

Observations and Reflections from Key Informant Interviews

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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September 21, 2009

INTRODUCTION

In June and July 2009, the research team engaged by the Canadian Team Sports Coalition conducted interviews with 17 key informants, many of whom were well-respected, senior Canadian sport leaders. These interviews were one component of a larger research project focusing on the value and benefits of team sports in Canada. These interviews were comprehensive and yielded rich insights into the unique realities that team sports face in this country. During the interviews, these leaders were inspired to think about what a world-leading team sport nation would look like, and were invited to provide suggestions into how best to achieve that distinction. As one key informant queried: *“I wonder what our system would look like if we asked ourselves ‘What is the most optimal training environment for the player and how does it contribute to high performance team sport in Canada?’”* This brief captures some of the highlights of these interviews.

ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Clarification of mandates:

The role and relationships between and among National Sport Organizations (NSOs), Provincial and Territorial Sport Organizations (PTSOs) and local organizations, as well as the relationship between and among governments across all levels, must be better understood. Having a clear sense of an NSO’s mandate and that of its partners will better enable a team sport to leverage existing assets. For instance, one sport leader suggested that: *“NSOs have not for the most part identified their mandates. They have a mission and vision statement and if we’re lucky, a statement of values. But they have not taken stock of their mandate. One immediate benefit will be to clarify issues related to governance.”*

Integrated governance plan:

Each NSO needs to have a strong governance system in place that links directly to the PTSO and Club levels and to the organization’s members. A few team sport NSOs in Canada, such as hockey and soccer, have successfully created this type of national membership structure through their governance models. The governance systems for the remaining team sport NSOs are varied and in many cases disjointed, with the result being that the sport is unable to be unified in pursuit of national objectives. A handful of NSOs have addressed this problem by drafting Memoranda of Understanding between the national office and provincial/territorial partners. This approach offers an alternative opportunity (outside of wholesale governance reform) to create shared understanding, align objectives, and engage members to work towards a shared purpose. It also makes it possible to accommodate different levels of organizational capacity that exist across provinces and territories. When asked what needed to be done in order for team sport organizations to be successful in the governance area, one key informant had the following to share:

“We will be successful when there is a strong PSO alignment within the NSO’s overall vision for the sport. The driving force would be a national plan that clearly articulates the partners’ roles in achieving a collective vision”.

International comparisons:

Knowing what other countries are doing, and what their plans and budgets are, would provide Canadian team sports with critical information related to emergent practices, exemplars, and pathways to avoid. Presently, we do no formal intelligence gathering in this area.

Long-term system development:

Currently, most team sport NSOs in Canada are focusing on investment at the high-performance level because the pursuit of international results is the only way to garner more financial support from national funding partners. However, this is a short-term response that will not generate sustainable outcomes. Investment in the top of the pyramid at the expense of investment in the broad base of the sport is not a wise long-term plan. Team sport organizations urged to coordinate their leadership efforts to create a plan for their sport in Canada that engages all partners and is based on the principles of LTAD. Some sports may benefit from the following strategic, yet simple, observation by one of the interviewees: *“... the focus should be on the development stages to ensure that the base is solid before we shoot for more specific high performance objectives.”*

FUNDING

Additional funding is required:

Said one sport leader *“We need to invest; we need to invest strategically with first those team sports we truly value as a country. Part of our problem and lack of success is because we are not funding what we value. By not doing that you don't get people interested enough to participate. As a country, we value team sports - it's where we are in our communities. The current system is preventing team sports from winning - the system needs to intentionally fund team sport in order to improve our performance and recognize and reap the benefits that team sports have to offer”.* It was widely acknowledged in the interviews that there is a funding gap. As revealed by the Full Team Ahead report, team sports are far more popular, they engage far more members and participants, and they produce significantly more economic benefit than individual sports, yet they are funded to a lesser degree.

Determining the “true” value of team sport:

The positive benefits of team sport go far beyond the field and, therefore, measuring the value of participation, community involvement, volunteerism, and viewership must be considered when funding team sports. The system needs to align with what Canadians deem important. *“If you step back and take a snapshot of what Canadians value by analyzing the participation numbers, our infrastructure, the sports that are played in our schools, viewership ... you will very quickly isolate certain team sports. This does not mean that you don't support the other team sports but you support them differently.”* Said another: *“I don't support the idea of only funding sports that are medal potential - it creates a gap between sports that are performing and those that aren't. It takes away the hope that kids have of someday playing for a national team. What kind of message does this send to the coaches of these teams?”*

Creating a new funding framework for team sports:

The framework used by Sport Canada to fund sport should take into account the needs and realities of team sport. For instance, a team medal should be valued differently and funders should recognize the

significant financial, logistical and scheduling challenges that team sports need to overcome to place amongst the world's best. Team sports are evaluated for funding using the same policies and formulas that are used for individual sports. The majority of those leaders interviewed asserted that team sports needed to be viewed through their own lens, and that national funding partners must recognize the unique challenges that they face.

Additional sources of revenue:

Currently most team sport NSOs are limited in their fundraising and marketing ability because they do not have direct access to their members through their governance frameworks and membership structures. This can only be corrected through significant governance changes, which would require political will and a sustained effort on the part of the leadership of these organizations. That being said, one key informant indicated that: *"The [NSOs] of mass participation sports need to get on the ball and create additional sources of revenue. They have such potential to self generate funds without relying on government support."*

COMMITMENT TO LONG TERM ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

LTAD needs to be implemented taking into account the ages and stages of athletes especially at the L2T, T2T, and T2W stages:

Those interviewed acknowledged that team sport lags behind individual sport in terms of the implementation of LTAD. Each team sport NSO must not only design their athlete development pathway, but also ensure that it is supported across all levels of the sport and implemented appropriately - especially at the key stages. This implementation will require the support of provincial/territorial partners, clubs, parents, coaches, schools, colleges, universities, educators, and funders at all levels. A comprehensive, coordinated, and connected strategy that takes into the principles of Canadian Sport For Life (CS4L) is a foundational first step for many of the team sport NSOs. Said one key informant: *"Much of team sport athlete development is not yet in synch with the principles of LTAD (i.e. ratio of skill development/training to competition is the reverse of what it should be in several sports). Changing these things will take time and lots of commitment from the sport's technical leaders."* Implementation of these strategies is not without its challenges and team sports are encouraged to search out exemplars to gain support and build momentum as they work towards achieving sustainable change.

Early specialization should be avoided:

Clearly, the significant benefits of team sports provide young athletes with the opportunity to learn valuable skills that can be applied outside sport. As the engine that drives physical literacy (due to the large number of participants at the community level), team sports have a unique opportunity to ensure that their programs are structured according to the CS4L principles – especially at the Active Start and FUNdamental stages. However, it should be noted that there is mounting pressure, especially at the community sport level, for young athletes to focus on the 'we' when their young minds are more inclined to think about the 'me'. As one key informant queried: *"Is there a way for team sports to build a solid 'me' so you can be a better 'we' player? If you do both team and individual sports you develop a much better athlete. Each has what the other doesn't. They are the perfect foil for the other. In team sports you're always playing against another team so your ability to develop core competencies is sometimes limited or lost for the good of the team. You hear individual athletes speak about achieving their personal best. In team sports, we don't speak about personal best. Individual athletes have that training and background and they bring that lens and philosophy and work ethic to a team environment and it shows. The benefit of early individual sport training enhances the team sport experience and more should be done to allow that transfer to occur. Go to a*

daycare and observe kids playing. What they are doing in fact is playing in parallel. And they each have their own toy. This is precisely what young athletes below age 9 are doing in team sports except there is only one toy. They are geared and wired to play in parallel and we are focusing on having them develop cognitive skills that they are just not hard-wired to have at that young age, rather than capitalize on the window of trainability that maximizes their interest and ability.”

Promote multi-sport clubs – enhancing the first sport experience for young athletes:

Flowing from the previous recommendation, it was suggested that alliances could be forged amongst team sport and individual sport, allowing different sports to offer a meaningful blended sport experience that allows the young athlete to maximize their full athletic potential during formative years. For instance, one sport leader shared his thoughts on how this might play out: *“I like the Sport 4 All concept whereby many sports are bundled to allow young people to experience a full range of sports rather than early specialization in a select few. For instance, at the L2T stage, team sports could collaborate on a talent identification program where multiple team sports are offered to young athletes – specialization comes later especially in team sports. The skills are transferable and would produce a better overall team sport athlete.”*

Back to basics – creating an Active Start and Sport for Life continuum:

Reclaiming our parks and green spaces with unstructured team play was a recurring theme in the interviews, as evidenced by this quote: *“Our parks stand empty and yet we have everything we need. We have the infrastructure in place with ball diamonds, soccer pitches, and football fields. We have schools that are built around team sports. It’s the will that is missing - we need to look at it from a different perspective. It’s our paradigm shift.”* Engaging municipalities in a discussion about how to attract more people to parks through loosely structured team sport activity is one strategy that would make better use of existing spaces. By providing the necessary equipment through community centres and schools, municipalities could fill their parks, generate social capital by inviting neighbours to play together, and break down barriers to participation.

Gaps in the athlete development pathway:

Some of the key informants suggested that the biggest gaps existed in the T2T and T2W stages, as this is when kids begin to drop out of sport. As one sport leader suggested: *“The moment that kids don’t make the team, they will most likely stop playing and if we’re lucky transfer to an individual sport where the opportunities to play are greater. The reality is for these kids is that if they are cut at this age, they move on. There needs to be a ‘repechage’ system for team sports that provide an opportunity for a greater pool of kids to compete, train, and stay involved in meaningful competition. The greater the numbers involved, the greater the pool of talent to choose from.”*

ENGAGE SCHOOLS

School Sports Strategy:

It was suggested by numerous sport leaders that team sports rely significantly on the school system to develop and train players. At the moment however, high performance team sport athletes are developed *“in spite of the school system we currently have and not as a by-product of it.”* Many went so far as to suggest an overhaul of the current school sport system with a view to develop a comprehensive, long-term, integrated strategy connecting school sports (including team sport at the college and university level) to PTSOs and NSOs in a more structured and aligned way. This could involve the creation of an “excellence stream” within school sports. The following remarks were echoed by many sport leaders: *“One of the most important steps required to enhance our overall team sports strategy is to have university (and college)*

sport align within the Canadian sport system. They (universities and colleges) need to develop and then implement LTAD with guidance and support from the PSOs and NSOs.” Said another: “For the most part, the NSOs haven’t made an effort to establish a relationship with school sports. One has to wonder what the impact would be if school sports were included as a critical component of each NSO’s LTAD.”

Engaging colleges and universities:

Colleges and universities have infrastructure in the form of facilities and organizational networks, personnel in the form of paid coaches and sport administrators, and participants in large numbers, yet do not engage with the Canadian sport system. It was suggested that there is currently an opportunity and a need for schools at all levels to become a driving force behind a team sport strategy. In order to do so, there has to be willingness on their part to embrace the concept of high performance and to put a premium on athlete development. For instance, if colleges and universities targeted a limited number of sports and saw themselves as the locus for developing high performance team sports athletes, Canada would be able to retain and recruit athletes and coaches that would begin to raise the bar both domestically and internationally. If sport schools emerged at the high school level that contributed to the LTAD pathway for upcoming high performance athletes, and directed them to colleges and universities, then the bar would also be raised. *“The CIS and CCAA in particular have a tremendous opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the LTAD pathway. That being said, schools in general are not contributing to the LTAD continuum and I’m not sure they are heading in that direction.”* Said another: *“Ideally, university and college sport contributes to the team sports experience in a meaningful way. We need a finishing school that will provide national team athletes with meaningful competition that enhances their daily training environment. Universities and colleges could be providing the competition these athletes need to support the NSO’s high performance objective by seeing themselves as part of the NSO’s LTAD pathway. They could be seen as an important gateway for athletes to future professional or national teams. School sports could play a pivotal role in the athlete’s high performance pathway.”*

TRAINING FACILITIES

Team sport requires national and international training centres to optimize performance:

Sport leaders interviewed suggested that many good resources are currently being wasted through overlap and duplication. A *“training centre for team sports”* will help NSOs leverage the different assets they each bring to the table by providing athletes, coaches, sport science and support staff with professional services. Many team sports can be grouped around the facility infrastructure they require – fields, gyms and ice surfaces – and if brought together there could be significant economies of scale as well as synergies. Such a facility or facilities would also provide the opportunity for corporate Canada to invest in something tangible. As one sport leader suggested: *“A high performance training centre will generate a ripple effect from the highest level of sport to community sport. If I were an athlete, I would want to get to Canada’s training centre.”* From an international sport perspective, hosting semi-annual team sport training camps in Europe would provide Canadian athletes with the best of both worlds – access to meaningful competition and training within a Canadian team environment with minimal disruptions and travel. As another key informant suggested: *“Perhaps we focus on developing a European training base and do a yearly training camp out of Europe. Perhaps we guide our athletes to a European team that has shared approaches and philosophies based on what’s best for the athlete and look for ways to use the system more efficiently and effectively.”*

INCREASE THE VALUE OF TEAM SPORTS

Increase the value proposition of team sports:

There were many suggestions for increasing the value proposition of team sport. Those given the highest priority include developing a comprehensive communications strategy that generates common messaging amongst team sports and builds a platform to articulate the benefits team sports provide to Canadian society; investment in Sport Canada's team sports strategy; development of a team sports strategy for schools; and a focus on development and implementation of team sports' LTAD plans.

Re-think the value of a medal:

It was suggested by numerous sport leaders that there is a built-in inequity in how Canada currently measures the value of a team sport medal. *"We should recognize the value of a team sports medal. How we reward and recognize performance in team sports and the formula associated with that, should be reviewed and be more reflective of what it takes to get create a successful team sport environment."* It is interesting to note that in Australia, team sport medals are recognized differently and are rewarded according to the actual number of players on the team who receive a medal, versus the single medal awarded to the team as a whole.

Measuring success:

Many sport leaders suggested that if Canada is serious about investing in team sport then we need to re-evaluate how we measure success. For instance, the Canadian Olympic Committee and Canadian Paralympic Committee could include a team sport medal when setting their high performance objectives at the Games, rather than just targeting a set number of medals. It was suggested that team sport should be valued for the incredible contribution they make to Canadian sport overall: the entire sport system is driven by community sport and community sport is driven by team sport.

ENHANCE COACHING

Remuneration:

One significant difference between team and individual sports is that team sports are often volunteer-coached while individual sports typically have paid instructors and coaches. Many key informants suggested that the issue of remuneration affects accessibility and quality of the coaching experience. For instance: *"[Through government funding] we are actually rewarding sports that are often less accessible, they have paid coaches thus the costs are usually higher to participate, even though their numbers are far less than team sports. The funders expect that volunteers will continue to provide 'free' coaching and instruction for team sports and this is part of the problem. In order to have high performance athletes we need high performance coaches at all levels of the system. While this can be done as a volunteer, it's much harder to recruit and retain highly competent and qualified volunteer coaches than it is remunerated coaches."*

World class coaching:

It was noted by many key informants that there is a dearth of quality coaches in team sports, especially at the L2T and the T2T stages of LTAD. From an NSO perspective, it begins with having competent technical leaders on staff that understand and recognize the need for quality coaching in support of LTAD. Not only would this begin to enhance the quality of the daily training environment, but also it would lay the foundation for many of the other recommendations relating to athlete development to bear fruit. As coaches are in positions of leadership and are often at the hub of the sport experience, an increase in the quality

and competence of coaches for team sports would generate momentum for the changes that need to occur in order for team sports to meet their full potential.

COMPETITIVE OPPORTUNITIES

Create meaningful competition for team sports:

Sport leaders spoke about the high cost of operating a first class high performance program for team sports. They also discussed the issue of not having access to professional or semi-pro leagues in Canada (other than hockey) ... and only on a limited basis for soccer, baseball, and football. For most team sport athletes, this leaves them with little or no choice but to leave the country to continue their development. *“Young people who are talented have no place to go to in Canada except for those that are aspiring hockey players. So many head to Europe or the US where they are provided with competitive opportunities. We need to be creative in enabling better competitive opportunities with the ‘right’ international teams.”* It is important to note that providing meaningful competition does not call for a cookie cutter approach. Each sport needs to be assessed to determine what meaningful competition is to them. For some sports it might be strengthening the school system; for others it might be to participate in national leagues or to compete across the US border; and for others it might be to head to Europe for competition.

National leagues:

Some key informants indicated that national leagues are an important part of a high performance system and that Canada has very few, excluding hockey, that function optimally. Stated one informant: *“For this to happen you need vertical alignment of NSO/ PSOs/Clubs who are all sharing in a pathway of excellence that includes schools as well. This then creates a targeted athlete pathway where sport, not just hockey, but sport, gets ‘in the blood’.”*

Master Hosting Plan for team sports:

A dedicated team sport hosting program specifically to assist team sport organizations to host events leading up to the Olympic and Paralympic Games and World Championships was suggested by some of those interviewed. It was conveyed in interviews that research has indicated that host teams tend to perform better at major games and championships and as such, a commitment to host team sport competitions can lead to improved performance in the future.

CONCLUSION

Team sport will only be in a position to meet public expectations if the Canadian sport system commits to a long-term strategy that takes into account the unique requirements and realities that team sport faces in this country. Sport Canada has recently developed a *Summer Team Sport Strategy* that identifies some of the steps required for summer team sports to succeed. This strategy has also identified possible actions that Sport Canada can pursue to better support summer team sports, including: targeting summer team sports for enhanced support, facilitating improvements in NSO management structures and governance, better aligning hosting programs and athlete assistance programs, supporting national leagues where appropriate, and seeking commitments from other organizations such as the Coaching Association of Canada and the Canada Games Council.

Many of the sport leaders interviewed believed that there are serious funding concerns in relation to team sports. It is interesting to examine the extent to which team sports are funded by Sport Canada. An examination of the most recent published contributions data (2007-2008 year) using Sport Canada’s own

definition of team sport as set out in its *Summer Team Sport Strategy*, reveals the following: team sports represented 15 out of 53 funded NSOs that year, or 28 percent, and they received 27 percent of the funding that was directed to NSOs. At first glance this might suggest that there was equity in funding, however, such analysis ignores the fact that team sports are vastly more popular and engage far more participants than individual sports. This is clearly a case of *equal* not being the same as *equitable*.

It is also notable that of all the contributions that funding year (excluding funding to VANOC, which is not included in the published contributions list), Sport Canada's contributions to team sport were just 17 percent of its total contributions, whereas its contributions to individual sport represented 46 percent of the total. The balance of the contributions, or 37 percent, went to organizations that did not distinguish between team and individual sports, such as multi-sport organizations, Games organizations and Canadian Sport Centres. It is widely perceived that this contribution of 17 percent represents a significant disparity, given the popularity, participation rates, membership numbers and extensive personal, social, community and economic benefits of team sport.

However, increased funding is not the only commitment required to ensure that team sport achieves its full potential. As one sport leader suggested "*It's not only a question of more money, but a better use of existing money.*" For instance, effective implementation of long-term player development within team sport is a critical component to achieve, maintain, and sustain high performance results. It is also widely acknowledged that team sports face unique challenges, as they are not necessarily a homogeneous group. While some obstacles can be addressed through funding, partnerships and alliances, many more will require a more targeted approach to determine the best path forward.

It is recommended that the contents of this brief, supported by the other documents emanating from this research project, form the basis of a more structured analysis and consultation that would lead to the development of specific recommendations for strengthening team sport in Canada and securing its rightful, prominent place within the overall sport system. The Canadian Team Sports Coalition is encouraged to develop and put forward these recommendations as part of a longer-term strategy, or a 'game plan' of sorts, for team sport in Canada.