

# Policy legitimization in sport: pivotal role of implementation

Laurence Chalip

Griffith University



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Coubertin's expectation that the Olympic Movement would provide a stimulus to the development of sport has been well documented. However, what is less fully appreciated is that he sought to have government, as well as private initiative, provide much of the necessary physical and programmatic infrastructure. In a letter to Members of the IOC in 1920, he wrote, "In future it will not be enough for well-meaning municipalities to make a few playing-fields or enclosures available to existing gymnastic and sports clubs. More is needed." That same year, in his address to the Opening Meeting of the IOC, he reinforced the point, "... sporting apprenticeship and upkeep should be made available without charge or almost without charge to proletarian youth. And who will see to that? The state, the municipalities...."

This concern was an ongoing one for Coubertin. In his address to the Olympic Congress in 1925, he said, "But to make the various forms of sport ... available as nearly cost-free as possible to all citizens that will be one of the duties of modern local government." Since that time – particularly in the post-WWII period – various elements of the Olympic Family (e.g., NOCs and NFs) have lobbied for government assistance. In some countries, there are organised lobbying groups for sport. In Australia, for example, the Confederation of Australian Sport represents the interests of sport to government.

All this has not been without effect. Governments throughout the world devote substantial time and resources to sport<sup>1</sup>. Although the nature and amount of investment vary widely, contemporary governments – particularly those of OECD nations – are increasingly committed to sport development.

The important feature of this investment to bear in mind is that any investment in sport must compete with other demands for public resources. The claim for public investment must be legitimised in terms of the *public* benefits that can be claimed to be generated. Interestingly, throughout the world, five key benefits are commonly asserted by those seeking to justify investment in sport:

- health
- social well-being
- community development
- national pride
- economic benefit.

If one examines each of these legitimations, one finds that each has potential merit, but the claimed benefits are often not delivered uniquely (or sometimes at all!) by Olympic style sport as it is commonly organised and administered. This is a substantial source of vulnerability for sport, particularly to the degree that it has become dependent on public investment. Thus, it is instructive to examine each of these legitimations a bit more closely.

### Health

There is certainly no question that vigorous physical activity can promote health. The potential benefits are

well documented. Physical activity has been shown to:

- promote enhancements in brain structure of children
- assist in development and refinement of perceptual abilities, including vision, balance, and tactile sensation
- fortify mineralisation of the skeleton
- reduce risks for obesity
- reduce risk of heart disease and high blood pressure
- improve cardiac function
- reduce atherosclerotic disease
- reduce risks of osteoporosis
- reduce frailty among the aged
- reduce risk of diabetes.

This is an incomplete but impressive list of benefits – one that certainly recommends the value of physical activity. Indeed, in the mid 1980s, the government of Australia undertook a review of the relevant research. The review concluded that the net benefit of a 10% increase in physical activity by all Australians would be \$590.2 million [in 1986 Australian dollars].

However, as the astute reader will have noticed, application of this analysis to the legitimization of sport investment requires a semantic trick. The benefits and the financial analysis apply to *physical activity* and not to sport, and least of all to highly competitive Olympic-style sport. Although sport can certainly engender physical activity, not all physical activity is normally classified as sport. Consider, for example, dance and such popular forms of exercise as jazzercise and aerobics. Further, not all Olympic sports are commonly associated with high levels of physical activity. Consider, for example, archery and shooting.

Further, the intense activity associated with elite sport is not necessary to obtain the benefits cited. Indeed, the intense activity and physical contact associated with many sports are often not conducive to health – at least not in a way that renders the kind of *net* benefits identified in the Australian government study. For example, Scandinavian data find that 25% of all childhood injuries serious enough to require hospital care are caused by sport. An Australian study found that 31% of parents reported a medical expenditure of over \$100 annually for their child athlete, and 27% of parents missed work as a consequence of their child's sport involvement.

The obvious conclusion – one that is not often missed by astute legislators – is that the kind of sport we provide when we seek Olympic excellence is not the kind of sport that renders the benefits for which we make claims on the public purse. Indeed, sport-for-all administrators throughout the world (especially, Germany, New Zealand, and Australia) report that traditional sport clubs are often unreceptive to programs designed to promote participatory physical activity rather than competitive excellence. Nevertheless,

programs designed to provide the kinds of health benefits so often touted by sport lobbyists would:

- offer physical activities sometimes not labeled “sport”, such as dance and exercise
- focus on physical activity rather than competitive excellence
- emphasise sports and activities with low risk of injury
- encourage (or require) clubs to provide and market programs that focus on active participation rather than competitive excellence.

At present, these are not the kinds of program features that Olympic-style sport clubs have sought to foster, even though many have used health benefits as a legitimization for government investment. As we will see, similar problems inhere with each of the other common legitimations.

### Social well-being

A number of studies have demonstrated that sport can contribute to social well-being<sup>ii</sup>. For example, a classic study by Gregory Stone in the United States found that people who were fans of the local baseball team also had lower levels of alienation. This study is complemented by a New Zealand study which found that people who became involved with local clubs (including sport clubs) in the towns to which they had recently moved were better adjusted and were more socially integrated.

There are also reports of effective use of sport as an intervention to reduce crime, delinquency, and aggression. The Institute for Athletics in Education (IAE), based in Chicago, has over 35 years of successful work using sport as a tool to enhance educational aspiration, and attainment, while reducing the risks of delinquency. The Belfast United program used soccer to help build relations between Protestant and Catholic youth in strife-torn Belfast. The Salvation Army in Australia has used sport as an avenue to enhance its services to families.

However, a close examination of interventions like these reveals two characteristics. First, effective programs use sport merely as a hook in order to get participants involved in other (non-sport) activities. For example, IAE uses sport to create mentoring relationships between adults and adolescents in order to encourage adolescents to focus on their schoolwork. The Belfast United program required participants to participate in counseling and discussion sessions aimed at enhancing understanding across the two religious communities. The Salvation Army uses sport as a means to create relationships with families so that the organisation can provide counseling about financial and social issues that affect those families. Thus, it is not sport *per se* that is generating the impact; it is the other programs that sport has helped to facilitate. These are not the kinds of ancillary activities that most (if any) traditional sport programs offer.

Further, the reduction in alienation found in Stone's study and the New Zealand research requires that sport facilitates social integration. When club memberships are open and club recruitment is inclusive, it can help to reduce alienation among those who might otherwise be isolated. However, sport clubs do not

traditionally market themselves to those at risk for alienation – particularly when the club is focused on production of elite athletes.

So, sport is capable of enhancing social well-being, but to do so, sport organisations must be linked to (or must themselves offer) non-sport social services. Further, they must seek to provide services to (and integrate as members) those who are most at risk for alienation, delinquency, or related social difficulties. This is not the way that most sport clubs choose to operate or to market themselves. Thus, as in the case of health benefits, the value of sport that is claimed is not consistent with the implementation that is provided by those sport organisations seeking to legitimise their claim on the public purse.

### Community development

There are a number of instances wherein sport has been demonstrated to enhance community development. For example, the city of Corning in New York undertook a substantial development scheme to improve the quality of life in the city – funded substantially by the corporation of the same name, which has its headquarters in the city. The development included enhancement of sport facilities and programs. The result was that turnover in the local population (and at the Corning factory) was substantially reduced. The redevelopment of the city clearly enhanced the quality of community feeling. Similar stories are told about the City of Midlands in Texas, where excellent sport programs have been part of the way the city has developed itself despite an otherwise unattractive location.

There are other ways that sport has been shown to enhance the life of communities. Throughout much of the world, sport is a topic of social discourse that can be used as an “ice breaker” between people. Australian work shows that volunteering in sport helps to build social networks. There has been substantial social psychological work demonstrating that sport teams can become important symbols of community – thus helping to engender a shared sense of community feeling.

However, the value of sport as a tool for enhancing the quality of community life depends on its integration into systems of community planning. Too often, sport is treated as merely another “service” – one that is not integrated into the total planning scheme for a community. This has, in part, been exacerbated by systems of sport administration that have themselves treated sport as separate from the rest of life, thus failing to link sport to the necessary community service systems.

More fundamentally, sport’s capacity to enhance social discourse depends on the ways that sport organisations link themselves to the development and enhancement of social networks. All too often, sport has also served to inflame social tensions or has created organisations that are best characterised as cliques – another context where insiders can differentiate themselves from outsiders. If sport is going to serve community development, sport organisations will have to work with the planning and social service

elements of the communities in which they function. That requires a level of integration with public systems that is, so far, uncommon among sport organisations (and not taught in sport management courses).

#### National pride

Even a casual observer of international sport – particularly Olympic sport – will note that sport is often used as a vehicle to enhance national pride. The intensive Canadian investment in sport in the 1970s, as well as investments by several African nations, were intended to exploit the resulting national pride in order to engender a sense of nationhood. It has also been suggested that sporting success can enhance the attractiveness of exports and of the country as a tourist destination. Certainly, a great deal of the Australian investment in the Olympics and in its Olympic teams has been predicated on these potentials.

However, the utility of sport as a nation building tool has been minimal. Although people sometimes share some enthusiasm for the success of their national team, that does not always translate into a reduction of internal nationalisms, as the Canadian experience illustrates. As with other instances where sport has some potential for use, it is an insufficient intervention in and of itself.

Similarly, the value of sporting successes for international prestige may be over-estimated. International media research suggests that the nature of coverage generates a primarily domestic impact. In other words, the people for whom the successes of national athletes are most reported (and therefore are most salient) are the domestic audience. The successes that are so much celebrated at home may be only minimally or fleetingly noted outside the home country.

Even in those instances where there is an enhancement, the enhancement needs to be capitalised upon. For example, after the astounding success of the New Zealand eights in rowing at the 1972 Olympics, some British butcher shops posted pictures of the team with the caption, “Raised on New Zealand lamb.” As this example aptly illustrates, it is not the success *per se* that generates an impact; it is the ways that success is used tactically in marketing plans for products and for destinations.

Once again, however, our sport programs have been administered in isolation from national integration, export development, or tourism marketing. The focus on production of Olympic champions has treated sporting excellence as an end in itself rather than as the means that our legitimations claim for it. The kinds of integration with national systems for integration, export, or tourism that would be necessary to generate the outcomes we so often proclaim for sport are simply foreign to the ways that we typically administer sport.

### Economic advantage

Sport has certainly become a key piece of our economy. In the United States, many communities now have sport development officers whose job it is to attract sport organisations and events to their city or their region. In Australia, all states and territories except New South Wales have an events corporation whose purpose is to attract sporting events. These activities are legitimised on the grounds that they will enhance economic development.

The employment created by sport, and the sales of sport equipment and services are also often cited as examples of sport's economic worth. A recent Australian study claimed that sport as a whole contributes nearly 1% to the country's GDP. Similar figures have been advanced for the United States.

The claims of economic advantage are worth looking at with some care. The claims of sales and employment are particularly problematic. The growth rate of employment for sport typically depends on substantial investment of tax dollars. The value of that employment to the economy must be weighed against alternative investments – something that has not been done. Similarly, claims about the value of sporting goods sales are questionable, since in most developed countries the majority of sporting goods are imported. In Australia, for example, the purchase of imports exceeds that of exports by as much as 17:1. Thus, the sale of these products may not be contributing to a positive balance of payments.

The value of events is also a concern. Most hallmark sport events lose money. For example, the 1992 Adelaide Grand Prix lost AUS\$5 million, and the 1994 Brisbane World Masters Games lost AUS\$2.8 million. These losses are compensated from the public purse on the grounds that the economic benefit from these events far exceeds the losses. However, once again, the economic benefit depends on the region for which the economic gain is claimed. In Australia, economic benefits for events are typically calculated in terms of Gross *State* Product rather than Gross *Domestic* Product. This is not accidental. Although any one event may be a gain for the state in which it is held, it is probably a loss for the country because most attendees are Australians, and many costs (including rights fees) go to foreign companies. So all that has occurred has been to shift money from one part of the country to another, but the net impact is negative for the country as a whole.

If events are going to have an economic benefit, they must attract visitors and they must get visitors to stay and spend. Further, the visitors that are attracted must come from outside the community seeking the benefit (or else new monies are not brought in). We have recently undertaken a series of studies for events like the Gold Coast IndyCar Race, the Gold Coast Marathon, and the Sydney Olympics. We have found that most events we have examined (with the notable exception of the Sydney Olympics) are not leveraged. There is no consistent effort to capitalise upon them to build tourism, as is required to obtain optimal economic advantage. This is largely because the sport organisations themselves are concerned



with the administrivia inherent in running a sporting event; they are not concerned with leveraging the event for economic advantage. (This includes the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games.) Yet, the economic advantage is what legitimises the organising effort in the first place. The challenge, then, is to learn how to leverage events more effectively. Once again, this will require that sport administrators learn to do more than provide “good sport”.

#### Concluding comments

Sport is clearly capable of providing all five of the benefits that are typically claimed for it. However, the ways we deliver sport at present are not designed to engender those benefits, except perhaps as an accidental artefact. This is largely because sport organisations and sport administrators have not yet taken seriously the implications of their own legitimations for government investment in sport. This represents a serious deficiency of strategic thinking. Not only does it reduce the credibility of our claims for sport; it also makes sport appear to be, at best, a blunt tool. In short, sport as it is currently organised and administered seems a poor public investment. That, in turn, makes it particularly vulnerable to the changing winds of political agendas.

If we are serious about public support, then we need to be serious about delivering the benefits we claim to be capable of delivering. That will require a somewhat different kind of implementation of sport delivery than we have witnessed so far. It will require sport managers to be willing to integrate sport more fully into systems of health, social welfare, community development, and economic development. If we want sport to be valued by the public purse, then we need to design and deliver it in ways that are consistent with the public benefits we claim sport can provide. As the foregoing analysis suggests, the resulting systems of sport delivery may look substantially different from those that are currently in vogue.

<sup>i</sup> See, for example: Chalip, L., Johnson, A., & Stachura, L. (Eds.) (1996). *National Sport Policies: An International Handbook*. Greenwood Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Some of this work is reviewed in: Chalip, L., Thomas, D., & Voyle, J. (1996). “Sport, Recreation and Well-being,” in *Community Psychology and Social Change* (edited by D. Thomas & A. Veno). Dunmore Press.