

Full Team Ahead: The Benefits of Team Sport to Canadian Sport

A report prepared for the Canadian Team Sports Coalition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dina Bell-Laroche, Rachel Corbett and Kevin Lawrie

September 21, 2009

Full Team Ahead: The Benefits of Team Sport to Canadian Sport was prepared for the Canadian Team Sports Coalition by an independent research team. The team's purpose was to research and document the potential contributions and unique benefits of team sport. The review of literature revealed the following:

The most popular sports in Canada are overwhelmingly team sports. Although research shows that the participation rates for team sport and individual sport are roughly the same, involvement in other areas (volunteering, attending) is markedly different. In 2004, approximately 24 million adult Canadians were involved in team sport, while approximately 10 million, or less than half, were involved in individual sport.

The long-term physical development of children begins with team sport. Team sport dominates the agenda for active children in Canada. Team sports are a child's first exposure to organized sport and this trend continues into adulthood with the five most popular sports among adults being team sports. Thus, team sport is viewed as a fundamental contributor to athlete development. It fulfills this role by generating physical literacy that is then transferable to many different sport and physical activities.

Team sport teaches life lessons that extend beyond the field of play. By bringing together different people to work together towards a shared objective, team sport participation offers a social dimension not available through individual sport participation. Research supports the position that team sport develops unique personal characteristics in individuals, which translate into enhanced community and societal benefits.

Team sport develops a certain kind of leadership. It is widely known that athletes have stronger leadership skills than non-athletes. Literature also strongly suggests that team sport participation hones these skills to a far greater degree. The skills developed in the team sport setting by both athletes and coaches – namely, skills in communication, relationship management, conflict resolution, group decision-making, and the ability to focus on the pursuit of a common goal – are skills that are widely applicable beyond sport.

The sport tourism industry is driven by team sport. While there have been no studies comparing the economic impact of team sports as distinct from individual sports, there is a strong argument that the sheer popularity of team sports (in terms of participants, volunteers and attendees, who together spend the money that fuels the economic engine associated with sporting activities) ensures that the vast majority of sport's economic impact flows from team sports.

Team sport transforms a crowd into a community. There is no dispute that sport participation helps to shape our national and cultural identity. There is abundant anecdotal evidence that team sport success is a powerful source of national pride. There have also been studies of the psychological and social dimensions of supporting and identifying with a sports team. Notably, in a national poll to determine which sport images will be featured on 2010 Olympic coins, Canadians voted the Canadian men's hockey victory in the 2002 Winter Olympics as the most memorable Winter Olympic moment, followed by the Canadian women's hockey victory the same year. These team sport victories clearly had a powerful and lasting impact on the nation's psyche.

The literature review for *Full Team Ahead* was supplemented by two further research components: a survey of athletes, and structured interviews with 17 distinguished Canadian sport leaders. The findings from these two inquiries are summarized in separate briefs. Athletes and sport leaders shared insightful perspectives on the importance and value of team sports and corroborated many of the findings noted above.

In terms of the importance of team sport to the athlete development pathway, it is notable that nearly nine of ten athletes, regardless of their current sport, participated in team sports as part of their development, and seven of ten athletes said that participation in team sport was *very important* to their athletic development. A further two of ten said that participation in team sport was *somewhat important*. This speaks powerfully to the notion that team sport is a foundation from which future elite athletes emerge.

In the course of carrying out this project, it became apparent that there are wide gaps in the research literature. While we know that team sports are more popular, we don't know why. Research on the economic impact of sport does not distinguish team sports from individual sports. There is no research as to whether participation in team sports is more or less likely, than participation in individual sports, to lead to later involvement and engagement in sport in other roles (as a coach, official, administrator or volunteer). It would also be interesting to more formally evaluate the role and impact of team sport within the Canadian Sport For Life framework. A third brief sets out a proposed research agenda for team sports and suggests some research questions to address these gaps in the scholarly literature.

This project was not intended to diminish the value of individual sport or to create divisions within the sport community. However, it is widely acknowledged that team sport *is* different; that achieving international success in team sports presents unique technical, logistical and funding challenges; and that team sport deserves to be viewed through its own lens.

Ideally, this project will set the stage for continuing discussion on how team sport in Canada is studied, funded, evaluated and supported. It is hoped that such discussion will inspire the necessary refinements in the Canadian sport system to support both individual sport and team sport athletes in their quest for excellence.