific skills (e.g., accounting, website management). In fact, interview participants identified key challenges in the future as getting enough volunteers to do the existing work, and for the club to grow (34%). More specifically, they felt the focus should be on getting volunteers who can commit to the time requirements and can be trusted to follow through on their responsibilities (21%), getting qualified and quality volunteers (18%), as well as younger volunteers, true “volunteers” who are involved for others rather than themselves or their kids, and new volunteers with fresh ideas (total 25%).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of interview participants (69%) indicated that their club has at least some difficulty getting volunteers; particularly coaches (36%), executive volunteers (31%), and formal administrative roles such as league convenor or referee coordinator (21%). These represent roles with more consistent and heavy time commitments, and also those that require some expertise. More specifically, interview participants primarily attributed the difficulty attracting coaches to people (mostly parents) feeling they do not have the technical skills to coach or ability to work with a group of children or youth of a given age. Notably, the participants indicated that it is difficult for the club to find people who do have the requisite skills. These sentiments are reflected in the following quotes:

“People feel if they don’t have the background they can’t get involved.”

“People aren’t comfortable with the technical side of it. . . People don’t know the game.”

“Part of it is lack of expertise of individuals for subject matter. . .Its not just skills in the sport, its also the skills in dealing with individuals of that age. Its not just every individual that can come along and start relating to these kids.”

The heavy time commitment involved in coaching was cited as a relatively less notable barrier to recruiting volunteers. It was, however, the most common reason given for the difficulty

recruiting executive volunteers, and specifically the heavy amount of work right off the bat. Other key reasons included the heavy, regular time commitment, not working directly with children but being more in the background, the politics involved in running a club, and too few volunteers for the amount of work to be done. As one participant noted,

“It’s a larger commitment [and] its less direct in terms of involvement with the kids, there’s more background work. . . I know there’s a lot of time in meetings and I think its sometimes tougher to attract those kinds of people.”

The interview participants also acknowledged that the difficulty recruiting volunteers in general is because of conflict with family obligations and activities, and conflict with work.

In contrast, the vast majority of interview participants (89%) noted that their club has no difficulty keeping volunteers. The consistent sentiment was that, “once you are there, people are willing to carry on,” at least for a reasonable period of time. The typical commitment of club volunteers was described as four to six years, which tends to coincide with the length of time that one’s child is involved in the club. This was deemed to be a satisfactory, and hoped for, volunteer commitment. Indeed, the most common reason given why volunteers leave is because their child is no longer involved in the club (36%). Thus, interview participants deemed volunteer recruitment to be more challenging than volunteer retention, given the accepted expectation that volunteers will only stay as long as their child is involved. As one participant noted, “It is not bad after you get them. It is just getting them.”

The interview participants commonly perceived that, once volunteers are in the clubs, they are quite clear about their role expectations (76%). This was attributed to their initial orientation to the club, formalization within the club in terms of a constitution, policies and procedures, and position descriptions, and regular meetings. It was also consistently noted that

there is good support for volunteers in the clubs (97%), which was described as providing help for coaches (51%; e.g., dealing with athlete registration and competition entries, booking facilities and referees, providing resources and updates from the provincial association), volunteers helping each other (48%; e.g., other volunteers picking up the slack, coaches helping each other out), and support from the club president and executive members (46%; e.g., open communication within the club, executive volunteers are at the field, board helps deal with parents). The large majority of interview participants (85%) also noted that their club formally recognizes volunteers in some way, mostly in the form of a volunteer appreciation night and/or year end banquet where volunteers are thanked (55%). Other mechanisms include special volunteer awards (36%; e.g., club coach of the year, volunteer of the year, award of merit), and club clothing or a gift (28%). Interestingly, almost half (48%) felt their club should be doing something more to recognize their volunteers, not necessarily at great expense but at least demonstrating some thought and planning to reflect the club's appreciation for its volunteers.

Ultimately, interview participants were asked to describe the “best thing(s)” and “worst thing(s)” about volunteering with their club. For most, it was working with kids (32%; 87% of whom were coaches), and helping kids by providing a good experience in a positive activity (30%; 77% of whom were executive volunteers). This is reflected in the following quote:

“Working with kids. . . I like the interaction with the kids. You feel like you belong, and the kids, really, a lot of these kids need that kind of thing and when you see that we make a difference to them, you know a lot of these kids don't have much, and you see the kind of input or impact even that you might have on these kids, its really rewarding.”

Other “best things” noted, especially for executive volunteers, were the good people involved (16%) and a positive work environment (18%). As a few participants indicated:

“We have some of the best people to work with. We have terrific coaches. Our executive [is] terrific. They work their hearts out.”

“I think the best thing I get out of it is when I actually see people also doing, willing, and wanting to volunteer.”

“It’s a good group of people that I work with, and the cooperation that you get.”

According to the interview participants, the “worst things” about volunteering for their club were the time commitment involved (31%), dealing with parents (25%), as well as the lack of volunteers to do the work and volunteers who do not carry through on their commitments (13%). Interestingly, of those who noted the, sometimes overwhelming, time commitment, many indicated that the problem would be alleviated with help from more volunteers.

In summary, the volunteers who participated in the interviews found a lack of volunteers and recruiting enough good volunteers to be the key challenges in the context of community sport clubs. They were generally satisfied with how volunteers are looked after once they are involved, and with the length of time volunteers stay on board.

## Discussion

A discussion paper prepared for the Sport Matters Group (Jurbala, 2006) suggests that we must move “towards a new understanding of sport and the voluntary sector” (p. 11). Beyond the economic impact of sport on health care and the cultural impact of our Olympians, we need to consider the role of the “vast, indispensable, yet often overlooked, social machinery” that is the voluntary sport sector (Jurbala, 2006, p. 11); a role that “gives a unique insight into what it means to be Canadian” (Jurbala, 2006, p. 11). Sport is indeed an important context for voluntary activity. Sport volunteers teach and coach in our communities, and they organize and supervise recreational and competitive sport programs, leagues and events for children, youth and adults.

According to the findings of this study, they contribute a substantial number of hours to this; more than volunteers in general, on average. They volunteer in sport “with” others, rather than just “for” others; a condition which is fundamental for building social capital (Putnam, 2000). Sport volunteers work with other coaches, other executive members, and other volunteers in the club. In fact, a notable aspect of the community sport organization environment is the support that volunteers reportedly provide each other, suggesting a culture of “pitching in.” This collective action is the epitome of the type of “connections among individuals” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19) that strengthen a community (cf. Bowen, 2004).

The findings enhance our understanding of the nature of sport volunteerism, while highlighting a number of issues that seem to compromise the potential of sport as a site for civic engagement, collective action, and further community development. The sport volunteer profile describes a fairly unique group of volunteers that make a solid contribution in terms of the relative numbers of people involved, and hours contributed. However, it also indicates a fairly narrow profile which, by extension, highlights who is less likely to be involved in sport volunteering: for example, women, and younger (less than 35 years) and older individuals (more than 45 years). This may reflect a narrow “recruitment niche” (Nichols & King, 1999) that not only constrains the ability of community clubs to expand their volunteer base, but also limits the opportunity for others to become engaged in the community through service to sport. Furthermore, the potential impact of interpersonal relations and social networks may be restricted when a group has a narrow versus a more diverse makeup (cf. Weiner, 1997). Wider recruitment could include individuals who are not typically involved in sport volunteering but who may be particularly motivated to support a cause such as community sport, to use their skills and experiences in sport to help an organization, and/or to get involved because someone they

know – a friend, partner, or grandchild – is involved. It seems plausible that women and younger and older individuals, for example, who are currently underrepresented as sport volunteers, may have these same reasons for getting involved. It is important to further understand why they are underrepresented in sport, and whether certain characteristics (e.g., gender, lower education, no dependents) reflect barriers to their involvement.

The large voluntary sport sector may indeed define what it is to be Canadian (cf. Jurbala, 2006); to be an “active participant in the life of a city” (Body-Gendrot & Gitell, 2003, p. ix), by volunteering “with” others (Putnam, 2000). Directions for future research include examining more specifically the nature and meaning of social networks created through sport volunteerism, as well as their further impact on the individuals in those networks, their sport organizations, and the community at large.

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