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Curling and Community in Rural Canada

Project Summary

The main objective of this research was to understand the role of curling clubs in rural Canadian life. It aimed to deepen and broaden our understanding of the role of leisure and sport settings in community development by studying the rural curling club. Specifically, it sought to: (1) explore the functions of these clubs as sport and community places over time; (2) examine the roles the clubs play in rural life and assess the challenges and opportunities they face; (3) observe and document the club year-round as well as community-based activities in the facility; (4) understand how these functions and meanings differ across communities and the country; (5) determine how rural curling clubs are community spaces to be understood within the broader contexts of rural and social change; (6) develop and refine new research approaches designed to best capture the complex interactions in these sport settings.

Thus far, it can be concluded that curling clubs are central places in small communities and have some combination of the following six characteristics:

- Sources of regular physical activity and life-long social connections
- Part of community identity
- Sites of pride, history, commitment and ownership
- Founded upon volunteerism
- Platforms for valued family time and activity
- A gathering place' for the community

Research Methods

Because these are small clubs and are located in very small communities, an ethnographic approach was undertaken. The researcher travelled to two clubs in each of the ten provinces (with an additional two clubs in Northern Ontario) and spent a bonspiel (generally a multi-day, multi-team tournament) weekend at the clubs. Graduate students were often present and part of the research team. Where possible, the researcher also travelled to the clubs during the summer (off-season) months to meet with key players (e.g. clubs presidents, board members, etc.) and to get a sense of what role the club plays in the community when curling is not taking place. During the winter, the research team spent entire weekends in the club, taking part in social events and aiming to have as many meaningful, informal conversations with participants as possible. In all, it can be estimated that a total of approximately 600 hours were spent in the clubs over the course of the research (average time in the clubs was about 30 hours). In addition to conversations, the research team carefully observed the behaviors and activities of the curlers. Notes from conversations and observations were recorded and were later analyzed. Photos and later video recordings were also made on site and proved to be very helpful sources of information during data analysis.

Research Results

Specifically, the findings can be grouped as answers to four main questions: Why do people try curling; why do they join (and remain club members); what challenges do the clubs face; and how are clubs attempting to meet these challenges?

It is clear the primary factor influencing an individual's decision to join a curling club is a social connection. Indeed, nearly all participants listed family, friends and co-workers as primary influences. Other reasons cited by participants included: school and youth involvement; change in family status that provoked a desire for a new activity (e.g., kids leaving home, spousal death or divorce, moving to a new community); and a desire for winter-months physical activity.

Curlers join and remain members of clubs because of the following benefits: Contributes to their health and well-being; allows them to enjoy regular physical activity at varying levels of experience and ability; provides volunteer and leadership opportunities; fosters a sense of ownership in the club; and allows for community engagement.

Challenges facing clubs relate primarily to economic issues, in particular, a lack of stable economic and volunteer burn-out. Other challenges included: the effects of a lack of diversity within the sport; a growing divide between elite/professional and amateur curling (what is referred to as competitive vs. social curlers); and the resulting tendency for sport organizations (including the Canadian Curling Association) to provide uneven support for clubs (high performance camps vs. grants for small repairs and upgrades).

Many clubs are working hard to address these challenges with innovative programs and strategies, including: maintaining affordability; identifying as a 'life-long sport' (e.g., from 'Little Rocks' for youth to Masters Curling); developing coaching and leadership capacity; responding to modern participant needs with flexible memberships and league play; promoting the social benefits of club membership; and updating the club's former image (closed, elite, white, male-dominated spaces) to socially diverse, community places.

A serious limitation was the researcher's lack of French-speaking abilities, which meant the clubs visited in Quebec were generally bilingual and not solely Francophone. Further, due to cancellations, two clubs identified for research and visited in the off-season ceased to be available for research during the winter term.

Policy Implications

In general, local curling clubs have been highlighted as sites of important physical activity with tremendous potential for social benefits. To achieve the benefits, clubs need stable and dependable investment and access to resources to help them continue to build capacity and maintain infrastructure. A successful and thriving curling club is one at the centre of both sport and community life. As such, the following should be supported and resourced: Youth Development; family-friendly infrastructure and programming; and capacity to understand and meet the needs of the modern adult participant, seniors and people with challenges and non-traditional curlers.

There are three steps sport policy makers can take to support curling clubs: 1) Support curling with the same level of financial (federal, provincial, municipal) afforded to other sports (e.g. hockey); 2) Increase exposure to curling by implementing programs in schools across Canada; and 3) Provide development funds to national or provincial curling organizations and to local clubs.

Next Steps

All research opens new doors of inquiry and this project has been no exception. One of the outcomes of this project is the development of a project focussing on the challenges of diversity and access facing urban clubs. The study focused deliberately on small communities because it was thought that the role of the club in the community may be more easily visible on a smaller scale. However, there is certainly room to look at bigger clubs in larger communities. Other questions that stem from this project include: What is the state of urban curling clubs and what challenges are facing them; What is the image of curling in the minds of new Canadians and how can we increase its appeal; How can national sport organizations communicate more effectively with, and respond to the needs of, their grassroots members; How can those concerned with sport development and participation balance the needs of high-level/elite sport development with those of everyday Canadians; How are (particularly winter) sport clubs working to meet environmental challenges with facilities such as hockey and curling rinks?

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

Canadian Curling Association; All provincial and regional curling associations; The Curling News; The World Curling Federation; Federation of Canadian Municipalities.