Establishing Legitimacy in the Face of a Dominant Amateur Sport Institution: A Case Study of True Hockey

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The context of sport is ripe with instances of change, despite the depiction of long-term stability (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Within amateur sport—in particular, youth sport—criticism of the increased standardization and underlying logics that govern it has never been greater. In most contexts, entrepreneurs can enter the marketplace with their own unique operations to serve dissatisfied consumers; however, doing so within an institutionalized sport system has been difficult (Legg et al., 2016). Indeed, powerful national and regional governing bodies rely on coercive pressures to ensure their member community sport organizations (CSOs) remain aligned with their organizational vision and values (Slack & Parent, 2006).

To date, little remains known about institutional entrepreneurship as a process of disruption in the amateur sport system, including how and why it develops and persists against significant resistance. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop understandings of how new sport organizations can successfully challenge dominant sport institutions, and how they can achieve their own legitimacy in order to diversify the range of opportunities available to youth participants. Theoretically, this study draws on an institutional work perspective, which explores the mechanisms that actors employ to create, maintain, and/or disrupt institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Guided by an instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995), this study explores the case of a minor hockey organization (i.e., True Hockey) in Ontario, Canada that has been successful at overcoming barriers to operate independently from the athlete development system established by the sport’s national governing association (i.e., Hockey Canada). True Hockey is one of a few organizations to have provided youth an alternative to Hockey Canada’s highly restrictive development programming (Garbutt, 2018; Radley, 2015). Following its development, True Hockey was identified as a problem by Hockey Canada that it needed to address. Historically, Hockey Canada has invoked a policy that labels organizations like True Hockey as “outlaw leagues” and prohibits participation by anyone associated with these rival organizations (Campbell, 2019). Additionally, Hockey Canada has also shown a tendency to adjust its organizational boundaries to absorb members of “outlaw leagues” to eliminate any threats to its dominance (Kalchman, 2010).

Data collection via interviews has been completed with 20 stakeholders of True Hockey (i.e., executives, parents, coaches, managers). Also, data have been extracted from organizational documents, promotional materials, and media reports. Documents and interviews are being analyzed using abductive reasoning (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Through an abductive approach, the researcher attempts to explain as much of the phenomenon (i.e., True Hockey’s ability to develop as an organization and achieve legitimacy despite challenges from a dominant institution) as possible with existing theory while looking for anomalies in the data that may require new explanations (Timmermans & Tavoro, 2012). It is through the consistent confronting of theory with the empirical world that a novel advancement of institutional work can be established (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Trustworthiness was established in accordance with guidance provided by Tracy (2010). Findings and implications for theory and practice will be presented.