The Complex Institutional Environment of Competitive Sport in the United States

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Elite competition purveys sport at every level of athletic competition in the United States (U.S.; Ridpath, 2018). The structures and meaning systems surrounding elite competitive sport translates into a highly competitive space wherein sport actors care more about winning than skill development and life-long participation (Legg, et al., 2016). The emphasis on winning at all costs contributes to declining participation of youth in sport (Ridpath, 2018) and can result in the legitimization of abuse of athletes (Nite & Nauright, 2019). Yet, there is a dearth of research systematically exploring the institutional environment of competitive sport and how the environment shapes organizational decision making.

An institutional environment is a set of institutional orders governing organizational stakeholders’ ways of thinking and acting (Scott, et al., 2000). Institutional orders are systems of institutional logics governing systems of legitimacy, authority, economy, and interaction (Thornton, et al., 2012). Institutional logics are taken for granted material structures, beliefs, values, and ideas. A simple institutional environment is when one institutional order governs the context (Scott, et al., 2000). A complex institutional environment is when multiple institutional orders govern a context. Scott, et al. (2000) found the health care industry is a complex institutional environment where multiple institutional orders operate simultaneously with different institutional orders gaining or losing dominance overtime. Depending on the dominant institutional order, organizations adjust their strategies to survive (Rueff & Scott, 1998).

Within the context of sport, there has been some research exploring institutional environments, orders, and logics. For instance, Nite, et al., (2013) examined how organizational actors make sense of multiple institutional orders in an athletic department. Southall, et al., (2008) found economic logics to govern NCAA broadcast decisions and Southall and Staurowsky (2013) found the NCAA combine economic and educational logics to create the collegiate model. There has not been a study examining the institutional environment of competitive sport across segments of society.

The purpose of this study is to determine the institutional environment of competitive sport in the U.S. across the national, collegiate, and adolescent levels. The study will focus on the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC), the NCAA, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFSHSA) and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) as these organizations govern a significant portion of competitive sport in the U.S.. I will conduct a web-content analysis (Herring, 2009) of each sport organization website as well as a media content analysis (Skalski, et al., 2017) of online news reports about the sport organizations. Websites and online news reports provide insight into the institutional orders governing sport organizations (Lok, 2010; Nite, 2017).

Athletic participation is declining (Project Play – Sport for All Report, 2015). There is rampant abuse across sport organizations (Hampel, 2018; Sandrin, 2020; Soto, et al., 2017; Tatos, 2020). By understanding the institutional environment of competitive sport it will provide insight into the institutional orders governing sport actors’ thinking and acting. Possessing an awareness of the institutional orders shaping actors creates the opportunity to change institutional environments (Seo & Creed, 2002).